

Danda Nata Festival in Orissa, India

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All is dark and quiet when we arrive at the village of Kessabiraini. The villagers who greet us show us to a veranda near the edge of town to wait, looking out onto an open field with trees beyond. Now, close to midnight, the oppressive heat has retreated to a somewhat tolerable level, though we are in no danger of getting chilled, despite the cool stone of the raised front porch on which we have settled for the next few hours. The ritual was scheduled to begin around midnight, but the juno (resin powder used to sprinkle on the torch flames) still needs to be crushed and pounded into powder before the ritual can begin. Our hosts insist on laying straw mats under us, and we curl up to rest, grateful have a reasonably comfortable place to wait, particularly when the rain begins. Sitting under the overhang, watching the downpour, I wonder how the villagers will deal with the inclement weather. Will the ritual be postponed until the rain has stopped? Will it go on as planned, all of us standing under the downpour as if nothing was out of the ordinary?

Several of the village men have sought refuge under the veranda's overhang with us, continuing the discussion they've been having with Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, one of our Principal Investigators, about the intricacies of which Goddess is actually worshipped in this ritual. Is it Kali or Kalika, or are they the same Goddess? This evolved into further Sanskrit theological questions, and now the men sit nearby, singing Sanskrit slokas as the warm rain pours down, all of which I attempt to capture on tape.

When they summon us, we follow the sound of the drum to the still pond not far from the temple, stumbling into an intense scene already underway. Down at the bottom of the worn stone steps leading to the water, the priest and various others are working in a small oval formation, exchanging dialogue and arranging flower garlands, four small, lighted torches, water vessels, and a clay pot filled with the infamous juno. I watch as

they struggle through a decision about a particular garland of flowers — should it decorate the Kamana Ghata (the pitcher of desires) or the Kamana Danda (staff) held by the priest, already adorned by flowers and streamers? The priest is almost hidden behind the decorations of the Danda and the other people working around him, lighted only by the glow of the torch fires.

There is a sense of barely contained energy, a sense that what is happening at the water's edge could easily explode up the steps and overtake us. Indeed, one of the first of the villagers to enter trance is a man further up the steps than we are standing. The priest with the Danda staff begins to shake, and as he moves deeper into trance the focus of attention shifts to him. Another man has already taken the Kamana Ghata on his head, ready to carry it through the village. Two others go into trance as well, each dancing his own individual dance.

As the priest interacts with the other two entranced men near him, their movements become wilder, and the crowd backs up the steps to clear a path to the entranced man at the top of the steps. One of our contacts in this village waves me out of the way, and I find myself outside the crowd, watching as three women who have prostrated themselves on the ground are approached by the priest. He appears to symbolically chop their heads, then lift them up from the ground.

Our group struggles to keep up with a wild procession through the village with stops in front of two houses where circles of mud have been drawn on the ground, improvised altars for offerings to the deities. Finally, the entourage circles the temple before entering the building.

After the ritual, our team is ready to retreat to our veranda, but we are invited to someone's house. We follow our host into the large cement structure, then through the open courtyard in its center. On the far side of the courtyard, we stumble up the unlighted steps and enter the corner room, where we are to sleep. By this time it is 5 am, not long before dawn. We try to catch some rest before the daytime rituals begin.

Six of our team of volunteers had accompanied Chandrabhanu on this journey to Kessabiraini, hoping to capture in photographs, recordings and notes, the particulars of this village's performance of the Danda Nata. A festival with roots in the 4th century, this

celebration of devotion to the God Shiva is an important example of the non-literate tradition that still thrives in India. Although there is extensive research examining the more mainstream traditions of ritual performance in this country, the non-literate traditions are still mostly unexplored territory.

Scholars seeking the history and evolution of literate forms here have a wealth of written materials to work with, the Sanskrit writings that laid out the foundations for these traditions between the 8th and 13th centuries. Rituals such as the Danda Nata, on the other hand, can be understood only through what we can reconstruct from what we see performed today. A colorful, vibrant, ritual performance form, it is part of the folk tradition that precedes the literate tradition by thousands of years, forming the basis for the more mainstream performance traditions that grew from it and other forms like it.

Rather than merely applying currently established performance theory to this form, Chandra and Vibha are using the documentation and study of the Danda Nata as a stepping off point for understanding how we can look at and understand traditions of this sort, those that do not lend themselves so easily to explanation using the currently popular theories. So at the same time that they are gathering information, they are learning how to make sense of it, letting the form itself teach them its meaning, rather than imposing pre-established theories that may blind the researchers to the more unexpected elements of this ancient tradition.

Of course, as in many developing countries, the non-literate traditions are in danger of extinction. As the more isolated groups are exposed to Western culture and take on more "modernized" values, the old practices fade and disappear. Unlike the literate traditions, which leave us with at least the written record to work with, these non-literate performance traditions leave nothing behind for us to study. The understanding that we can gain of the history of this culture and its beliefs lies in our study of the living ritual performances that are still available to us. By collecting notes, photos, and recordings of the current manifestation of those early practices, we bring them into the realm of documentation, comparison and further study.

Chandra is in an unusually advantageous position for undertaking this study, as his ancestral home is in the village of Tigiria, one of the twenty or so villages where this festival takes place. The eldest son of an eldest son who is a descendant of the

Commander-In-Chief to the King of this village, his family is well known and respected here. He knows these rituals from the perspective of an insider, and Oriya, the major language of this area, is his mother tongue. Thanks to the years Chandra and his wife and research partner, Vibha Sharma, have spent as graduate students at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, they move with ease in the Western world as well, bridging these two very different cultures. Vibha brings yet another perspective to their studies, as her expertise in the area of mass media and its effects on traditional performance forms allows them to understand more fully the current influences on the Danda Nata. With this knowledge, the PIs can begin to understand this unique tradition and where it came from.

Although the entire village community is involved to some degree in this festival, thirteen men of the village, the bhoktas, are the central participants, undertaking vows of celibacy, special dietary restrictions, and pious conduct for the period of the festival. For the thirteen to twenty-one days (the length can vary from year to year) of the festival, the bhoktas take on these self-inflicted punishments, or dandas, in order to please the deity, in hopes of invoking the blessings of Lord Shiva.

The Danda Nata form consists of four distinct elements, three of which seem to the Western eye as more devotional in nature, and one that more clearly fits our notion of dramatic performance. The devotional segments each involve a focus on one of the elements of earth, water and fire, and take place during the day. Watching the bhoktas of the village of Panchagoan, a fifteen minute walk from Tigiria, perform the Bhumi or Dhuli Danda, or earth ritual, I wondered about the punishment aspects of this rite. The men seemed to be enjoying their rolling on the ground and acrobatic feats. Under the direction of the Pata Bhokta, the head priest of the group, they formed human pyramids, performed individual somersaults and cartwheels, and created a series of group exercises. At one point, they formed a human chain, each man holding the dhoti of the man in front of him with both hands. They carefully lay down on the dirt, each man placing his head and arms between the legs of the bhokta behind. The Pata Bhokta sprinkled more dirt on them (just in case they weren't gathering enough dirt on themselves from their activities!) and then the end bhokta began the uncoiling by standing up and walking forward over his comrades, as each in turn pulled up the bhokta whose head had lain between his legs.

The Pani Danda, or water ritual, seemed a natural progression from the Bhumi Danda, and perhaps it was the promise of plunging into the cool water of the village pond that allowed the bhoktas to enjoy their rolls in the dirt so thoroughly.

As the bhoktas run off towards the pond, the hundreds of villagers follow, with our intrepid team of observers swept along by the teeming procession. The villagers line the sides and back of the stone steps leading to the pond but leave the steps themselves clear. One bhokta distributes mango branches with leaves to the rest of the bhoktas, who then plunge into the water. They smooth water over their foreheads and hair and then down their faces. Plucking the leaves from their mango branches and stuffing them into their mouths, they chew them, swish and spit water, then use the twig end of the branch to brush their mouths and teeth. They are squatting in the shallow edge of the pond so that they appear to be up to their chests or necks in the water. One man stands, and we can see that the water is actually at about the level of the men's knees if they were standing. The bhoktas continue washing themselves, immersed in water.

Firewalking, walking over hot coals, may be the element of the Danda Nata that westerners are most familiar with, but it is not the only component of the Agni Danda, or fire ritual.

At the far edge of the area in front of the temple where the Bhumi Danda had taken place, a structure stands, erected out of two mango poles with a cross-pole at the top. Each of the poles has a ladder leaning against it. In front of the mango poles, a pit in the earth houses the carefully tended fire. The head bhokta is brought to it with a cloth covering his head. As the priest continues to bounce and sway in trance on the other side of the fire pit, swinging his two swords, the head bhokta throws off the cloth on his head and climbs up the poles. Hanging upside down, tied by his ankles from the center cross-pole, the other men swing him out over the fire pit, his head moving swiftly through the leaping flames. After several swings, he pulls himself up to the crosspole and climbs down, as two bhoktas throw mangoes from the tops of the poles to the crowd. Villagers try to catch them, and those lucky ones who do, cut pieces for those around them in the crowd, sharing the blessed fruit with their neighbors.

The fourth element of this festival, the Danda Suanga, most resembles what we would normally identify as theatrical performance. An open area of the village is

converted to a stage, its boundaries defined by four poles. Spectators surround the performers on all sides, entering and leaving the stage area through a path left clear between the crowds of villagers sitting on the ground. These performances often last until dawn, as two villages theatre troupes compete to present each familiar scene with the most grace and energy, as well as the ability to improvise answers to theological questions in song and rhyme in the final phase of the performance.

Rather than a complete story, the performance consists of a series of scenes, each telling a short tale. The performers are all men, some dressed as women to portray the wives, Goddesses, and other female characters. Each episode tells us something about the relationship of humans to each other and to the deities. The characters portrayed are generally from ancient times — a bird-catcher, a hunter, a group of wandering mendicants, or a snake charmer. Lord Shiva figures prominently in many of the scenes, along with his consort, Parvati, but appearances of Brahma and Vishnu, the other two major Hindu deities, are not unknown. In one village, an episode recounts the tale of an attempt to foil Jagganath, originally a tribal deity, now known throughout Orissa as Lord of the Universe and an incarnation of Vishnu.

Even for the non-Oriya speaking volunteers, the spectacle of this performance element of the Danda Nata can be fascinating to watch. My own experience with more classical Indian dance forms did nothing to prepare me for the style of movement that these performers exhibit. Considerably less contained than Bharata Natyam, perhaps the most well known to westerners, these dancers moved in ways that seemed blatantly sexual at times. Chandra explains that the custom of men playing all the women's roles allows this sort of explicit expression of sexuality in a way that would be considered outrageous should real women dance so suggestively with men.

Those who can understand the words of the songs derive yet another level of meaning, one that takes the Danda Suanga beyond the realm of entertainment and into social and political commentary. The sacred nature of the ritual does not preclude the use of humor and satire in many of the sequences. Chandra compares this to the Shakespearean fool, who can stand outside the bounds of society and comment upon what he sees. The characters of the Danda Suanga, however, are closer to that of

Vedushika, the fool of Sanskritic tradition, who can step even beyond commentary from the outsider's point of view.

"Vedushika can transgress the line, move back and forth. Every time he transgresses that line, he creates another line," explains Chandra.

In this way, the commentary provided by these ancient characters can remain current, taking into consideration themes that are relevant to the spectators of the moment, even referring subtly to the presence of westerners in their midst who have come to observe the performance. Of course, this aspect of the Danda Nata might go right over the heads of the volunteers without the in-the-moment translations by our PIs. Whenever I had the chance to observe parts of the festival within whispering distance of Chandra, I was struck by the rich layers of meaning in these performances.

Chandra and Vibha's quest for new ways to understand this ancient festival created some frustration for our team of volunteers. During one of our earliest briefing meetings, team members plied our PIs with questions concerning what we should look for, what to focus on, which aspects of the ritual performances we should pay attention to. Chandra laughed, telling us that if he points us in a particular direction, we will then miss something that he might not have thought to tell us about — or even notice himself. He told us that reports from our untrained eyes provide him with a means to see past what is already familiar to him. For earnest westerners seeking very specific directions to "do our job right," this was perhaps the most difficult task. We were to approach the rituals with a beginner's mind, seeing all the elements of the event as freshly as we could manage.

Despite this general instruction, we brought some of our specific skills to bear in our work. Coming as we did from a variety of nationalities and backgrounds, and an age range from 17 to 72, we brought a diverse set of skills and perspectives to our task of gathering documentation. Peter Lumby, a retired sociology professor from London, England was pressed into service as our mapmaker, drawing detailed diagrams of the path that the processions took through the village. The quick sketches of Charlotte Haldenby, a world history teacher from Ontario, Canada, recorded her vision in a way that went beyond the photographic lens, as well as bringing some amusement and

pleasure to the villagers when she presented copies to them. Toby Johnson, a psychotherapist and writer from Austin, Texas, handled the video camera. My own background in dance pointed me towards a focus on the specific movements of the bhoktas and the dramatic performers.

The schedule we followed was sometimes erratic, as our work periods were determined by the timing of the rituals, some of which changed several times, often at short notice. We had to adapt to a culture that lives at a different pace than our hectic, scheduled to the minute, western ones. Often days would go by between rituals. At these times, we shifted our group focus to gain background information from the scholars who visited our home base in Tigiria. They spoke to us about Goddess worship, the role of ritual in Oriya culture, or the influence of Oriya folklore in Indian literature. Each of these lectures filled in a few more blanks in our understanding of the culture in which the Danda Nata takes place. Then, just as we would begin to get restless, we would attend an all-night ritual performance, with dozens of dancers and singers drawing the villagers to the nearby temple courtyard.

We are at the Goddess temple just outside of town. It is a small square building, unassuming even in daylight, but in the dark it fades into near invisibility behind the throngs of villagers congregating in the space around it. There are food vendors around the edges of the area, and the excitement is palpable, as men of the village greet each other with hugs and touches and shouts and find a place to sit on the ground surrounding the center square where the performance will take place. Children are scattered throughout the crowd, as ordinary bedtimes do not apply on festival nights. The women sit quietly further away, speaking in subdued tones. There are four poles defining the corners of the stage area, each holding the ends of the cross-poles. A bright light hangs at each of the four corners, and a fabric awning covers the top of the structure.

In the first scenes, the loudspeaker blasts the singing voice of one of the musicians, whose voice takes on the appropriate qualities for each character as he sings or says their lines. As the night wears on, the characters sing for themselves as they dance, their voices projected into the warm night air by the microphone hanging down in center of the stage area, cleverly costumed in its own cloth skirt. I marvel at the

continuing energy of these dancers as the sky lightens into dawn, and the crowd thins out. As the drummers from the two village theatre troupes finish their final round of competitive rhythms, our tired team of volunteers discusses whether or not we are awake enough for a last cup of chai from the local vendor before we retire. After these many hours of rhythmic songs and drumming, I slip into sleep accompanied by the echoes of the night's sounds.

Cultural research projects must struggle to prove themselves worthy in the face of so many environmental crises that need addressing. We work hard to save endangered species and find solutions to ecological degradation. In our rush to answer the urgent need of so many other species on this planet whose plight is often the responsibility of our own humankind, we must not neglect the dwindling cultural resources left by our own ancestors. These folk traditions can vanish as completely as any extinct species, leaving traces only as fading memories. If we can enhance the possibility of their survival by focusing a spotlight on these traditions and acknowledging their importance, then we will have gained far more than the videotapes and photographs gathered by our team members.