Folk culture and Identity:  
A Micro Level Study of South Odisha

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| Introduction: | In the history of mankind Orissa always stands great for human values, glory and superb intelligence. Orissa has gifted with nature's bounty, a 482 km stretch of coastline with golden beaches, serpentine rivers, mighty waterfalls, forest-clad blue hills of Eastern Ghats with rich wild life. Orissa is quite rich in its heritage that houses many remarkable monuments of ancient times. The entire length and breadth of Orissa is marked with remarkable tourist places and each place of India has a tale to tell to its tourist. The patrons of culture and Architecture can perceive the marvelous Architecture of the temples, rock-cut caves and also the forts that once belonged to the Great Oriyan Kings, radiating the rich heritage of Orissa. The land, while retaining its pristine glory, also offers the visitors modern amenities. Its territory formed a part of the ancient Kalinga of Mahabharat time. In the ancient time Orissa rose to prominence as a Kingdom under Kharavela, a great conqueror and patron of Jainism, in the second half of the 1st century B.C. Other great rulers belonged to the Keshari dynasty and the Eastern Ganga dynasty who were also great builders. At one point of time the vast kingdom of Orissa had spread from Ganga to Godavari. The flourishing maritime trade with South-East Asian countries i.e. Java, Borneo had brought in a golden era of affluence and opulence. The Kalinga School of architecture flourished from the 7th to 13th century A.D. The most important monuments of this period can be seen in and around Bhubaneswar and Puri. The Mukteswar Temple is the finest piece of Architecture of Kalinga. The Lingaraj Temple of Bhubaneswar, the Jagannath Temple of Puri and above all the world renowned world heritage Sun Temple at Konark are the epitome of temple architecture and sculpture of Orissa. The modern Orissa came into existence in April 1, 1936. The Britishers declared it as a separate province. In 1948 and 1949 the area of Orissa was almost doubled and the population was increased by a third with the addition of 24 former princely states. 

A modern part of Southern Orissa comprises of the Ganjam, Phulbani and Koraput districts of Orissa. Ganjam, the southernmost district of modern Orissa, was originally a part of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga. Lying between 18°12’45” and 20°25’40” north latitude and 83°33’20” and 85°15” east longitude, it was surrounded by the dominion of Raja of Berar in north-east to south-east and Vizagapatam district in south-west. The Bay of Bengal adorned her south-east boundary, giving her a unique geographical place. |

| Folk Dances of South Odisha: | In South Orissa, be it dance or music, it is a soul-filling means of religious participation, a way of reaching the God. Therefore, most of them are associated with religious worship, fairs, festivals and as well as they serve as means of social and cultural recreations. Dance is the most popular form of south Orissan performing art. The people of south Orissa evolved their unique native styles which are distinctly different from other regions. Different dances are performed according to the religious rituals, and they are celebrated, associated with the arrangement of fairs, festivals and gatherings of friends and relatives of the rural folk. On festive occasions, folk dances like DandaNacha, BharataLeela, KrushnaLeela, Rama Leela, PrahaladaNataka, ChadeiyaNacha, Das Kathia, Paik Nacha, SakhiNacha or RadhaPremaLeela, KandheiNacha etc. are performed. The cultural activities of the region are mainly based on mythological legends. They have been influencing the society to a large by creating a sense of ‘fellow-feeling’ among the people in different ways, such as patriotic spirit, love for literature, belief in God, taste for music, theatre and dance. |

| A. DandaNata | DandaNata or DandaNacha is the earliest form of folk dance of South Orissa that is based on religious traditions of the worship of Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali. |
**Danda** means a pole, **Nata** means dance. They totally mean a festival celebrated for the worship of Shiva in which a pole represents the God. It is a very popular theatrical form of folk dance of south Orissa. **DandaNata** is a mixture of both religious and secular values and substances. It has its root in the socio-religious and cultural history of Orissa with special reference to the Siva Kali legend. It aims at arousing religious fervor as well as entertaining aesthetic pleasure among the spectators especially to promote spiritual upliftment through rigorous self-discipline.

**B. SakhiNacha**

SakhiNacha is another very popular dance drama of South Orissa. Sakhi means female companion. The concept of SakhiNacha has been developed on the eternal love story of Radha and Krishna. It is believed that Krishna used to meet Radha disguised as different personalities in different times and the Sakhis of Radha played a greater role in helping Krishna for the same. They also sue to dance on other similar developed songs. Numerous troops of SakhiNacha are found in Ganjam particularly, each of which consists of a vocal instructor-cum-string player, two or three rhythm players and about half a dozen dancing boys some of them appear on the stage dressed as girls.

**C. ChadheiyaNacha**

This dance is peculiar to the Ganjam district only. Chadheiya means bird-catcher who makes a living by catching birds and selling them. An improvised pattern of the Chadheiya dance is now added in ‘DandaNacha’. But the difference is that in the ‘DandaNacha’, the chadheiya and chadheiyanı (wife of Chadheiya) appear on the scene and the couple sing ballad in praise of Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati while in the Chadheiya dance feminine character is absent. Moreover, it is a group dance comprising six or more chadheiyas on the theme of a hunting expedition of the chadheiyas.

**D. ChanguNata**

Changu is a musical instrument of rural variety of tambourine. It is played by the male members of the Saora, Kandha communities of Koraput and Phulbani districts. The dance in accompaniment to the Changus performed by women alone. The men only sing songs, play on the Changu and move with the female dancers with simple steps. In the dance, the women advance one step and back forming half round movement. In between, the male-dancers perform vigorous stunts in which they leap into the air and make wide circling movements.

**E. GhudukiNacha**

This dance is performed with a music instrument called Ghuduki. This instrument is prepared out of the gourd or hollowed wood into which a string is tied. Two or three dancers dance to the rhythm of this musical instrument. The youths of south Orissa like this dance very much for its pleasant music and song.

**F. Oshakothi/Kothisala or Ghatakalasi Dance**

Oshakothi or Kothisala dance is performed for seven days proceeding the full-moon day of Ashwina (Kumar Purnima) by certain low caste people of south Orissa. The origin of this tradition may be traced back to the early medieval period of caste rigidity where the low caste people were not allowed to enter into the temples. Probably the deprivation of these low caste people to the temples might have prompted them to look for an alternative and obviously they might have selected ‘Kothisala’ or the common house of their habitation center. Since this dance form originated from the ‘Kothisala’ it is named as Kothisala dance.

**G. Ghoomra Dance**

Ghoomra dance is named after a typical earthen drum called Ghumra. It is just like a big pitcher, the mouth of which stems out like a cylinder and is covered with the skin of a snake or of a godhi (monitor lizard). When played with both hands, it produces a peculiar sound quite different from other varieties of drums. The dance is performed by a group of male members who dressed themselves in coloured clothes and jackets. They use turbans on which peacock feathers are attached. They also fastened ghagudi (a chain of brass bells) on their waists and ghoonguras (a chain of small brass bells) on their feet which produces musical sound while dancing.
H. KelaNacha or Baunsa Rani (Bamboo Queen)

The Kela is a low caste community especially found in Ganjam district. This community is familiar for its acrobatic feats of daring nature. The reference to KelaNacha which originated in Ganjam as a household circus of the Kela community has been found in the literature of Kabisamarat Upendra Bhanja. It is now fast vanishing due to the lack of patronage. The male participants in this circus play drums and exhibit muscular feats whereas the female participants climb on the top of a bamboo and display difficult acrobatic feats. Because of their daring acrobatic feats on the top of the bamboo they are popularly called the Baunsa Rani or the Bamboo Queen.

I. KeluniNata

A specific group within the Kela community of Ganjam performs KeluniNata, which consists of rope walk; rhythmic jumps etc. and the performers are the young maidens of Kela community. The males accompany them with instrumental music using Changu, Mardal and flute. This performance is professional and designed to support their livelihood.

J. DhanaKoila

This is a ritual dance named after the musical instrument ‘ghanakoila’. Dhanakoila is an instrument consisting of a new earthen pot (matihandi), a flat panel prepared from bamboo piece (baunsakala), Kalapati, Batuli Khada (caterpillar) and Patar Chamunda. The dance is performed before the devotees (Bratacharini) for five consecutive days. Each day is marked by observance of fasting and listening to puranic recitals accompanied by music of Dhanakoila instrument. During this dance, Kalsi (woman endowed with mystique powers) answers questions posed by the mass.

K. BaghaNacha

BaghaNacha (tiger dance) is an imitative dance of the animal among the tribal people who used to perform it before and after they go for hunting. Now it is performed as a folk dance in Ganjam district. It is associated with the ritual festivals of the Mother Goddesses, Durga, who also rides on a lion. The dance is performed particularly during the time of the ThakuraniYatra. The dancer is surrounded by a group of Changu players who by beating the Changus encourage him to dance. In this dance the body of the dancers is painted bright in yellow and black in a stripped pattern to give the look of a leopard.

L. PaikaNacha

A special feature in the cultural field of Ganjam district is the PaikaNacha (Soldier’s dance). This is a martial dance being enacted by the Paiks as a part of their physical exercises. In olden days, Orissa extended her territory from the river Hooghly in north to Godavari in south with the help of a vast army of valiant Paiks. The Paiks were not in the regular pay-role of the army. They formed the rank of a peasant – militia. Though agriculture was their main occupation, they used to keep themselves prepared by regular practice and training in war techniques. Most of the Paik villages have Paika-akhadas (village gymnasium) where young people assemble in the evening after the day’s work. Along with traditional physical exercises, they dance with sword and shield in hand to the accompaniment of the country drum. The primary aim of this dance was for the development of physical strength and courage of the warriors.

M. RanapaNacha

Ranapa literally means a stilt. The dance on the stilts is prevalent among the cow-herd communities of southern Orissa. The young village dancers standing on the stilts, dance with utmost ease to the accompaniment of dhol and Mahuri (wind instrument). Songs relating to the boyhood exploits of Lord Krishna are also sung intermittently. This dance has become so popular that often in cultural festivals they are invited to entertain the people. Recently they have been also invited to perform this dance in international cultural festivals being organized by different European countries.

N. Chaitighoda or GhodaNacha

GhodaNacha is another popular dance performance of Orissa. The dance is originated from the fishermen community, who celebrated the dance on the full-moon day of Chaitra (March-April). It is also performed on other occasions. The dancers worship Goddess Baseli through this dance. Baseli is a
local form of Bhairavi who is believed to be horse-headed. So, the representation of the Goddess Baseli is made of a well-decorated horse-head made of wood, painted brightly in red, black, yellow and white colors.

**O. Dasakathia**

Dasakathia, another popular performance of South Orissa and the most indigenous form of ballad singing in Orissa, is said to have been originated in the 15th century in the village Pitala of Ganjam district. The word ‘Dasakathia’ has been derived from the word ‘dasa’ means a devotee and ‘Kathi’ means wooden pieces. Dasakathia(also called Ramtali) is 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 forefinger in between 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 workout various uncanny rhythms of percussion instruments.

**P. KandheiNacha/Puppet Dance**

The KandheiNacha puppet dance is played on the occasions of festivals by way of ‘shadow play’ in many parts of the region and is especially popular among the children. The peculiarity of this dance is that the dancers are puppets. Puppets of different shapes and sizes dressed like human beings are made to play human characters by means of their pulling on and off through threads (ordinarily not visible) attached to them from behind the stage. The puppets are played by the masters as characters in a story in tune with the background music. This play requires more skillmanship and continuous practice, which is now on progressive decrease on account of lack of support and patronage of the enlightened and charitable members of the society.

**Q. PrahalladNataka**

Of all the folk plays of Orissa, PrahalladNataka prevalent in the district of Ganjam is perhaps the most elaborate, ornate and colourful, dance drama. PrahalladNataka was first conceived by Raja Sri Ramakrishna Chhotray (1857-1905), the then ruler of Jalantar in Ghumsur area. Though the authorship of the play is ascribed to the Raja, it was actually written by Gopinath Parichha, a well-known poet of his time. PrahalladNataka is essentially poetic in nature. Gayakaaacts as the interpreter of the play. The whole episode of ‘BhaktaPrahallad’ gets enacted through this play. The Gayaka has specific songs and dialogues. It has one hundred and twenty songs for the characters to sing.

**R. RadhaPremaLeela**

The influence of Bhakti movement in India resulted in the development of literature as well as folk dance. Due to the spread of the Bhakti cult, the worship of Radha Krishna was very much popular among the rural folk of Ganjam. Poets like GopalKrushnaPatnaik and KabisuryaBaladevRath composed a series of poems on Sri Krishna, Sri Radha and other Sakhis (lady attendants) in the 19th century. RadhaPremaLeela, which is based on the story of the love between Radha and Krishna is a popular performing dance drama of Ganjam. The actions of Sri Radha, the heroine, Sri Krishna, the hero and the other eight Sakhis adorned the stage and create a romantic atmosphere tingled with religious fervour. They play with the tune of different kinds of musical instruments played by a group of talented artists in the background. Boys, in the guise of female persons pretending to be Radha and her Sakhis offer their devotion and reverence to Krishna, the divine one, through this dance drama.

**Conclusion:** Besides the above discussed dances, some other dances like BhutaKeli of Kashingar, Laudinacha of Ganjam, KandheiNacha, GhantaNacha, Mundapota, Rama Natak, Kala Ghoda and RajaraniNata are also prevalent in South Orissa. There are many tribal dances prevailed in the region. Among them Dhandari dance of Uttaras, Dhensa dance, Shikar dance, Disari dance, Dhap dance, Graha dance etc. are very popular among the tribals. Thus, south Orissa has been a rich store house of numerous dances or performing folk arts, over the centuries, which can rightly be regarded as her glorious and everlasting cultural heritage, attracting universal attention and appreciation at home and abroad in its multi-dimensional forms and expressions – ornamented with qualities of both head and heart, in most
meaningful and conceivable ways. These arts not only serve as recreations to get rid from the busy life, but also provide enjoyment, good social relationship, harmony, physical exercise and to some extent livelihood.

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