

Original Article

Socio-cultural and Literary Potential of the Traditional Odia Oral Narratives: A Critical Review

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Abstract - The paper aims to evaluate the sociocultural and literary potential of the age-old popular Odia oral literature, which includes folk songs, lullabies and rhymes, which are variously known as Nanabaya geetas. There are popular oral songs like Chakulia Panda gita, Kendara gita, Halua Gita, Janughantia gita, and Kelakeluni gita, professionally sung by people on different occasions. Also, it includes a critical discussion of popular folk stories and poetic plays in the light of their popularity, highlighting eco-consciousness, delicate sociocultural bonds, and spiritual and moral matters. At first, it presents the factual contents of such literature briefly; then focus shifts to the discourse aspects of such writings, focusing on how it impacts motivating children; provides entertainment to all; and marks timely celebrations in the voices of parents and grandparents, ploughmen, tribal and people of specific communities like Baishnab, snake charmers, professional folk dancers and troupe performers of people's plays and hosts of similar such category of performers those who live on this. It is evident from the analysis that such oral narratives are not only embedded with sociocultural, artistic and moral values but also treasures of literary values reflecting on emotional, nostalgic and carnivalesque tempo altogether. What is more, they disseminated the traditional knowledge systems of Odisha too.

Keywords - Carnavalesque, Oral narratives, People's plays, Sociocultural, Traditional community.

1. Introduction

Oral narratives are spoken anecdotes or stories either in the form of songs/lullabies, tales and poetic narratives used mostly in people's plays. India has a glorious tradition of oral narratives, including the Vedas, otherwise known as *sruti*. Traditionally, people have been telling stories and religious and scientific things orally for a long time. Some oral narratives last for generations. These stories have been orally passed from elders to the respective off-springs. Sometimes, new plots and plot twists have been added to the stories per contextual needs. It includes friends, gurus, artists, parents, husband and wife, and community leaders. Indian oral literature, in general, and Odia oral literature possess the cultural and literary elements to suffice the community and cultural networks. These narratives provide amusement and help learn simultaneously; they include informal details of experiences and events and proved to be very useful at nightly bedtime. Children become curious to listen to such stories about how animals got their names and physical constructions; actions, and reactions and as such, parents and grandparents used to recite the epics which portray the evolutionary process of the world and the related matters of common inquiry and make it a seasonal activity to take it as a pastime. Also, the differently-abled people used to earn a livelihood by making it a profession of telling stories, singing folk songs and spreading cultural and mythological news in villages and community centres. Their inventory included fables, varieties of tales, mythological narratives, historical anecdotes, and epics.

1.1. Oral Narrative Tradition in Odisha

The oral literary narrative tradition is very old in Odisha. These are the stories told by grandmother, by

gurus and by pilgrims. Suasari Kahani, Abolkara Katha, Katha Sarita Sagar, and Tuantuin Gapa are very common. One popular book *Utkala Kahani* includes lots of such age-old stories compiled by Gopal Chandra Praharaj. Similarly, many songs are sung by ploughmen, minstrels, mothers, nomadic strolling bands, and the tribal. In addition, oral narratives are very much used in people's plays enacted on different seasonal festivities.

2. Literature Review

Many works have already been done focusing on oral narratives' literary and linguistic components, but still, we find them incomplete in some respects. Lwin (2017) critically analyses the discourse performance of a contemporary professional storyteller as an example of interactive community-based activity and then focuses on how 'the process of co-constructing an oral story with an adult audience' could be established through narrativity and creativity. Factors hindering an oral storyteller from successful storytelling have also been discussed.

Biswal and Pramanik (2020), in their article "Vanishing Oral Tradition: Kathani- A Folktale in Odisha", talks about *Kathani*, a folk tradition transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Many of the *Kathanis* have similarities with the tradesman and craftsmen described in history. The prince sees the princess at the bathing pond and falls in love with her at first sight, and the journey of marrying the princess is the most romantic and alluring matter of *Kathanis*. However, this folk tradition is on the verge of extinction due to the forces of urbanization, westernization, and globalization.



It is evident from such discussions that were ranging from entertaining erotic narratives to potential narratives still need thorough documentation and cultural analysis.

3. Songs as Oral Narratives

3.1. *Chakulia Panda Gita*

It is the professional whose name is given after a commonly prepared cake called *chakuli*. He visits villages on specific occasions like *sankranthi*, full-moon or no-moon days. The strolling singer addresses the august audience by invoking lord Jagannath, then lord Ganesh and then promises to render services in terms of moral and spiritual songs. His songs, known as 'Lokahitabani', are moral songs as he sings of making life beautiful like a pond of lotus, respecting women because they perform various roles as daughter, wife, and mother and termed as goddess Laxmi and Saraswati. He sings that there should not be dowry torture, and people should maintain unity in the family; believe in the concept of hell and heaven; read *the Gita*, *Bhagabat Purana*; and follow guidelines in daily life. In addition, he sings of living an honourable life devoid of animal sacrifice, adopting vegetarianism, try to possess good company and consideration. There is a reference to Mahatma Gandhi as well as his three monkeys. He also highlights the ideology of *brahmacharya* and advises maintaining value in speech and actions.

3.2. *Janughantia Gita*

Sung by the category known as Gurubaishnab, that is, the wandering mendicants. They start singing, seeking the lord's blessing. Normally, they sing the highly dramatic episode of Rama and Parsurama meeting from the *Ramayan*. He narrates the glory of Parsurama, who made the earth rid of *kshyatriyas* twenty-one times. He does not recognize Rama and not allows him to cross the forest path in Mahendragiri. So, it leads to fighting between them in which Rama takes away the war ability of Parshurama when the later recognizes him and surrenders. This singer wears bells on his thigh and holds a parshu, which is the weapon of Parshurama, which he displays to the village folk with various tricks.

3.3. *Kendara Gita*

A specific group sings it of Baishnabs. They start with the prayer and glorification of the lord and continue singing the song of self-realization. The song is conversational. Specifically, they sing of some of the plights of the mythological characters, like the story of King Harishchandra, his son Rohitaswa and queen Sabya. The song leads to adopting the best ideologies of life and tells of living a truthful life.

3.4. *Halua Gita*

The ploughmen in the rural areas normally sing this song relating to the power of religiousness. They sing the song regarding home remedies for common sicknesses; study the nature of people and how to deal with them; natural adaptability; sociocultural norms, how to render social service; how to follow the path of lord Ram; chant *mantrapanchakshara* of lord Shiva; cause and effect of

karma. Basically, they sing the story of Kirata living in a forest. He is a cruel hunter of animals. However, one day the utmost honesty of a deer as his victim transformed the person. He then becomes pious worshipping lord Shiva.

4. Odia Rhymes and Lullabies

These are the rhymes for children and folktales sung by mothers/grannies through the act of poetic narration to the children on various daily routine times like bedtime or consoling them to get rid of childish obstinacy. Almost all the songs have an anonymous origin, constituting an important element of folk culture. These are buzzed around by them, and such songs' styles and rhythms are distinctive. At times, it becomes an uphill task to translate them into English by keeping the original content, style and tone intact.

4.1. *Tukumusi Gita*

It is a lullaby reflecting on the notoriety of mice at home in eating paddy and other eatables and making holes here and there. The mother normally sings this to praise her small child so that he or she will eat without irritating her. In the meantime, she also refers to the goodness and love of the maternal uncle for milking cows and bringing them to them along with other things; and expresses her sadness for her husband, who is away from home.

4.2. *Nanabaya Categories*

This lullaby is sung in order to divert the attention of babies towards weaver birds by making them feel fanciful as the mother of the bird goes on driving the cow herd and brings ripened bail for them, and after coming from work, she fondles him/her. Nanabaya (vagrant crackpot) songs are sung on various familial and general occasions, but they are designed for children's health and happiness. The different occurrences include the mother cuddling babies and showing affection; swinging to sleep or amuse; dancing with the child for fun or practice; providing consolation to the crying child; while feeding; and teaching them fundamentals, etc. Nanabaya songs fall under the literature for children category. There are two categories of Nanabaya Geeta. They are – *Prachina Nanabaya Geeta* (ancient vagrant crackpot lullaby) and *Adhunika Nanabaya Geeta* (modern vagrant crackpot lullaby).

The 'Prachina Nanabaya Geeta' category of oral songs has no written records; therefore, these songs are anonymous so far orally, and this tradition unquestionably passes from one generation to the other. Examples of Prachin Nanabaya Geeta can be categorized under mother's songs and friend's songs. Mother's songs include *Aa janhamamu sarada sashi* and *Are baya aa*. The friend's songs include *Akala aakala takalatian*, *Tuan tuin*, *Aal mala dhinki dhala*, *Aikam baikam*, *Aakhi nahin kana nahin*, *Asare pilae banaku jiba*, *Itikili mitikili*, etc. Some are still in use, whereas most of the other songs have simply disappeared from a human voice. Some have been composed in modern forms. Some of the Adhunika Nanabaya Geetas have been documented with the names of certain poets. The well-known Rural poet Nanda

Kishore Bal (1875-1928) published his collection of songs in 1934 under the title 'Nanabaya Geeta'. His popular Nanabaya songs include Baya chadhei, Chutia musa, Dhore baaya dho, Nida mausi, Benguli nani, Baya maa, etc. Other popular modern Nanabaya song poets include Ramakrushna Nanda (1906-1994), who wrote Hathi ne ghoda ne and Chaka chaka Bhaunri. Devotional poet Madhusudan Rao (1853-1912) composed certain songs for study purposes at the primary level in his very popular book *Chhabila Barnabodha* (A Picture Book Letters and Words), which contains a number of very popular songs. These songs are culturally assimilated with the Odia-speaking community and orally produced almost by one and all. Some such songs are: Arana Mainshi rahichhi anaai, Raati pahilani rabai kau, Sameera Bahai dhira, Bilua bada chatura, Baishakha mase bada kharaa, Gaibaachhuri aasaaasa, Hansa kheluchhi nadinire, Sukhapare dukha, Prajapatiti harasare, Akasha dise kisundara, Kisundara aha, Pahila andhara rajjani, and Sandhya sangita. Laxmikant Mohapatra(1888-1953)'s Aa janhamamun, Godabarish Mishra(1886-1956)'s Tuni hua pua, Gopal Chandra Praharaj(1872-1945)'s Jhulure hathi jhulu, Tu'uku musi, Kalicharan Patnaik's Dhore baya dho, Aa janha mamun saraga sashi, Upendra Tripathy's Tu'uku Mushi, Udaynath Sarangi's Bae chadhei and Chaka chaka bhaunri, Kunjabihari Das' Udu uduma, Narayan Prasad Singh's Kainshi kakudi lalita pita, etc. Many Nanabaya songs have similar musical notes, or at least the starting is the same, but there are various textual changes befitting the situations.

One more popular lullaby in the same category on vagrant crackpot sings of driving him to the finger millet (raagi) field, where he would find a resting place. While expressing her deep love, the mother addresses the baby to be indispensable to her and promises the baby that she will bring him the angel of sleep to make him sleep deeply. In the meantime, she would express her anguish for her daily chore by sobbing.

The mother sings *aajahnammu saraga sashi* (addressing the moon to come being the universal maternal uncle) to fondle and play with the baby and share butter and milk skin with him. Mother says the uncle to bring him a red umbrella, turban and shoes to go on a pleasant trip.

The frequently sung oral tradition, *itikilimitikili phutigala kaincha*, is another popular, playful song inviting friends to come together to celebrate the wedding of a jackal in which bear would eat voraciously followed by the meeting called by lion king in which the tiger uncle would propose how to save the forest and wildlife from destruction.

Damara kau (raven song) is a popular song sung by a mother or grandmother to make the baby happy and divert attention so that the baby would sleep or eat. There is a reference to the activities like counting cowries, bathing in the river together and plucking cucumbers from the farm. It leads to the praise of the baby, expecting that he/she would live an honourable and successful life altogether.

Jhumurujhain song is also playful, and talks of the generosity of cows in giving us milk and mocking remarks passed at monkeys for interfering in every matter.

5. Oral Narrative Traditions in People's Play in Odisha

People's play is a performing art. It is a coin in which 'people' are on one side, 'play' is on the other, and virtually both are complimentary. It is a reflection of the culture of Odisha. It reflects the lifestyle of common countryside people as well as institutional life, added with the vigour and vain of play, dance and song. The environment of such plays is purely rural and abounds in the simple lifestyle of rural people. The audience can solve their own social, personal and spiritual problems by watching such plays. Sometimes, such plays abound in the magnetic attraction of religion, the glaze of blind beliefs and the fragrance of culture.

The male members perform the character roles among the common folk, who are not necessarily professional. The stage of play is the rugged roads of the villages. The village people get a respite from their hard and daily chores. They forget all delineations, wants, caste, and creed and get chained in closeness only to be the audience of such plays and enjoy the rasa of the plays. These plays are sometimes enacted at the village temple, under trees or in the open theater. Almost all the plays declare the decay of sin and victory of the law of nature and religion. Thus, the organizer, the actor and the audience are altogether spellbound by the fetter of religion and culture, and they dream of a life of space and prosperity through this.

On the stage, we see Rāmalīla, Rāsālīla, Bhāratalīla or Duarināta, Pālanātaka, Daskāthīa, Gotipua Dance, Dandanāta, Puppet dance-drama, Ghodānāta (horse dance), Pātuanāta and Suanga (farce), etc. The actors mostly appear in the forms of couples such as Sabara (the arrow bearer) and his wife Sabaruni, Patarasaura (a category of nomadic) and his wife Patarasauruni, Dhoba (washerman) and his wife Dhobani, Kela (snake charmer) and his wife Keluni, Jogi (the pious rover) and her better half Jogiani, Keuta and her female partner Keutuni (fisherman and his wife), and Hādi (common class providing social service) and his female counterpart Hādiani. Similarly, there are popular duets with grandfather and grandchild, Brahmin (religious preacher and performer) and his wife, black lady and fair lady. Patient-Vaidya (doctor), milkman and his wife, Babu-Babuani (rich couple), etc. These plays are popularly based on sing-songs and dances known as people's plays. Also, they reveal the dramatic actions themselves through appropriate gestures as defined in the classical books on drama. The plays are enacted in the rural areas throughout the year, but basically on the occasions of particular functions of the calendar as well as the birth year anniversaries of members of families. The plays not only get acted for entertainment but also to spread the message of the ideology of Shaiva (related to Lord Shiva), Shakti (related to the goddess), and Vaishnav (related to Lord Vishnu) traditions on moral and sociocultural bases. These are also enacted on the parameters of public acceptance of the well-

known mythological and sociocultural values. They perform different "Līlas" (important sociocultural and moral activities) like Krushnalīla, Ramalīla, Raasalīla and Bhāratalīla.

Although the people's plays are a natural outcome, we still find two famous playwrights of Odisha associated with this. They are Baishnab Pani(1882-1956) and Balakrushna Mohanty(1901-1980). Later, Kalicharan Pattanayak(1897-1978) inherited the tradition of forming a troupe of Rāsa at a cultural hub named Sakhigopal. So to say, in Odisha, these celebrities started the so-called 'First Theatre' form in this way.

The plays are full of oral narratives typical to the groups and communities. Among all the characters, the role of Niyati is very important. He is not only the narrator of the plot but also the agent who paves the way for the play before the august audience. The importance of villains like Rāvana, Kansa, Mahisasura, Duryodhan, Hiranyakasipu and many others is felt more than the heroes and heroines. But finally, their defeat and death cause denouement and round contentment among the audience.

Similarly, in Chaitighodanāta, they sing the song of worship of the woman power called Shakti in the form of Baseli or Basuli with a horse face. In Dandanāta, singing such songs, people worship lord Shiva in different forms. Also, this kind of worship and cultural performance is done exclusively, paying religious regard to goddesses like Bhattarika of Badamba, Hingula of Talcher, Kalapata of Angul, Samalai of Sambalpur, Gouri of Nayagarh, Sarala of Jhankad, Rankai Bauti of Hindol, Charccika of Banki, Siddha Ramachandi of Konark, Maninaga of Ranpur and Siddha Bhairavi of Ganjam. These goddesses are taken for the narrations of Adishakti. In the Chhau dance, the Nataraja dance of Lord Shiva is reflected, and this form is treated as the tantra form.

People's play is very much a part of the tribal people of Odisha. They have three objectives like hunting, farming and lovemaking. During hunting and harvesting, they reflect their youthful vigor through people's play. In October, they perform the Dalkhai dance while worshipping the goddess Dalkhai in Dasherā. In order to live a life of peace and prosperity, tribals also have Karama dance in which they worship nature in the form of two deities named Karamsen and Karamarani. This Karama refers to Saal trees mostly present in Odisha forests. Another tribal dance representing people's play is Rasarkeli. This dance emanates a sort of rasa through the jest and fun. Ghumura, mostly enacted in Kalahandi, Balangir and Sambalpur districts, provides great musical charm. Ghumura is a musical instrument like a mardal, and at least seven to ten people form a group and dance, displaying the stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Also, they enact other traditional stories to provide entertainment is a part of bravery among the tribal audiences. In the undivided district of Koraput, the tribals perform Desianata. It is said to be created by the Maharaja of Jeypur named, Ram Chandra Dev. It is performed in the open street. The actors wear masks of animals, birds and demons to create the exact feelings among the audience.

The characters possess the most important and reflective roles in such plays. They, of course, cover all categories of people of traditional social professions. Some humorous and dramatic characters include Mirza Saheb, Parivawala, Vestiwala, Jhaduwāla, Hookawāla, etc. The godly characters like Srikrishna, Balarām, Rāma, Seetā, Hanumān, Vishnu and Nrushingha, including lord Shiva and goddess Pārvati, make the audience feel that common people have no other way but to accept the religious and moral values, set by them. In addition, other common social characteristics reflect that problems may come in the family or society, but patience, religiosity, mutual trust, and understanding must help them live happy and prosperous lives. The mythological characters like Arjun, Subhadrā, Kansāsura, Prahallād, Hiranyakasipu and Ugrasena; and animal characters like Garuda, Monkey, Deer, Tiger, Lion, Bear and Snakes, etc., perform important roles.

Similarly, Kelakeluni Gita is another poetic play. It includes two actors Kelā, the snake charmer and Keluni, his wife worshipping lord Shiva. So, they sing of the cause of his yogiship; explain the cause of moving with spiritual elements, the story of Danda brata, and daily activities related to religious ways of life. Kela reflects on his livelihood by selling herbs and shrubs using palm leaf engravings. He also reflects on social plights, whereas Keluni's sad songs reflect remembering her parents and childhood. She also moves against drinking wine, citing the example of her husband.

Desia Nāta is the musical folk form noticed in the Koraput district of southern Orissa. The tribal culture contributes to this as they perform it during their annual festival called Chaitraparva in the month of Chaitra, i.e. March-April. The screenplay is prepared in the local dialect by the Nāta Guru (the Director), who can also manage the music and stagecraft. Although he has a depth of knowledge about this, the actors are also experienced and contribute creatively to the oral narratives and gestures' success. The performance is near-mime as the actors use masks locally prepared by traditional artisans. Men take the female roles and sing in the female voice with approximation. The oral narratives and song dialogues are mostly prompted by Nata Guru or an experienced singer treated as the lead singer. The story of the plays are related to mythological anecdotes—the most popular among them being Gandā badim (Killing of the rhino, the demon), Subhadra haran (Subhadra's abduction), Taranisena badha(Killing of Taranisena, the demon king), etc. Some of the other names can be mentioned, such as Niladri haran (Niladri's abduction), Shashirekha haran (Shashirekha's abduction), and Kumbhasura badha (Killing of Kumbhasura, the demon).

Some very popular cultural and musical programmes work as the interlude of almost all the programmes. In such cases, singing those popular lines admixed with contextual topics makes the narratives very interesting. Such a programme is Dalkhai. It is performed during various festivals such as Bhaijiuntia, Phagun Puni, Nuakhai, etc. On such occasions, young women from Binjhal, Kuda, Mirdha, Sama and some other tribes of Sambalpur, Balangir, Sundargarh, Bargarh and Nuapada districts respectively take part in this dance. This

Dalkhai dance is the most popular one in Odisha. The men shout the word 'Dalkhai Bo!' at the beginning and end of each stanza sung during the dance. This is why the dance is popularly known as the Dalkhai dance. The oral narrative, in this case, is based on the themes of the weakness of young men as pointed out by young women, and vice versa. A kind of mutual flirt also goes in between the narrative accounts. Although the narrative has a profound backdrop of the eternal love story of Radha and Krishna, various local topics are also given room. Selected instances from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, description of nature and moral and successful conjugal life, and respect for elders and own culture also constitute the essence of the narrative.

Ghumura dance-song originated from southern Odisha and considered the public views and myths as its point of argument. It refers to *Chandi Purana* in which Durga, the eternal deity of Shakti, asks all the gods and goddesses to lend their weapons as instruments and powers to make her supremely powerful in the name of Adishakti to kill a demon king Mahisasur. In this oral narrative, one of the war-musical instruments used is the Ghumura, formed by the combination of a portion of dambaru (a small two-headed drum), a musical instrument of Lord Siva and veena of the goddess of education, art and craft named Saraswati.

Chaitighodanāta is a similar oral poetic play accompanied by dance which invokes the lords and then refers to the origin of the *samsar* after *pralay* (holocaust), where a fisherman played a key role as a devotee of lord Vishnu. This oral narrative includes lots of sayings and

refers to the long-time water route trade tradition of the Odia people.

6. Critical Discussion and Conclusion

Traditional oral narrative traditions are natural and spontaneous outcomes of the urge of the village folk. This happens to be a vast area of research. Such a tradition itself talks of its strong adherence to community life and attachment to the epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and many other mythological anecdotes which happen to be the base of the thought and actions of the Odishan people. Such narratives evoke emotional as well as an artistic spirit on their own. People feel a common sense of carnivalesque in involving themselves in such dialogic processes. They start from every home in the form of mothers singing lullabies or *Nanabaya gitas* but then expand their artistic, literary and cultural wings to more powerful manifestations in terms of filial, fraternal, friendly love and envisage the strong bond of love between husband and wife and children, social commitment, respect to the law of nature, live a natural and honest life admixed with the flavours of spirituality. In our time, in terms of musical tracks and tunings, such narratives get manipulated contextually to be more meaningful. There are fictional elements in some of such stories or anecdotes, but as a matter of fact, they are well accepted by all ages without questioning the logic of such narratives. Very often, it is noticed that such writings are associated with ecological well-being, including the special role of plants, trees, both wild and pet animals and finally, the greatness of cosmic beings like the sun, the moon, and the sky.

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