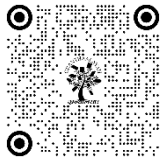


DANDA NATA OF ODISHA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ITS CULTURAL AND RITUALISTIC DIMENSIONS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BOUDH

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ABSTRACT

Danda Nata is a vibrant folk tradition celebrated in rural and tribal communities of Odisha, with Boudh district standing out for its unique variations. Held annually during Chaitra (March–April), the festival spans thirteen or twenty-one days and culminates on Maha Vishuba Sankranti. The celebration is marked by rhythmic drumming, energetic dance, dramatic acts, and comedic performances, blending spiritual rituals with theatrical expressions. Central to the festival are the devotees, known as Danduas or Bhoktas, who undertake vows of austerity and devotion, guided by the Pata Dandua or Pata Bhokta. The event unfolds in four phases: Dhuli Danda, Pani Danda, Agni Danda, and Suanga Danda. Each phase involves distinct rituals, physical endurance, and purification through sand, water, and fire. The final phase, Nrutya Danda, features dance, music, and satire. Boudh's Danda Nata is distinct for incorporating Bandana, a devotional recitation, Dalapuja, a special puja performed before Meru, and Sola Suanga Danda Nata, which includes sixteen forms of dramatic and satirical performances. These elements add depth to the festival, blending humor, folklore, and religious themes. The worship of Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali ties Danda Nata to both Hindu and indigenous traditions. The performance, accompanied by instruments like the dhol, mahuri, flute, and mardal, remains a dynamic cultural experience. In Boudh, Danda Nata continues to evolve, preserving its spiritual and artistic heritage, making it a unique and living expression of Odisha's folk traditions.

Keywords: Danda Nata, Boudh, Bandana, Dalapuja, Sola Suanga Danda Nata, Lord Shiva

DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.4026

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Danda Nata is one of the most significant and vibrant folk traditions in Odisha, particularly prevalent in the western and southern parts of the state. Boudh district, located centrally in Odisha, plays a central role in preserving and practicing this ancient ritualistic festival. Geographically, Boudh lies between 83-34° and 84-49° East longitude and 20-22° and 20-60° North latitude, bordered by Sonepur district to the north, Kandhamal to the south, Nayagarh to the east, and Bolangir to the west. The district's name, derived from Lord Buddha, reflects its historical association with the spread of Buddhism in this part of Odisha, which flourished in earlier periods (Padhy, 2022). Today, however, Boudh is known for its strong cultural and spiritual heritage, with Danda Nata serving as a key cultural expression. The Danda Nata

festival is celebrated annually during the Chaitra month (March–April), typically spanning 13 or 21 days and culminating on Maha Vishuba Sankranti, also known as Pana Sankranti or Mesa Sankranti. The festival is not only a religious observance but also a spectacular expression of local folk culture, combining dance, drama, music, acrobatics, and intricate rituals. The central participants, known as Danduas or Bhoktas, are devotees who take sacred vows and endure rigorous penance, including walking barefoot through the villages and engaging in intense physical activities. This austerity is believed to earn them blessings from Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati (Sahu, 2015). The festival unfolds in five distinct phases: Dhuli Danda, Pani Danda, Agni Danda, Bana Danda, and Suanga Danda. The first phase, Dhuli Danda, takes place under the scorching sun of April, with the devotees performing sand rituals, physical endurance feats, yoga, fertility rites, and sacred drama. This phase is also marked by military drills, acrobatic acts, and divine possession, highlighting the strength and devotion of the participants. The second phase, Pani Danda, involves acrobatic acts performed in water, showcasing the devotees' agility and endurance. Agni Danda is one of the most striking rituals, where devotees dance while holding sacred torches (dandas) made from clay, ignited by the fire from Champabara, and perform dances in the darkness of the night. This symbolic act of holding fire represents purification and the devotion of the participants. The Bana Danda phase follows, in which the devotees observe a period of seclusion, resting and preparing for the concluding rituals. This period allows them to regain their strength before they are joined by other members of the community for the final performances. The last phase, Nrutya Danda or Suanga Danda, is a grand spectacle of dance, music, and theatrical performances, blending sacred and humorous elements to engage the audience. It is at this point that the community comes together to celebrate the successful completion of the arduous rituals, rejoicing in both the spiritual and cultural triumph of the participants. In Boudh district, the Danda Nata festival is distinguished by several unique practices that set it apart from other regions of Odisha. One of these is the Bandana, a devotional recitation performed by the Danduas (Satapathy, 1999). Through these recitations, the devotees express deep reverence for the deities and seek blessings for their community and their personal spiritual well-being. Another important ritual is the Dalapuja, a special puja performed a day before Meru, which marks the culmination of the festival. During this ritual, the devotees perform prayers and offerings in preparation for the sacred events of the following day, ensuring that the festival's final rituals are performed with utmost devotion and purity. Additionally, the Meru Mandapa is a key feature of Boudh's Danda Nata, a specially constructed structure where the final rites and performances take place. The rituals here serve as the concluding part of the festival, symbolizing the spiritual and physical trials that the devotees have undergone during the days of celebration (Pattnaik, 1991). The musical elements of Danda Nata play an integral role in enhancing the overall atmosphere of the festival. Traditional folk instruments, such as the Dhol, Jhanja, Mahuri, Lisan, Ghanta and Tasa, provide the rhythm and melody that accompany the dances, rituals, and dramatic performances. The music, along with the performances, reflects the deep-rooted cultural values of the community and adds to the vibrancy of the festival. Furthermore, Danda Nata in Boudh has contributed significantly to the development of folk literature in the region. The festival includes songs, dialogues, and proverbial expressions, many of which have been passed down through generations. These verbal expressions not only add to the cultural richness of the event but also serve as a form of oral literature that encapsulates local stories, myths, and moral lessons. Through these expressions, the festival becomes a medium for storytelling, reflecting the spiritual, moral, and social values of the community (Sahu, 2015).

2. NOMENCLEATURE OF DANDA NATA

The word "Danda" carries multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It can refer to a stick, pole, staff, club, or rod, often symbolizing strength and discipline. In a broader sense, it also signifies punishment, chastisement, control, restraint, and exercise, reflecting concepts of authority and discipline (Satapathy, 1999, p-2). Additionally, "Danda" can represent a time unit or a penalty, highlighting its diverse applications in language, culture, and tradition.

- 1) The word *Danda* in *Danda Nata* means a 'stick' or a cane stick, which is sometimes seen as a sacred pole representing Shiva and Shakti. During the performance, this pole is sanctified with mantras and worshipped as a symbol of Shiva and his consort Gouri (Das, 1958).
- 2) The term "Danda" also signifies punishment, which plays a key role in the festival's name. The 13 Bhoktas (devotees) undergo intense austerities and ascetic practices throughout the performance, embracing physical and spiritual discipline (Das, 2016).
- 3) Danda Nata is traditionally performed on village streets in Odisha, which serve as its open-air stage. This connection to the streets gives the festival its name, "Danda Nata." (Dash, 1982).

- 4) In literature, 'Da' represents the feminine energy (Prakriti/Nature), while 'Nda' signifies the masculine force (Purusha). Their union symbolizes creation, which is the core essence of Danda Nata. Rooted in ancient fertility rites, this festival is closely linked to agriculture, celebrating the harmony of male and female energies for prosperity(Satapathy,1999,p-4).
- 5) The word *Danda* also signifies 'time.' Since Danda Nata is performed during a specific period in the month of Chaitra, lasting for either 13 or 21 days, its name is derived from this temporal association{.
- 6) The word *Danda* also means 'staff' or a 'group of people.' In Danda Nata, this is reflected in the participation of 13 primary Bhoktas (devotees) who play a central role in the performance.
- 7) In Danda Nata, four earthen torches, known as *Dipa Danda*, are worshipped. These torches are then used to establish a connection, leading to the performance of the Agni Danda. This entire ritual is referred to as *Danda* in the festival(Mishra,2020).

In general, *Danda* signifies punishment, while *Nata* refers to dance. Therefore, Danda Nata can be interpreted as the "Dance of Punishment," symbolizing the rigorous austerities and physical hardships endured by the devotees during the festival. The performance reflects both a spiritual journey and a symbolic representation of the trials faced by the participants, who undergo intense penance and purification as part of the ritual.

3. MYTHOLOGICAL AND PURANIC ORIGIN OF DANDA NATA

There are various opinions, Puranic accounts, and different legends regarding the ancient origin of Danda Nata. These sources present diverse perspectives on how the tradition began.

- 1) According to the *Natya Shastra* by Sage Bharata Muni, Lord Shiva first taught the Tandava dance to the sage Tandu. Over time, the word *Tanda* evolved and, through linguistic transformation, came to be known as *Danda Nata*.
- 2) The demon Bajrasura, who had received great power from Lord Shiva, insulted the sage Rudrabrahma. At Lord Shiva's command, Rudrabrahma performed a 13-day Danda vow to kill the demon and restore balance(Panda,2016).
- 3) Another legend tells of the demon Merusura, who gained great power from Lord Shiva and began attacking the gods. In response, the gods prayed to Lord Shiva, who instructed them to perform the Danda vow. By following this ritual, the gods were able to defeat Merusura and restore order. This event is commemorated in the Danda Nata festival, with the name *Meru Yatra* being derived from the legend.

The Puranas narrate that Brahma's five sons, Indra's five sons, and Kubera's three sons, who were once cursed by the sage Kratu, undertook the Danda vow as a path to salvation. The curse had condemned them to suffer, and in order to break free from it and achieve liberation, they performed the Danda vow. This vow, which involved rigorous austerities and ritualistic practices, was believed to purify them and restore their divine status. Through this spiritual discipline, they hoped to appease the sage Kratu and earn his forgiveness, ultimately attaining freedom from the curse and liberation from their sins(Nayak, 1984).

According to the *Shiva Purana*, the origin of Danda Nata is linked to the Daksha Yajna. The *Shiva Purana* narrates that during the Daksha Yajna, a significant event took place in which Daksha, the father of Sati, organized a grand sacrifice but intentionally excluded Lord Shiva from the invitation. This act of disrespect angered Lord Shiva, and in retaliation, he unleashed his divine wrath, leading to chaos and destruction at the Yajna. In this context, the performance of the Danda Nata is believed to have originated as a ritual to appease Lord Shiva and restore cosmic order. The devotion and penance of the participants in Danda Nata, symbolized by the rigorous physical austerities and spiritual practices, are seen as a way to invoke the blessings of Lord Shiva, just as the performance and the vows taken during the Daksha Yajna were meant to seek reconciliation with the divine. Thus, the Danda Nata serves as a reminder of the powerful divine energies of Lord Shiva, with the rituals and practices reflecting themes of penance, purification, and renewal(Panigrahi,2013).

4. HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF DANDA NATA

From the 5th to the 11th century AD, the Keshari dynasty ruled over Eastern Odisha and was a strong proponent of Shaivism, which led to the rise of tension between Shaivites and Buddhists. Under their reign, Buddhists were barred from entering Hindu temples, and eventually, many began to worship Lord Shiva in an alternative way through the Danda Nata. This traditional religious and theatrical performance is believed to have originated in the 8th or 9th century AD during the rule of the Somavanshi kings of Kosal. The emergence of Tantricism following the decline of Buddhism played a pivotal role in the spread of Danda Nata, which became popular among the rural agricultural communities of the region, especially in the districts of Boudh and Sonepur. The performance gained momentum during the time of the Somavanshi rulers of Sonepur and the Bhanja dynasty of Khinjamandala in Boudh. The Shiva temples such as the Koshaleswar Temple in Baidyanath, the Kapileswar Temple in Charda, and the Siddheswar Temple in Jagati, all dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries, are evidence of the Shaiva influence in the region. As Shaivism spread and Buddhism began to decline, followers of Buddhism, known as Boudhadharmis, were declared untouchable and forbidden from entering Hindu temples. To overcome this social stigma, they began performing Danda Nata, a form of worship that allowed them to honor Lord Shiva while wandering through villages with Shiva idols. This practice served both as a spiritual devotion and as a social protest against the restrictions imposed on them (Panigrahi, 2013, p-11-12).

The time of performance

Danda Nata is performed in the month of Chaitra. Chaitra is, like Aswina, generally considered to be the month of goddess. It is the time of scorching summer heat, except the late night. By this time harvest is over. It is a time of leisure and merry making for the farmers. Hence it is the right time for performance of Danda Nata. Shiva says to Parvati

Kumbha ante mina masa
Bhoga satara diwasa
Dakae asta sambhunku jiba pani tolibaku, gaurilo
Mohadadhi nikataku.
Shiva kahanti go Shiva
Danda Nata bhiaiba,
Sansare hebba prachara
Dekhabe sakala nara.

Danda Nata is performed from 17 day of Mina Masa for a period of 13 days till Mesha Sankranti or Maha Vishuva Sankranti (Nayak, 2019; Mohapatra, 2021).

Bhokta in Danda Nata (The Performer or Participant)

The participants or the performers of Danda Nata called as Bhokta OR Dandua. Among the performers there are 13 Bhoktas, one is Pata Bhokta or Chief among them. They are the cursed sons of Brahma, Indra and Kubera. According to Shri Budhhimanta Puhana the 13 bhoktas are the cursed 5 sons of Brahma Maricha, Pulaha, Poulastya, Kratu & Angira, the 5 sons of Indra Jayanta, Pakashastree, Subatsa, Surasena & Gandharbasena and the 3 sons of Kubera Nala, Manibhadra & Kubera.

They took birth as 13 Rishiputras or sons of the saints named Durvasha, Goutama, Shakti, Bhrgu, Asasheka, Asmika, Rudra, Dattatreya, Bhaya, Mahabirya, Garganara and Byasa etc. in Western Odisha danduas consider them to be Mataniga Rishi and his 12 sons Kabi, Habi, Nabamuni, Brahma, Parichaya, Karana, Kandula, Jnanee, Kapila, Parasara, Shuka and Janaka. According to a song sung by Binakara. Whoever they might be the 13 bhoktas, assume names in Danda Nata in terms of their responsibilities and activities as Guard of the Kamana Ghara, Holder of Prabha, Patabhokta, Danda & Resin holder, Nachagua holder, Patadandia, Padidandua, Holder of Gouribeta, Pata Dholia, Holder of Peacock feather bunch, Jhanja holder and Banner holder.

Danda Utha (Starting Rituals)

In the village where the Danda Party is formed, there is a sacred house known as Kamana Ghara or Kamana Mandira (Temple of Desire). This house holds all the sacred items used in rituals throughout the year, including the worship of Goddess Kali. On the first day of Danda Yatra, the Bhoktas (devotees) and Danduas (participants) gather here early in the morning. They bring a swing (Khatuli) from the Shiva temple with metal images of Lord Shiva and Parvati, and dig

up the sacred Dandas buried beneath the ground. These include four large Chilams made of clay and a Gounbeta, a cane stick representing Goddess Kali, Lord Shiva, and Mother Parvati. A Kamana Ghata (pitcher of desire) filled with water is also set up, along with a patch of sand where seeds of paddy, wheat, mung, and nuts are sown, to sprout by Bishuve Sankranti. In the second phase, the devotees proceed to a village pond or river for Ghata Puja, where they create a sand phallus to represent Lord Shiva and offer prayers. After bathing and wearing new clothes, they are initiated with a sacred thread. In the third phase, they light a fire by rubbing wood or stone, from which they ignite a rope called Bihanaberia (made in straw), smouldering for the entire 13 days of Danda Yatra. The Danduas follow strict austerities, including abstaining from food, sleep, and intoxicants. They walk barefoot and eat once a day in complete silence. For 13 days, they travel from village to village, performing rituals and entertaining the community.

Phases of Danda Nata

Danda Nata is meant for worship of Lord Shiva and Devi Kali with a desire for salvation and welfare of the universe. The thirteen bhoktas and others remain pious adhering to austerities for a period of 21 or 13 days, bearing a lot of pain, pray Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati to bless them their hosts. The bhokttas daily perform five kinds of Danda or punishments during they physically interact with five basic elements of the creation such as dust, water, fire, air and ether. These are

- 1) Dhuli Danda- The Earth Ritual or Sand Services
- 2) Pani Danda- The Water Rituals.
- 3) Agni Danda- The Fire Rituals.
- 4) Bana Danda- The Secluded Life as in Forest
- 5) Suanga or Nrutya Danda- The Theatrical Performance.

Bandana Kina/Bandapana (Welcoming Rituals)

The group of devotees or Danduas participating in Danda Nata enter the village in a procession and assemble at the central square. The Dholia beats a special band called the Bata Chalti Badya (Walking Band) while entering the village. The sound of the band signals the arrival of the Danduas, who are welcomed by either an individual householder or a representative of the entire village. They greet the Danduas by pouring ceremonial water from a pot (Gadu or Garia) in front of the procession. The Danduas apply some of the poured water and soil to their foreheads as a mark of respect. The procession then moves to a specially treated and sanctified area, cleaned with a mixture of cow dung and water. This area is prepared with the necessary items for the ceremony, such as Pidha (a wooden stool), Bhoga (food offerings to the gods), flowers, Dhupa (incense), Pana (a mixture of fruits, jaggery, and milk), and Ukhuda (dry fried rice mixed with jaggery). The image of the goddess (metal images of Lord Shiva, Parabha, Trisula, and Alama) is placed on the Pidhas, and offerings of Bhoga and flowers are made. The worship follows a blend of Brahmanical and Tantric rituals, known as Panchopachara or Sadasopachara Puja. The host, his family members, and others consecrate the gods with holy rice and money offerings (Dakhina). Then, the Veenakara holds the Bina in his left hand and a whisk fan (Chamara) in his right hand. He plays the Veena and prays to the gods and goddesses for 15-20 minutes. The Veenakara also sings songs and describes the rules and regulations of Danda Nata through song. The entire procedure, from the entry of the Danduas into the village to the Veenakara's prayers, is known as Bandana Kina, especially in Boudh Danda Nata.

Dhuli Danda- The Earth Ritual or Sand Services

Dhuli Danda is a traditional Hindu ritual performed as an act of penance on a sandy surface, typically lasting for three hours. This ritual combines worship, physical exertion, rolling on the ground, and playful pranks, symbolizing various aspects of life and nature. Upon receiving an invitation from the host, the participants, known as Danduas, gather in the village. The event is accompanied by the rhythmic beats of the *dhol* and the melodic sound of the *mahuri*. The performance typically takes place in front of the host's residence and lasts for about three to four hours. The activities during Dhuli Danda are symbolic, representing agricultural life and the cycles of nature. These include acts such as ploughing, cultivation, harvesting, somersaulting, cartwheeling, constructing temples, digging wells, and offering fruits from the harvest to the deity. In addition to these symbolic acts, participants also showcase various structures, such as pyramids, as part of the ritual. The performance is led by the *Pata Dandua* or *Bhokta*, who directs the ritual by holding the dhoti of the person in front of him and gently laying down the dirt. The Bhoktas then rise and assist each other in continuing the performance. At the end of the event, all participants refer to each other as *Rishi Putra*, signifying their shared spiritual bond. Dhuli Danda is more than just a ritual; it is a dance performance deeply rooted in the agricultural lifestyle of the community. Male actors perform various roles, including *hailas*, *khambari*, *tapia*, *bepari*, *kasturia*, and

mulia. The dance incorporates the use of *danduas* or *bhoktas* as ritual objects, and the *Patabhokta* invokes Lord Shiva's blessings upon the performers. The entire performance thus reflects the community's connection to nature, labor, and spirituality (Patra, 2014).

In Dhuli Danda, two devotees with anklets on their feet and turbans on their heads bow down to Lord Siva and then bow their heads in all direction. At this time the rest of the devotees who are far away also repeat the same activities. And those two main devotees once again bow down to Lord Siva and when they get up, other devotees come from a distance and start dancing with them and finally everyone claps their hands and loudly chants "Kala Rudra Mani Nku Bhaje". After each service is completed, this process is repeated again and again. In this Dhuli Seva everyone addresses everyone as *Rishi Putra* and the service concludes with a question and answer between a gentleman and the devotees.

Gentlemen speak (Bhadra Loka)- Oh Rushi Putre.

Bhokta answer- Yes.

Gentlemen Speak-

Aile Hara

(Hara, the lord Shiva came)

Deigale bara

(Distributed blessings)

Anaseva chhadi ehi seva kara

(Give up all other services and concentrate on his worship).

Bhokta ask question to gentlemen- E seva kale ki phala pai?)

(What are the fruits of his worship?)

Gentlemen answer- Andha netra paai

(Blind gets sight)

Aputrika Santana pae

(Issueless gets child)

Khandia kama hue

(Half left works get completed)

Rogi byadhiru mukti pae

(Diseased gets cured from difficult diseases)

Ajnani jnana pae

(Stupid gets knowledge)

Sukhila katha kancha hue

(Dry wood becomes fresh and green)

Ushuna dhana gaja hue

(Boiled paddy even germinates)

Bhaktire je jaha kamana kare

(With devotion whatever who desires)

Taha prapata hue.

(That he gets) (Satapathy, 1999, p-41-42)

Pani Danda or Ghata Puja

Pani Danda, also called Ghata Puja in Boudh Danda Nata, is a significant ritual performed after Dhuli Danda. It takes place near a riverbank or pond, where the Danduas engage in various activities symbolizing purification and devotion. The ritual begins with the use of mango sticks to brush the teeth, believed to purify the mouth and treat oral ailments. The participants then perform aquatic activities like swimming, somersaults, and forming human pyramids, representing

physical and spiritual strength. Following this, they construct a Shiv Linga on the riverbank and offer worship with sacred items such as **umbrellas, Prabha** (flags), Agnidandas (fire sticks), and Bairakha (whisks). A fire-based game is performed by the Patadandua and Panidandua, who feed resin into the Danda fire, keeping it burning. The ritual culminates with ablutions and the return of the Danduas to their resting place, marking the end of this phase. Pani Danda is an important part of the Danda Yatra, symbolizing purification, devotion, and the participants' connection to the divine, particularly Lord Shiva (Mohapatra, 2021).

Bana Danda/Dera Puja

In Boudh district, this ritual, known as **Dera Puja**, involves the Danduas retreating to a secluded spot in the evening. They set up a temporary hearth and cook simple meals such as rice, dalama, and curry. Before eating, they offer the food to Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali as a mark of respect and devotion. Once the offerings are made, the Danduas begin to eat. However, if they hear any external sounds or find something inedible, they immediately stop eating and chant "Kalo Rudramaniki Bhaje." This practice is designed to help them achieve mental peace and spiritual focus, as they engage in total devotion to the deities, away from the distractions of human habitation (Sahu, 2015).

Agni Danda

After the meal, the Danduas prepare for the Sapper, where they light the Agni Danda from the divine fire of the Champabara (Bihanaberia). They feed resin to the dandas (earthen torch-shaped objects) and engage in a fire-game, entering the village while praying to Lord Shiva for the host's wellbeing. The scene is captivating, with acrobatic feats, dancing, and jumping, all while holding the flaming dandas. Upon reaching the host's house, the Danduas chant "Kala Rudramaniki Bhaje" and conclude the Agni Danda ritual, preparing the ground for the next phase, the Suanga Danda performance (Mishra, 2020).

Suanga Danda or Nrutya Danda

Suanga Danda is a traditional theatrical performance within Danda Nata, in which artists perform various Suangas in duets, with the exception of Baidhana. During the performance, the Dhulia invites male participants to the Green Room, while their female counterparts are called by the males to join the act. This interaction typically leads to a quarrel between the husband and wife, but the conflict is resolved when the husband soothes his wife, resulting in a peaceful reconciliation. In Boudh district, there are 16 types of Suangas (collectively referred to as Sola Suanga), including Danduali, Hadi-Hadiani, Jhuna Khel, Parbha-Parbhani, Haras-Parvati, Chadheya-Chadheyani, Phakira-Phakirani, Nabachhanka-Nabachhanki, Kandha-Kandhuni, Kela Keluni, Bhalua-Bhaluani, Jogi-Jogiani, Baidhana, Sabar-Sabarren, Patrasaura-Patrasauren, and Binakara-Karuani. However, due to time constraints, not all 16 Suangas are performed. Some less important or time-consuming Suangas are omitted, while more engaging or erotic-themed Suangas take precedence in the performance. In certain areas of Boudh, a variant known as Radha-Krishna Leela Dannda is performed instead of the traditional Sola Suanga Danda. This performance celebrates the divine and amorous love between Radha and Krishna and is locally referred to as Radha-Krishna Pratham Bhet or Bandibutal. In addition to the traditional Sola Suanga, performances like Sali Bhenei and Diara Bhauja are also performed as a farcical representation of contemporary society, reflecting social issues through humor and satire (Nayak, 2015).

Dala Puja (Special Puja)

In Boudh district, Dalapuja is a unique and independent ritual within the context of Danda Nata, performed on the day before the Meru. On this day, the Pata Bhokta (chief performer) along with two other Bhoktas, carrying the Parabha (a symbol of Goddess Kali), proceeds to a secluded place. There, the Pata Bhokta and the others perform the ritual using Tantric methods to invoke and worship the Parabha (a metal image of Kali). After completing the ritual, they offer sacrifices, typically a magura or seula (a type of fish), as part of the ritual offerings. Once the worship is completed, all the materials used during the puja are left behind at the site, and only the Parabha is taken back to the resting place. This ritual remains an exclusive practice in Boudh and is not performed in other regions of Odisha. It holds special significance in the Danda Nata tradition of Boudh, distinguishing it from other regional practices of the ritual.

The Meru/Bishuba Sanskriti

On Meru Sanskrit Day, the Dandua troupe returns to their village to perform the traditional Dhuli Danda, usually in front of the village Shiva Temple. Afterward, they proceed to the Kamana Ghar, where a dramatic ritual takes place. During this ritual, a yajna (sacred fire offering) is performed, involving the erection of poles around the yajna pit. In an intense display of devotion, the Patta Dandua/Bhokta swings upside down from a horizontal pole. As he swings, drops of blood begin to ooze from his nostrils, leaving him in a semi-conscious state, symbolizing the depth of his penance and

spiritual dedication. Later that night, the Danda Suanga performance is held for the final time, encapsulating the essence of the festival. The following morning, the Danduas/Bhoktas remove the sacred threads they have worn since the beginning of the festival during their baths, signifying the end of their vows and rituals. The festival concludes with a communal feast, where non-vegetarian dishes are served, symbolizing unity and the collective celebration of the participants (Mohapatra, 2021).

Modernization in Danda Nata

Nowadays, the influence of modernity, the use of modern musical instruments, and the commercialization of Danda Nata have led to a gradual loss of traditional practices. The Bhoktas (participants) have adapted to modern conveniences, using bicycles and motorbikes to travel from one place to another, which contrasts with the traditional practice of walking barefoot. Additionally, the once strict dietary restrictions have eased, as Bhoktas now eat twice a day, unlike in the past when meals were consumed only once. Another shift is the use of modern clothing in the performances, replacing the traditional attire that was once a hallmark of the ritual. These changes reflect how Danda Nata has evolved over time, influenced by contemporary lifestyle and societal shifts.

Role of Govt. and Private Organization

To preserve Danda Nata in its current form, both government and non-governmental organizations are actively working towards its survival. Various cultural associations, festivals, and community gatherings are organized to keep the tradition alive. The government, through its initiatives, has been providing pensions to Danda Nata performers to support and encourage their continued involvement. In Boudh district, religious and cultural service organizations (Dharmika O Sanskrutika Seva Sangha), along with animal welfare committees (Prani Kalyana Mancha), are consistently striving to preserve and promote the tradition of Danda Nata. These efforts are aimed at safeguarding this cultural heritage and ensuring that it remains a vibrant part of the region's identity for future generations.

5. CONCLUSION

Danda Nata serves not just as an entertainment form, but as a significant social message, emphasizing equality and communal unity. Participants from various castes, especially from lower castes, come together in this ritualistic performance, where social hierarchies are temporarily erased. The egalitarian nature of Danda Nata is reflected in the shared penances, uniform attire, and common restrictions imposed on all participants, creating a sense of collective identity. The musical accompaniment, while minimal, is integral to the performance. Instruments such as the dhol, mahuri, flute, mardal, ghanta, ghungura, Tasa, Gini, and the male human voice create a unique auditory experience. The dhol plays a central role, with 16 distinct rhythmic patterns, known as Shohala Khadi, setting the tempo for the performance. The songs, often composed by uneducated folk poets, draw heavily on metaphors and similes from rural life, connecting the performance to everyday experiences. However, in recent years, Danda Nata has been influenced by the forces of modernity. The once simple and traditional rituals, including the Suanga, have been replaced by contemporary elements such as modern operas, theater performances, club dances, pop music, and modern styles of costume and makeup. This shift has led to a departure from the raw simplicity and rural ethos that characterized the original performance, resulting in a transformation that blends the past with the present. While Danda Nata retains its social significance, the changing dynamics highlight the tensions between tradition and modernization.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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