

# SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FOLK-SONGS OF ORISSA

---

D.N. Patnaik

The songs of a people acquire significance by becoming the medium in which the deepest human feelings and experiences express themselves without the help of intellectual concepts. Folk-songs, especially the songs of the unlettered people who dwell in remote villages untouched by any sort of sophistication, are a key to the understanding of their life. The ways, temperament and the local conditions of a people are best observed in their sayings and songs. How influential the folk-songs are in forming the popular mental make up may be realised from the analysis of traditional cultures carried out all over the world. The history of the folk-songs of any country is obscure as they live in oral traditions. Moreover, they are too protean an affair to be put into any tidy pattern of musical history. Yet, even the most conservative popular traditions are liable to growth and change and if the growth is slow, the change when it comes, may be far-reaching and even violent.

Hitherto it has been difficult to describe any stage in the evolution of folk-songs with scientific accuracy; as a rule, we lack a truly precise record of what existed earlier. Social and sociological changes have been in part responsible for the change and growth of this valuable time-honoured treasure and for the vicissitudes in the development of folk-songs. The transformation always takes place according to specific principles of reception and reproduction and it constitutes part of the very essence of every folk-art. Because folk-art is created anonymously and its content is handed down from one generation to another in a state of perpetual variation. Therefore, a folk-song is neither new nor old. It is like a forest tree with its roots deeply buried in the past, but which continually puts forth new branches, new limbs, new fruit. It is an individual flowering on a common stem. Therefore it is not a question of age or authorship that is important in a folk-song but that of spontaneity and beauty.

Very often folk-songs are looked down upon by classical musicians and musicologists as they do not conform to a grammar of music. But it is

overlooked that folk-songs are the development of primitive songs to which all other forms of music owe their origin. Principles do underlie folk-songs, but they are not rigid and are never thrust in by experts. Folk-music is not the degraded remnants of 'cultured music' or 'classical music' as we are some times told. Its melodies are based on the progressions of underlying harmonies.

Orissa, on the east coast of central India, forms an interesting geographical, cultural and historical converging point where cultural influences from north and south have for centuries intersected. Apart from the much famed temple art, architecture and other crafts of skill and beauty of Orissan artisans, what impresses a visitor most in Orissa are the dances and the music of her people. He hears the songs of the blind-beggars singing in praise of gods and goddesses, of the peasants ploughing the field, cart-men drawing the bullock carts to distant places, the cowherds tending the cattle, the boat-men rowing their boats and the young girls playing, singing and dancing during moonlit nights on festive occasions. The great variety of folk-songs with their melodic charm and beauty deeply impress the visitor. While some of them are the compositions of ancient bards who flourished three to four centuries ago, the rest are compositions of unknown village poets, composed in village dialects which though linguistically crude, are powerful and expressive. The verses of this rural poetry are sung and handed down through generations. The songs have evolved from the different occupations, ceremonies, festivals and entertainment. They are an expression of the flesh-and-blood-life of the Oriya villagers with all their desires, passions, problems, sufferings and joys.

Oriya folk-songs are of different types. Each makes a striking departure from the other both in form and style. Each is marked for its melodic art and elaborate grace. Besides some compositions of the foregoing poets, all other songs are simple and elegant in style. Beginning from joy to sorrow, they cover the entire gamut of human emotions and experiences, which are deeper and wider than the emotion and wisdom of a single individual. They are essentially impersonal and universal in character. Oriya folk-songs can be brought under certain categories:

Devotional songs

Mythological songs

Festival songs

Community songs

Dance-songs

Miscellaneous songs

The Ballad singers

### Devotional Songs

#### *Janana*

*Janana* literally means 'to inform', in which the devotee expresses his woes and miseries and seeks redemption from God. These songs are addressed to different deities and most of them to Lord Jagannath the presiding deity of the State. These songs written in simple and direct language have an emotional appeal. Oriya poets of the fifteenth century onwards have composed innumerable *jananas* which are sung by everybody. The peculiarity in these songs is that the devotee not only prays to the god to put an end to his miseries but also accuses and scolds him for not responding to his prayer, as a child accuses his mother for not attending to his requirements. He may even describe Lord Jagannath as an immobile log without hands and feet, or as blind, although having two big circular eyes etc. Thus the ultimate faith in god is expressed in such intimate human ways.

#### *Bhajan*

While *Janana* is for a solo-singer, the *Bhajan* is meant for group-singing. As a form of religious music it is prevalent all over the country, but differing from one region to the other. In Orissa, though there are Bhajans of simple variety written by well-known poets, the most popular are the *Khanjani Bhajans*. *Khanjani* is a percussion instrument of the tamborine type held in the left hand and played with the fingers of the right. As the *Bhajans* are sung in accompaniment to this shallow drum the songs are known as *Khanjani Bhajan*. Devotional in character the songs, though simple in language have a deeper underlying philosophy conveying mystic ideas. Of all the *Bhajans* written in Oriya the most popular are the Bhajans of Bhima Bhoi, a blind and illiterate poet, who flourished during the 19th century.

In most towns and villages there are small shrines dedicated to *Tirnath* (Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwarj) Mainly the labours devote themselves to group-singing of these *Bhajans*.

Besides their popularity among the working class, these songs also serve as a medium of worship among the members of the Mahima Samaj, a sect of void worshippers (*Sunyavadi*) belonging to the lower rank of Buddhism. A large group of mendicants have their base in Joranda, a hilly place in the district of Dhenkanal from where they move out to different parts of the State. Singing of *Bhajans* in the evening is a part of their daily ritual.

#### *Kirtan*

In India worship and music have always gone hand in hand. *Kirtan* is worship through music. Widely prevalent in eastern India, centering round the immortal love-story of Radha-Krishna, *Kirtans* are simple, moving and have tremendous mass appeal.

In Orissa, *Kirtans* are not the original contribution of Oriya poets. Here Orissa is indebted to Bengal. It is said that when Sri Chaitanya finally came to live in Orissa in the latter part of the sixteenth century, his followers brought this tradition of devotional music. It gained more popularity when Vaishnavism became the State religion.

In almost all the Hindu villages of Orissa there are *kirtan mandalis*. Besides religious functions and temple festivals where it is customary, group-singing of *Kirtan* with *Khol* (*Mridanga*—the earthen drum) and *Kartal* (cymbals) as accompanying instruments is often a daily evening performance by the villagers. In prosperous villages, *kirtan* for *Asta Prahar* (twenty-four hours) is annually celebrated with a large number of groups drawn from surrounding villages. This continuous singing of *kirtans* creates a devotional atmosphere among the god-fearing villagers and re-affirms their faith in God.

### Mythological Songs

#### *Chhanda*

A canto of an Oriya epic is called *Chhanda* and each *Chhanda* is set to a definite melody or *raga*. As the chief characteristic of these verses is *Chhanda* or rhythm, they are so called. The sources of the Oriya epics are the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. A few are based on love stories. These *Chhandas* are generally narratives of episodes and are usually sung by the traditional ballad singers. The most popular forms of ballad-singing are the *Pala* and *Daskathia*. The professional singers while narrating a story through song and dance bring together the literary imageries of different poets on a particular theme or sequence to add variety and colour to their performances.

*Chhanda* is a variety of literary folk-song which sometimes borders on the classical. Therefore it is also considered as a variation of traditional Odissi Music.

#### *Chautisa*

*Chautisa* songs are a valuable contribution of Oriya poets to the field of Oriya music and literature. Peculiar in form a *Chautisa* song is divided in to thirtysix stanzas according to the chronological order of Oriya consonants of the same number, each starting with one consonant. The songs, both mystical and instructive in nature, are sung by village elders and traditional folk-singers. Among all the *Chautisa* songs written in Oriya *Manabodh Chautisa* is the most popular.

#### *Chaupadi*

Correctly named the *Chatuspadi*, has four stanzas. This variety of songs are songs of love. They describe feminine grace and charm, the longing of the

lover for the beloved, the pangs of separation and all that concerns love. The language of the songs is poetic, but simple and direct. These can be sung by any person at village musical gatherings or by various entertaining groups.

### Festival Songs

Oriya society is replete with festivals. The most popular festivals of the caste Hindus of the coastal districts of Orissa are the Raja Sankranti and the Kumar Purnima. These two festivals are mainly meant for young unmarried girls who sing and dance on the occasion.

#### *Rajadoli Geeta*

Rajasankranti comes during the latter part of the month of June as a festival of rains. It is said, during the day Mother Earth becomes *Rajaswala* which is the sign of motherhood. So, on this day the young girls of Orissa worship Mother Earth so that she may be blessed with fertility. For three days they abstain from house-hold duties and enjoy to the full the festival feasting, singing and merry-making. Swings are installed in every home, or in mango groves on big trees. Swinging gently, the girls sing beautiful songs known as *Doli Geeta* (Swing-songs). The songs are not thematic, but touch all the emotions of love, courtship, romance, separation, suffering, joy, satire and humour.

The first line of the songs is always decorative and does not relate to the emotion expressed. The words are added almost without reference to the context. The songs sung full throat, are in slow rhythm. Unaccompanied by any musical instrument they have a melodic charm of their own.

#### *Kumarpurnima Geeta*

Kumarpurnima is the full-moon day in the month of October. This is also a festival especially meant for young unmarried girls, who worship the Sun-God in the morning and the moon in the evening. Some are of opinion that it is named after 'Kumara' the handsome son of Lord Shiva. The girls wish for a handsome husband and so, they propitiate the sun and the moon to have handsome husbands like Kumara. It synchronises with the saying of the *Sastras* that in matrimony the bride looks for beauty (*Kanya barayate rupam*).

On this day of festivity the young girls in their new clothes play a kind of game *puchi* and sing group songs, known as '*Kumara Punei Geeta*'. The songs are sung in a narrative pattern. In each line of a song a few words are added; this additive is *Phula Baula Beni* (a plate of Bakula flowers). The songs describe the beauty of nature as a whole and incidents of personal and social life. They have an earthy quality that endears them to the villagers.

### Community Songs

#### *Naudi Geeta*

The cowherd community of Orissa have peculiar songs and dances for their popular festivals of *Giri Gobardhan Puja*, *Dola Yatra* (Holi) and *Gahma Purnima* in which only young men take part. Holding two resonant sticks they produce the rhythm for the dance and songs, which are mostly about Lord Krishna and His sportive boy-hood activities. Each song is in a different tune and has a particular dance attached to it. Each dance brings out beautiful choreographic patterns. For some the rhythms are played out on the *dhol* (drum). Their dance on stilts *Ranapa Nrutya* has been popularised by Sri Bhagaban Sahu and his party. It is very difficult and requires immense control and balance to move with dexterity.

#### *Sapuaa Geeta*

A *Sapuaa* means a snake-charmer; Snake-charmers are found all over the state and are known as *Kela*, *Brittia*, *Dankia*, *Magan*, *Patki Bhat* and *Ghugia*, their caste names. Besides snake-charming they also serve as priests of the weavers (*Tanti*). They collect snake-poison to sell to the *Vaidyas* (village doctors) who use it for medicinal purposes. They move from village to village and earn their livelihood by snake charming. While charming the snake they sing different varieties of songs known as *Padma Tola*, *Phula Tola*, *Nirguna Geeta* and *Chaupadi*. The *padmatola* songs are narratives about the encounter of Lord Krishna with the serpent *Kaliya*. In *phula tola* they pay their obeisance to Lord Vishnu and other deities. The first couplet of each song is a musical narration and the following line conforms to melodies. In the beginning of each couplet, they invoke musically 'Oh Mahapravu' and they end by saying 'Govinda Hari'.

The *Nirguna* songs are theological riddles. On the surface they appear fantastic and unbelievable though the underlying meaning is very simple. The songs composed in the form of questions and answers are always sung in two parts, the answer part having more melodic variations.

The *Chaupadis* are literary love songs, mostly popular in the coastal districts of Orissa. Though they have no relation with snake-charming, they are sung only for popular entertainment.

All these folk-songs are sung in accompaniment to the rhythm of *Shiva dambaru* an hour-glass shaped drum with tiny bells fitted on it. It is held in the left hand with a string used for variation of sounds by tightening and loosening it. The drum is played on one side with the fore-fingers of the right hand.

#### *Yogi Geeta*

There is a class of people in Orissa like the Bauls of Bengal. They

are known as Natha Yogi or simply 'Yogi'. They are the followers of Guru Gorakhnath. Most of them are landless. The male-members of this community move out to different villages begging from door to door. To the accompaniment of *Kendara*, a rustic bowed instrument they sing the ballad of Raja Govinda Chandra. The ballad has a touching story of love and sacrifice which is heard with great interest by the village women. Though the singing of this ballad is customary for the Yogis they also sing episodes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. As their listeners are mostly women they generally choose episodes concerning women and their plight like the lamentation of Sita in Asoka forest, or the distress of Draupadi and her prayer to Lord Krishna to save her honour.

The Yogis eke out their living by the alms they receive in the form of cereals and vegetables.

#### *Kela Kelumi Geeta*

The Kelas are a nomadic tribe in Orissa. Excepting few months in a year they remain out of their homes. Their men folk catch snakes and birds and go about snake-charming in the villages to earn their living. The women make *Jhoomka* (toy cups) out of palm-leaves and after colouring them beautifully, sell them to children. They are adept at the art of tattooing which they do for women, a practice which has been largely discontinued. While tattooing the body they used to sing beautiful songs describing female beauty and how with the tattoo marks of various designs would bring good luck to the husbands of the girls who would never be afflicted by any disease or touched by Yama, the God of death.

At one time their dance and songs were immensely popular. The Kela used to play a *Ghuduki* (a stringed instrument played by stroking the strings) producing different varieties of rhythms to the accompaniment of which the Keluni, his spouse used to sing and dance. The songs usually relate to conjugal love. With the growth of various media entertainment the Kelas have completely abandoned this part of their profession.

#### *Chasa Geeta*

*Chasa* literally means a ploughman or a cultivator. The men of this community sing about the different agricultural activities such as ploughing, reaping, driving bullock-carts etc. They use a style in which the pitch of the voice is echoed to great distances. These songs generally relate to love and incidents from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are sung in a narrative style with long sustained notes. Hence they do not have any rhythmic accompaniment. They are simply meant for breaking the monotony of working in distant fields away from their homes, the language is simple and down to earth.

### Dance Songs

#### *Dandanata Geeta*

*Danda Nata* is the most popular indigenous folk-dance of Orissa. Closely related to the religious culture of the masses it is held for over a month in March-April. Especially prevalent among the low-caste Hindus the dance has a varied repertory with various characters who sing as well as dance. Each dance has peculiar songs attached to it. The songs, mostly cast in the form of dialogues, are sung intermitently while dancing. While *dhol*, the country drum, provides the rhythm it is silent during the singing. The first two lines of each song is in narrative style and the refrain to rhythm is always melodic. The songs cover a wide range of topics beginning from prayer to current affairs.

#### *Dalkhai and Rasarkeli*

The favourite folk-songs of Western Orissa are the *Dalkhai* and *Rasarkeli* which generally accompany the dances of the same name prevalent in the districts of Sambalpur, Bolangir, Kalahandi and Sundergarh. While some are in pure Oriya as spoken in the sea-board districts of Orissa, the rest are in local dialect. The only difference between the two varieties is in the use of additives *Dalkhai* and *Rasarkeli* which are a form of addresses to girlfriends. Incidents from the immortal love story of Radha-Krishna, the *Ramayana*, love, humour and description of the beauty of nature constitute the theme of the songs. On festive occasions competitions are also held among young boys and girls of the village where they compose extempore and sing simultaneously. This is very interesting and their power to express themselves musically, is commendable. The tune of these songs is not melodious, but harmonic, which it is usually averred, is absent in folk music. The instrumental music provided by different varieties of percussions (*Dhol*, *Tasa*, *Nisan* and *Cymbals*) and wind-instruments (*Mahuri*) during the dance constitute a beautiful orchestra of folk-music which is so harmoniously blended with rhythmic patterns that it instantly inspires the dancers as well as the spectators. As in the case of other folk songs the tunes are often repeated as an accompaniment to the dance and these folk-tunes show their true quality after several repetitions.

Though the harmonic pattern of *Rasarkeli* songs differ from that of *Dalkhai*, the accompanying dance and music remain the same. Some of the songs can verge on the obscene.

#### *The Karama Songs*

Prevalent among the low-caste Hindus and some tribal people of Orissa, *Karama* is a ritual dance held in the month of *Bhadra* (August-September). This dance is also found in some parts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. It is a tribal ritual-dance to propitiate either the male deity *Karam Devta* or the female deity *Karamsani*. Songs accompanying the dance vary



from tribe to tribe and are sung in praise of the deities. The songs of the men are purely melodious and non-harmonic in character, but the melodies undergo constant changes depending very much on the singers. The singer shapes the melodies of the second and following stanzas rather differently from the melody of the first stanza. Besides propitiation, description of the beauties of nature is the main theme of these songs. There are also songs describing the beautiful costume and ornaments of the colourful dancers.

The songs of the young girls of the Binjhal community of Sambalpur are of different varieties. They open with songs in praise of the deity Karma-sani in melody. Other songs that follow different patterns of dance are set to various rhythms. The songs generally describe the beauty of nature, specially the rivers, forests and the green paddy fields. The desires and aspirations of the people are also often expressed.

While the Binjhals sing in local Oriya the Oran, Kisan Kol and Bhumi tribes sing in their own dialects which appear a little complex in their melodic patterns. The men beat drums and a few sing, which is repeated in a chorus by the dancing women. Though the men sing in their natural voice, the women adopt a nasal tone, perhaps for synchronisation as they are to sing in unison. The ending line of each melody is dropped suddenly which is a peculiar character of tribal singing. This sudden drop with an accent is also marked in the songs of the Santals.

In the district of Mayurbhanj the *Karama* dance is accompanied by *Jhoomar* songs and in the district of Dhenkanal the songs are almost in the pattern of *Dalkhai*.

#### *Desi Karama*

The songs of the solo male-dancer during the *Desi Karama* dance is one of the best of western Orissa. The melodies have a wide range beginning from the base to the high pitch which is absent in other varieties. The songs accompanied by *Madal*, the earthen drum are generally simple in construction in which melody and rhythm are blended beautifully. Each line of the melody, ending in a long monotone, is its special feature. The rhythms are played out in *Madal* to lead the dance in different patterns.

#### *Chaitighoda Geeta*

Beginning from the Chaitra Purnami (full moon in March) the *chaitighoda* or the dummy-horse dance is held for a full month by the fisherman community of Orissa. This is their ritual dance to propitiate the horse-headed deity Basuli.

The songs for the dance are sung by a couple, *Rauta* and *Rautani*, who also dance with the dummy-horse dancer. They begin by singing in praise of the deity in simple narrative style keeping rhythm in slow steps.

Then they indulge in a long song-duel through which a story is narrated and many incidents are told with dance and humour. As in *Danda Nata*, *Dhol* (drum) *Mahuri* (pipe) and *Jodi Nagara* (two small drums) provide the dance-music. The dance pieces with swift vigorous movements come intermittently with couplets of the songs.

#### *Jhoomar Songs*

Usually as an accompaniment to *Jhoomar* and *Nachni Nat* this melodious variety of songs are most popular among the Kurmis and the other Hinduised tribes of Mayurbhanj and Sundergarh districts of Orissa. Linguistically the songs are of a peculiar variety being an admixture of Oriya, Bengali, Maithili and the local dialects because of the contiguity of this area with Midnapore and Purulia districts of West-Bengal and the Singhbhum district of Bihar where the songs are equally popular. Besides earthy expressions of love, incidents from *Ramayana* and the Radha-Krishna episode form the basic theme of the songs. The songs are essentially melodious in character having different patterns of composition, according to which their tunes vary. They are known as *Bhaduria Jhoomar*, *Panta Jhoomar*, *Rang Jhoomar*.

In *Jhoomar* dance and song *madal*, the earthen drum remains the sole accompanying instrument. The first two lines of each song is fully melodious, rhythm coming only at the end which the *madal* catches immediately. During the dance the men beat drums and sing, the refrain being repeated by the dancing women.

#### **The Ballad Singers**

##### *Daskathia*

The indigenous form of ballad singing in Orissa is known as *Daskathia*. It owes its name from *Daskathi* (also called *Ramtali*), a pair of castanets or wooden clappers, the playing of which accompany the singing. They are not hollow, but solid and resonant fitted with a bunch of tiny ankle-bells. The clappers are held in the left hand with fore-finger in between the two to keep them apart and played by the right hand with the thumb pressing the upper one with a jerk to strike below. While singing, the singers keep the time-beats with the clappers and sometimes work out various uncanny rhythms of percussion. Experienced singers often play two pairs of clappers simultaneously in both hands and prove their skill and dexterity.

The *Daskathia* group consists only of two persons, a singer and his assistant. The refrain of each couplet is repeated by the assistant known as '*Palia*'. He bears equal importance with the singer because a performance depends on his wit and humour to be lively. In between the singing of the ballad the '*Palia*' questions the singer pertaining to the theme in simple prose-dialogue and the singer answers through the songs. By this, the musical

narration becomes more explanatory to the common village audience. Intermittently the *Palia* also sings doggerels and banters to provide enough comic relief. Both the singer and the *Palia* not only sing, they enliven the performance with unsophisticated dramatic actions and dances.

All the ballads mostly have episodes from the great epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The metres of composition generally conform to the medieval tradition known as *Chhanda*, *Chautisa* and *Chaupadi*. Set to traditional tunes the ballad singing has a peculiar charm of its own. The compositions are mostly chosen from medieval poets, who flourished between the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries.

The *Daskathia* singers mostly belong to Ganjam the southern-most district of Orissa where most of the well-known Oriya poets of the medieval period flourished. Generally the traditional singers came from the community of lower Brahmins who plough the land and are debarred from taking part in the traditional ritual services. Now-a-days there are singers from other communities throughout the length and breadth of the State during the fair weather days to earn their livelihood. Their performances are usually held in mid-street or in somebody's courtyard or in temple precincts according to the nature of patronage.

Of all the singers of the tradition Gayakratna Baidyanath Sharma is most popular. For his unique style of presentation he has won many laurels in and outside the State. He has greatly influenced the present group of singers.

#### *Pala*

This variety of ballad singing took its birth in undivided Bengal and marked its advent to Orissa during the Mohammedan occupation in 17th Century A.D. It is closely associated with the worship of *Satyapir* (Satyanarayana of Hindus and Pir of Mohammedans), the cult which was created for Hindu-Muslim unity. In Bengal, there are sixteen *Palas* written by Kavi Karnapura each having a different story about the efficacy of worship to Satyapir. After the *Puja* a *Pala* is sung by a band of singers and musicians. *Mridanga* and cymbals are used as accompanying instruments. Gradually it took root in the soil of Orissa. Medieval musical Oriya poetry entered into its domain and made it more literary rather than musical. Thus music and poetry were blended. While in its original form it remained associated with the worship of Satyapir with singing of the Bengali *Pala*, on the other hand it developed as a literary-cum-musical entertainment purely based on Oriya culture. In this form a group of singers consists from five to seven persons. The most important is the *Gayaka* or the Chief-singer who holds a *Chamara* or a fly-whisk, *Sri Palia* is the Chief-assistant to the singer; the *Bayaka*, is the drummer who plays on the earthen drum *mridanga* and the rest are the *Pallas* or the chorus singers.

In the beginning of the performance the *Bayaka* and the *Palias* build up the atmosphere with a prelude of loud beating of the drum and the big-sized brass cymbals. This is done with some dancing. The drumming often becomes harsh to the ears. Then the *Gayaka* enters and after an invocation to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning starts singing an episode from an epic. He sings as well as explains elaborately in simple prose. This became necessary as the medieval Oriya poetry is most ornamental and very difficult for the common man to understand. He also elaborates on the scene and situation. While narrating a scene he digresses to important Sanskrit as well as Oriya poets to make it more varied and colourful; for example, while describing feminine beauty he brings in excerpts from Kalidas's *Kumara Sambhabam* up to the fore-most Oriya poet, Kavisamrat Upendra Bhanja's *Baidehisa Vilasa*. Thus the singing gets prolonged for several nights. Sometimes competitions of two groups are also arranged in which both the groups try their utmost to prove their merit.

As *Pala* mostly dwells on ancient literature a *Pala*-singer is required to be a man well-versed in Sanskrit as well as old Oriya literature. Moreover, he must have adequate knowledge of Sanskrit poetics and music. The most precious thing is to possess a sharp, clear voice. The popular singers of this form are Sri Harihar Nath and Niranjana Kar.