Maharaja Versus Mahaprabhu : An Introduction to Dhanuyatra

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Dhanujatra is a performance of Odisha that transports the participants, on lookers and all alike into a mythical atmosphere for eleven days and nights as well. Jatra is one of the most popular forms of performances in Bengal and Odisha. The genesis of the Jatra is traced by the folklorists in 15th -16th century through the Bhakti movement.

For the whole period of performance, Bargarh town becomes the mythical Mathura Nagari, Local River Jeera is considered as river Jamuna and the village Ambapalli, situated on the bank of river Jeera is identified with Gokul or Gopa.

Some of the basic characteristics of Jatra are as follows:
1. A Jatra is completed in one night.
2. The stage is fixed, either at the ground level or at a raised platform.
3. Stock characters like vidusaka or clown and /or sutradhara or narrator cum stage manager are a must.
4. An actor does not bear his dramatic persona during day time.
5. Purvaranga or preliminaries precede the main performance.

Even though Dhanujatra has the word Jatra in it, it does not imbibe the basic characteristics of Jatra, as such. At times, it is followed verbatim whereas at other, there are interesting deviations from the accepted norms or rules of Jatra.

In the month of Pusha (or Pousa winter, the first half of January), the sleepy town Bargarh of Odisha, turns festive.

During ‘Dhanujatra’ or ‘Kansa Badha’ (The killing of Kansa) performance takes place for 11 days, both day and night.

In a Jatra, usually everything is enacted at one particular place, which we call mancha or stage. In this performance the whole town becomes stage. The uniqueness of the festival lies in the fact that all the episodes of this Jatra enacted in different parts of the town making it the largest open air theatre in the world.

The plot of the Jatra is mythical and has adopted from the Srimad Bhagabat. It begins with the marriage of Devaki with Basudeba. Kansa, the brother of Devaki, becomes the King of Mathura, by dethroning his own father Ugrasena. He puts his own sister Debaki and Brother-in-law Basudeba in prison, as he comes to know that their eighth child will kill him.

Different episodes are enacted at different places in the regime. So, Dhanujatra does not confine itself to a fixed static or dead stage, as in case of other Jatra's; it rather becomes the stage for the world at large.

For that, it is said that, world’s biggest ‘open air theatre’ held in the tiny town called Bargarh in the West Odisha.

Radhakrishna Temple of Bargarh becomes the prison of Kansa, the math of Benubaba becomes the house of Nanda, Kaliya-dalana and Nabakeli or Nouka-leela are
performed in two big ponds, in Ambedkar square of Bargarh Gopis request Krishna not to proceed to Mathura, Krishna meets Sudama in George high school complex and cures Kubuja or the hunchbacked lady near the Kali temple. The play moves sequentially day after day and the audience moves from locale to locale.

To elaborate it further, let me explain that, in this dramatic spectacle, the court of the King Kansa is the main place of performance in Mathura. It is a stage, in the true sense of the word. It is a 10 feet high stage. Every evening, episodes related to King Kansa are enacted here. Durbar scenes include dancing and singing, sword fighting, wrestling and various conspiracies and planning. This is the major venue of the Jatra.

The play moves sequentially day after day and the audience moves from locale to locale. Here it is analogues to the Ramleela of Ramnagar of Benars in which “the performance troupe does not enact all the scenes in the same arena every night. If the action moves from a place to a jungle from Ayodhya to Janakpuri, from an ascetic’s hut to Ravana’s golden castle, the acting area changes. Different scenes are enacted at different places.”

According to scholars, the web site of District Administration says; origin of “Dhanu Jatra” is obscure. Some say it was very popular in the 18th century while others argue that is started in the 16th century. It is also believed that the Jatra was restarted during the British regime.

According to my informant, Shri Sadananda Panigrahi, one of the senior organizers, the Jatra was started in 1948. Late Chandramani Dash and some others went to Mathura and got the idea and after their return they started the Jatra. In its preliminary stage, along with the Chandramani Dash, there were many in the organization. Chakradhara Nayak (alias Kangali Nayak), Krishna Chandra Sahu, Tila Pradhan, Rushava Kar, Lakha Pradhan, Aparti Panigrahi, Brindaban Bishi, Bipin Sharaf, Gopal Sharaf, Munu Barik are to name a few.

Simultaneously, Shadashiba Sarangi was the organizer of Ambapali or Gopapura. Then, the Jatra was discontinued in 1953-54 for some years. In 1961 again it was started with the initiative of Sadananda Panigrahi.

The mega affair Dhanujatra was in the initial days continued for 15 days. During Chinese invasion in 1962, it was short cut to 12 days. In 1964, when there was an all Odisha students strike, the Jatra performance reduced to 11 days, which is continuing till these days. In 1974-75, there was a drought. The then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi came to see the situation. Because of the natural calamity, the Jatra continued for seven days.

Parallel enactment is a significant feature of this Jatra. From the second day, parallel performances take place in both Bargarh town and Ambapalli epitomizing Mathura and Gokul respectively. Krishna is born in the prison on the second day of the jatra. Basudeb exchanges the child with the Nanda’s newborn baby in Gokul. In this way, parallel performances go on both in Mathura and Gokul.

The timing of the enactment is prefixed by the organizers. It is 2 pm to 9 pm for Mathura and 1 pm to 6 pm for Gokul.

When Kansa is busy with his city tour (during day time) and perpetrating atrocities,
injustice and conspiracy (during the evening hours); Krishna enjoys his childhood as a romantic lad by doing various leelas either with Gopies (or the milkmaids) or by killing demons, sent by Kansa to kill him. In a single day both type of performances are enacted in a parallel fashion at different places. This is a unique feature of the Jatra.

No Vidushaka or clown is seen in the Dhanujatra, which is usually a must in Jatras. Kansa’s body language, dialogue and action create humor. On the other hand, Madhumangala, the main accomplice of the Krishna, creates humor with the help of other Gwalas or milkmen. These compensate the absence of Vidusaka.

The ordinary persons who act as the mythological characters, or become historical heroes or the legendary Saints or Bhaktas in a Jatra in the evening, lead the lives of ordinary persons during day time. The dramatic personas of those individuals are shed with the end of the Jatra.

On the contrary, the persons who act as the main characters of Dhanujatra are exceptions in this regard. They are identified as the characters they enact for the whole period of performance, both in the evenings and during daytime.

For instance, Devendra Sahu, the Assistant Sub Inspector of police, who acts as King Kansa for those eleven days, his role as Kansa does not end with the end of the evening performance. He rather moves around in the town, during day time, riding an elephant and followed by his courtiers and musicians. People of all classes address him as ‘Maharaja’.

Though the people know that he is only an actor, they still want to identify themselves as his prajas or subjects. During the process of documentation, I have seen, how sincerely the people offer their homage to the ‘King’. People shower the petals of flowers from the rooftops of their houses as a gesture of heartfelt reception. During the journey once, the King punished a driver for rash driving. As such, the actor actually lives through his dramatic persona throughout the period of performance comprising eleven days in Dhanujatra.

It is not in case of Kansa only. The two boys who act as Krishna and Balaram are, then, the students of class VII and VIII respectively. They both are real brothers and belong to the village Ambapalli, the village which transforms into Gokul during the Dhanujatra. They are also treated as real Krishna and Balarama. People address Krishna as Mahapuru, the root of which is Mahaprabhu in Sanskrit.

In this context, it is significant to note that the villagers of Ambapalli do not take non-vegetarian food from the day Krishna born till the end of the Jatra. They do not disengage themselves from this mega-affair. They identify themselves as the real residents of Gokul, nay they become them.

When Krishna and Balram leave Gokul and proceed to Mathura, that means, to Bargarh town, which 3Km. away from their village Ambapalli, the whole village virtually weeps. The villagers fear that they may not be returning to their village in future. Almost all
the houses are adorned with Purnakumbha or Kalasa. When the boys pass through the houses, the women wash their feet, pay respect and offer them sweets and present them one or two rupee coin

It is worth mentioning that generally in the folk performances there is an ample scope to touch upon or interpret or comment or satirize the issues of contemporary relevance with the sole purpose to convey some specific message. For instance, in Raslila, the main companion to Srikrishna, ‘Mansukh’, the clown character, may comment on transport problem or rising prices in a contemporary situation. Similarly in Dhanujatra, though the subject is mythical, its treatment / enactment has the potential to imbue it with contemporary relevance.

During the process of my documentation, a senior postal department officer once visited the court of the Kansa. Kansa showed his dissatisfaction over the poor performance of the department. He complained that, he had written several letters to the Nanda for sending the boys to Mathura to see the Dhanujatra, but he could guess that the letters were not reaching Nanda, other wise he could not have dared to disobey. As a result of it, he had send Akrura, to bring the boys. Upon hearing this, the officer of the postal department said humbly that, the king might have forgotten to write the Pin code of Gokul. That’s why this situation arisen. The king then wanted to know, what the Pin code was. Then the officer explained all about it. It is needless to say that, the message was communicated to the spectators.

One yet another day, two officer of LIC visited the court. They requested Kansa to order his people to buy LIC policies. Simultaneously one of them explained about one of their new projects called ‘Grama Bima’, under which 25 per cent of total assured money would be spent on the development of the village. The King asked them how many policies they had sold both in Mathura and Gokul. The Officer provided the data. Kansa then advised them not to sell any policy in Gokul, because very soon he is going to destroy the whole village. And in that case the corporation would bear a good amount of loss.

In this Jatra, Maharaj Kansa and Mahapuru Krishna get equal importance, both on the “stage” as well as the hearts of the masses. The power drunken demon King Kansa might be a villain in the epics, but in this performance, he is a hero. He receives love and respect of people. It’s really amazing and needs special attention. The love for the king Kansa is so deep that the lane of the actor Judhisthir Sathpally, (who used to enact the role of Kansa from 1961 to till his death in 1982) was known as “Kansa Maharaja’s gali” or the lane of the Kansa Maharaja.

Both the Maharaja and Mahapuru are presented in different ways. Maharaja Kansa utters dialogue, commands people, laughs in a dreaded way. He enters the arena on a high note with the sounding of drums and other musical instruments. He enters with stylized walking and his voice and gestures are commanding. His acting is melodramatic.
On the contrary, Mahapuru Krishna comes in a grace full manner. He does not utter any dialogue. Madhumangala sings for him or speaks on behalf of him. Mahapuru's acting and appearances are realistic. He is always calm and charismatic.

According to Sadananda Panigrahi, the selection of main protagonist is very tough. The first Kansa was Bundi Ratha of Degaon. Second Kansa was Bhimasen Tripathy. Judhistir Sathpathy, the actor who acted the role of Kansa from 1961, popularized the character and was very famous.

In the year 1983, there were five actors acted as Kansa during the performance and were discarded for their poor performances. In 1984, the present actor of Kansa character, Devendra Pradhan alias ‘Eli’ got selected through an interview and till today he is acting the Kansa role and became popular and famous like his predecessor.

‘Krishnaleela’ and ‘Dadhinata’ are two major performing genre of Odisha, which are Krishna centered. Kansa comes occasionally; if at all the plot demand so. Krishnaleela is operatic and Dadhinata is theatrical in nature. But only in Dhanujatra; both Kansa and Krishna get equal importance. In no other performances of Odisha, this unique feature prevails.

The impact of this jatra is tremendous in Odisha in general and Bargarh in particular. Chief Minister of the state and other ministers make it a mandatory to pay their homage to King Kansa every year. Some times King Kansa even enquires about the progress of any particular development project related to Bargarh, his capital city, to them. Interestingly, some of the newspapers publish the general news of Bargarh mentioning it as ‘Mathuranagari’ during the Jatra period. Some Buses put the nameplate ‘Mathuranagri’ instead of Bargarh in their desk board. Some sweet stalls prepare a special king of sweet, during these days called ‘Mathuracake” in the Mela or fair, which is now a days an added attraction of Dhanujatra.

Dhanujatra is a unique cultural asset of Odisha. A serious study can give it, its proper place in the pan-Indian arena. Present paper is a humble starting in this regard.

REFERENCES
2. ibid, p.94.