

THE FIVE ELEMENTS IN THE *DAṆḌA* RITUALS OF ORISSA

The seasons during which two new *rasa* flow on earth are Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October); both these periods mark the transition from one kind of activity to another at both the social and agricultural level. Monsoon season is a period when group/community activity comes to a standstill and life turns inward and indoor. When the rains stop trade and harvesting operations begin. Similarly after the winter months of collective work and social activities Spring arrives and nature renews itself for the new agricultural year. Among the rural communities of coastal and central Orissa, spring and autumn are marked by rituals related to the Śiva-Śakti cult in which deities are worshipped both in their benevolent and terrifying aspects. In these communities unlike in the orthodox Hindu section of the population Durgā or Devī is never represented by an iconographical image but by various symbols such as pole, pitcher, sword, dagger and so on.

In the performances of these rituals one finds traces of ancient cults belonging to the *Tantric Buddhism* and *Tantric Śaivism* and *Śāktism*, as well as the tribal and the indigenous features. It makes for a fascinating example of cultural synthesis achieved over the centuries. During both the *śola pūjā* (*Sixteen days*) culminating in *Vijayadaśami* performed in the month of *Āśvina* and the *ḍaṇḍayātra* (also called *jhamu nata*, *patua yatra*, *uda parva*) performed in the month of *Chaitra* a clay pitcher filled with water embodies the power of *devī*. The *kalaśa* workshop is more to do with the mind where the fulfilment of a vow or desire is involved. The *kalaśa* or pot can be interpreted as a womb containing the generative lymph (symbol of fertility) or as symbol of the human form where the pot is the head, the five mango leaves, the five senses, the water contained in the pot of the mind, the turmeric spread on it, the soul and the germinated paddy placed in front of the *kalaśa* its nourishment.¹ While in the last four days of the *śola pūjā* the *kalaśa* is worshipped with animal sacrifices (especially goats which are associated with *kāma* or desire, one of the six *ripu* or enemies). During the *ḍaṇḍa* rituals it is the human body which undergoes a series of punitive tests, once again for the cause of that has been a vow undertaken or a desire needs to be fulfilled.

The dictionary, besides describing the word *ḍaṇḍa* as *staff, club, stick, rod*, will also tell you that it means *corporal punishment, chastisement, subjection, control, restraint*. Self control is exercised by the devotees or *dandua* not only by way of fasting for between eighteen to twenty-one days (starting from the full moon of the month of *Chaitra* up to the beginning of the solar month of *Biśākha*), but also by performing other kind of physical exertions. Although all sections of the population can take part in these rituals, in most of the villages where *ḍaṇḍa* is performed a majority of the *dandua* are from the *paik* or soldier class² and the *pata dandua* is the leader of the *paik akhāḍa* of the same village. It is certainly difficult to establish the historical reasons for this military connection. Elements of self-discipline, physical fitness and vigorous dance involved in the performance of *ḍaṇḍa* together with the fact that both forms of physical expression are situated in the background of the Śiva-Śakti cult, partly explain this cultural link.

Another reason could be that while the *ḍaṇḍa* ritual is performed in some coastal areas of Orissa it is specially widespread in the *garjats* or fortified ex-Feudatory states of Central Orissa, like Talcher, Angul, Denkanal, Hindol, Daspalla and Nayagarh, where the population mainly consists of a military case. That the *paiks* besides being warriors, were all along also involved in agriculture in times of peace, is another important fact one might want to consider in this regard. An interesting variant of the *dandua* rituals of Central Orissa can be found in the *bhokta* cult of Baripada, the capital of the northern district of Mayurbhanji. Here the main *bhoktas* who undertake fasting and perform physical penances during the same part of the year hold hereditary titles; they used to be given special gifts and privileges by royalty to undergo penance for not only the welfare of the *Mahārāja* and his family members but for the entire community as well.

Among the *ḍaṇḍa*, the self-inflicted punishments are: *bhūmi* or *dhūli ḍaṇḍa* where the performers enact group pantomimes in the dust, *pāni ḍaṇḍa*, (acrobatics in water), *agni ḍaṇḍa* (which includes *jhuna khela*-playing with resin, *nia pata*-walking on burning coals, *ugra pata*-swinging upside down up on the burning ashes) and *swanga* (folk plays) which are enacted in different places every night for thirteen days culminating in *pana sankrānti* or the first day of the month of *Bāśākha*. Although there are variations in the performance of the different phases between one region and another, and although these days some parts of the ritual might not be performed regularly every day, the physical interplay of the devotees with dust, water, fire and air continues to be a common feature whenever *ḍaṇḍa* is performed. Under the burning hot sun of the month of April, in the middle of the day when the earth is at its hottest, the *dandua* gather around the *kāmana ghara* in the village.

Under instruction from the *pata dandua* they perform *dhūli ḍaṇḍa*, short sequences of pantomime enacted in the dirt, for Goddess *Kāmana*, who is represented by the permanent *kalaśa* kept in the *kāmana ghara*. It is believed that the goddess herself gives orders by using the *pata dandua*, is the mouthpiece. As the player act out the different agricultural operations, the *dhūli* is used in the most imaginative and creative ways. *Dhūli* represents sometimes the black grams that are sown in the ground, at other times the paddy that is thrashed and ventilated and at times the weeds that are extirpated. The bodies of the *dandua* become at times the plough, at time the boundary between fields, the cart on which the harvest is carried, or the bullocks which trample over the new paddy during thrashing operations. As with rituals in any part of the world which are performed with fervour and a firm faith in the *magical* as compared with the cause-effect driver scientific outlook, the enactment of certain real-life situations in a ritualistic set-up is believed to influence the course of similar events when they do occur at a later date.

Similarly, the physical enactment of all these agricultural procedures performed as ritualistic acts of offering and penance is supposed to assure success in the same operations when they take place during the new agricultural year. After the last act which simulates the smearing of oil and *haldi* over the body is time now to proceed towards the nearest tank for the ritualistic bath and *pāni ḍaṇḍa*. The procession moves along, with the *pata dandua* carrying the *gauri beto* (consisting of two cane sticks covered with red bangles, lack strips of cloth and a sari, and the bundle of straw containing the sacred fire). All the *dandua* enter the water for a dip and *gauri beto* is immersed. The *dandua* stand around her and after a full immersion, pour water over her again and again and wash her with leaves of the mango tree, chanting invocations to the Goddess all the while.

They then clean their teeth and wash themselves in the same manner and perform acrobatic feats in the water. In recent times, this portion of the ritual is often omitted, but a *dandua* I spoke to, who belonged to village Manikagoda in the Khurda subdivision of Puri district, confirmed that it used to be performed even about a generation ago. The aerial somersaults of the *pāni ḍaṇḍa*, called *sunā*, are part of the *paik* training even today. These exercises include backward somersaults from varying heights as well as a variety of pyramidal formations. After the bath and *pāni ḍaṇḍa* are over, an extremely important ritual takes place: the relighting of the sacred fire, called *ḍaṇḍa jia*. It is interesting to note that the word *ḍaṇḍa* assumes yet another meaning here; relating to the *handles* which support the torches which are relit everyday at this time and carried in procession through the village along with *gauri beto*. The handle, like the stick, is a phallic symbol and the symbol of Śiva to

whom the creative power of *agni* or *teja* has been mythologically attributed.

The *ḍaṇḍa* are four in number and every year two new ones are made while the old ones are stored in the *kāmana ghara* next to the permanent *kalaśa*. There are two parts to a *ḍaṇḍa*: the handle which is made of clay supports a cup made of straw; *jhuna*, a hard oily substance derived from the *sāl* tree is thrown in it because it has properties which create a coating on the straw and prevent it from burning fully. The fire, which has been carried from the *kāmana ghara* stored in the bundle of straw will be revived by rubbing it vigorously against the ground. The four *ḍaṇḍas* are placed on the ground in the shape of a cross with the four cups facing each other will be first lit with the bundle of straw and again and again be made blazing by pouring resin into them. While this takes place to the accompaniment of invocations, *Agni*, *Durgā*, *Kālī*, and various terrific aspects of Śiva Bhairava rise to the sky together with the blaze.

The procession around the village is completed at a very quick pace; but without missing *Sahi* and corner. Outside each house *bhogo* is offered to the deity. One of the *danduas* blesses each of the offerings and collects a portion of it. Every shrine is circumambulated, designs made of coloured powders decorate the ground outside and different types of *bhogo* are placed on it. These are the outer spaces where the *naṭa* is to take place at night; the ordinary space, sacralised and circumscribed on four sides by the ritualistic power of the square and circular designs, has become a medium of transaction between the secular and the sacred. The evening performance will not be mere entertainment, but a continuation of the process of expiation in which the entire community participates through the role-playing by the *dandua*.³ The procession will finally returns to the *kāmana ghara* towards evening; the deity is escorted inside, the fire switched off, and the *dandua* commence their only meal of the day—a liquid preparation called *pana* made of milk, fruits, black pepper, green gram and fried rice. The fire is relit at night and more physical exercises called *ḍaṇḍa bhariṅga* take place. These are performed by one of the *dandua* who holds the lighted *ḍaṇḍa* in his hands and performs some ground acrobatics.

The *pata dandua* goes around the *kāmana ghara* in a special *chali* called *jhaleri* while the blazing flames activated by the *jhuna* rise to the sky making a pathway of light into the darkness of the night. The scene is set for the apparition of *parva*, the terrific aspect of Goddess *Kālī*. Night performances always starts with the *parva* who is taken out only during the period of the *ḍaṇḍa naṭa*. The *dandua* who interprets this role is dressed in a red and black sari, wears ornaments and an arch made of bamboo strips round with cloths is tied to the back. This is the *parva* or radiance which is kept all

through the year inside the *kāmana ghara* together with *kāmana* and the *ḍaṇḍa* or handles. The themes of the *naṭa* which are performed in front of different houses for thirteen consecutive nights are drawn from the ordinary life of the tribal people. The steps are vigorous and performed at a fast tempo. Dialogues by the lead artiste, songs directed at the audience and pure dance interludes alternate. A lot of stamina is required on the part of the dancers who have to talk, sing and dance without a pause. There is a shorter version accompanied only by the *ḍhol* or a longer one called *svaṅga* (Sanskrit for graceful acting) accompanied by an ensemble of instruments such as *packava*, *ḍholak*, *jodinagar*, (to drum and keep beat), *jhumuka* (metal balls with pieces of iron inside), *gini* (cymbals), *harmonium*, *mahuri* and *kahali* (wind instruments). Among the most popular characters are *chadeya* (bird hunters), *bābāji* (*sannyasis*), *hata khata* (mendicants), *kandha kandhuni* (tribal couple), *pattara saura* (nomads), *śabara* (tribals), *vīṇākār* (he who holds the *vīṇa*).

In some villages the dancers or *nachua* are different from the *dandua* who perform the rituals. In such cases although the *nachua* too are under a vow, they don't observe a complete fast like the *dandua* but are strictly vegetarian through the period of the *ḍaṇḍa naṭa*. The houses in front of which the *naṭa* are performed usually belong to well-to-do families who have also taken a vow and manifest their devotion towards Śiva by inviting the dance party and sponsoring one of their performances. When the invitation is extended a small area outside the house is cleaned up, with cow dung and water, once it dries up decorative floor designs are drawn on it with coloured powders and offerings of food and a jugful of water are placed on it. The money collected after each performance goes towards the *pīṇa* expenditure; the entire community takes a single vow for the fulfilment of a common goal and every one does their best to ensure the completion of the rituals.

The last couple of days witness the climax when the *dandua* subject themselves to the trial of *ugra* and *nia paṭa*. At midday on *meru* under the hot sun in front of the *kāmana ghara*, each of the swings upside down for a few seconds over burning coals; the day after, on *sankrānti*, they walk on bed of charcoal which is about twenty-five feet long. Then only one act remains to be accomplished at 2 a.m on the night after *sankrānti*, the *kalaśa* will be emptied into the tank from which water had been drawn and consecrated at the beginning of the rituals. The circle is now complete and the entire process will start again the next year.

1965, Bindusagar (West), Bhubaneswar – 751 002, India

Notes

1. This anthropomorphic interpretation for the symbol of the *kalaśa* has been given to me by a tantric *pījāri* whose forefathers used to perform the rituals for the Royal dynasty of Seraikhella in the State of Bihar.

2. From the Sanskrit work *padatik*, they were the infantry soldiers of the rulers of the Feudatory states in Orissa. In exchange for the military service rendered, they were receiving free lands (*jāgīrs*) to cultivate in time of peace.

3. This link between the ritualistic penances enacted by the devotees in the daytime and the evening performance by the dancers, is somehow not so evident in the *bhokta* cult of Baripada in Mayurbhanji. Although the sacralisation of the performance-space is carried out by the Chhau dancers before starting the dances on the first night, by spreading on the arena some earth brought in procession from the *akhāḍa*, it is only when the dance performance is quite advanced that the *bhokta* pay visit to the arena with the sacred pitch of water on their head. All these procedures give more the impression of a juxtaposition of events than of an originally integrated process.