

Bharat Leela: A Unique Folk Tradition of South Odisha

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Abstract: Bharat Leela is a vibrant folk tradition originating from south Odisha. With many folk-tradition of South Odisha, Bharat Leela is one of the important folk traditions which embody the region's rich cultural tapestry through its unique blend of drama, music and dance. It is theatrical form primarily draws inspiration from the Hindu epics, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The artists are presenting these narratives in engaging and accessible manner. The characters are elaborate costumes, expressive performances, and rhythmic musical accompaniment. The play serves as a powerful medium for storytelling and cultural preservation. The performances were taken place during community festivals and gatherings, fostering social cohesion and a sense of identity among participants and audience alike.

Moreover, the act is deeply rooted in mythical themes, Bharat Leela also adapts to contemporary issues, reflecting the evolving dynamics of local society. Through the acts a vital role the tradition is not only entertaining and preserving the cultural heritage of south Odisha but also it educates, ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions for future generations. In this paper, highlighted its significances of Bharat Leela and the artistic endeavor and the communal experiences.

Keywords: Folk traditions, customs, theatre, Bharat Leela

Received : 12 May 2025

Revised : 08 June 2025

Accepted : 11 June 2025

Published : 29 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bhuyan, R., & Pattaniak, R.K. (2025). Bharat Leela: A Unique Folk Tradition of South Odisha. *Journal of History, Archaeology and Architecture*, 4: 1, pp. 59-67.

INTRODUCTION

The ethnic term "folk" refers to a group of people who get together to establish a nation or a tribe. According to this description, the folk people would be the majority of people from Lower Culture in a homogeneous social group that is bound together by racial, linguistic, and religious ties. A significant portion of this group tends to maintain its unique and indigenous form of civilization, customs, art, craft, and tradition, which remain constant from generation to generation. (Tiwari, 1999).

"Folk Theatre" is the theatre of masses and is also called the "Village Theater". The folklore, folk art and folk theatres are integral phase of folk culture, interlinked with growth of civilization. Various rural folks has performing arts in varied forms since the time immemorial. The objective of the folk is in two main ideas in the aesthetic pleasure and educating the society.

The continuity and interplay of creative performing arts have been rightly analyzed by a well-known theatre critic, Smt. Kapila Vatsayan in her book titled "Traditional Indian Theatre"- Multie

streams. She has opined “theatre is one amongst several other disciplines, where the principle of ‘un-manifest’ and varied manifestation’ was embodied”. (Kar, I. B. 2008)

Odisha is rich in various folk traditions than the other state of India. The varied of tribal contents throughout Odisha which might be a cause. Differences and varied were found in the folk traditions of Odisha from place to place. There are numerous folk theatre particularly played in Odisha such as Mughal-Tamasa, Pala, Dasakathia, Leela, Prahallada Nataka, Geetinatya and many more. These folk theatres have immensely contributed on the development of folk culture of India. In Odisha, Ganjam district have shown its remarkable artistic qualities in sustaining and nurturing theatre (Kar, I. B. 2008). The theatre were played on the rituals and festivals in the various folks, it has reflected on the part of the country’s theatre and formed the basic structure of the cultural achievements of the people the folks in traditions of the rural areas gives the sources and supply resources for the progress of the theatrical art. The main attraction of the folk theatres is its dance, language, art and music (Tiwari, 1999).

Odisha has a great tradition of folk theatres in general, but particularly south Odisha is rich for the spectacular traditional theatre forms like Prahallad Natak, Dandanata, Bharat Leela, Krushna Leela, Rama Leela and Radhaprema Leela. Bharat Leela is an extremely popular folk theatre hailing from the Southern part of Odisha (Principally Ganjam District). Despite their lack of sponsorship and economic hardship, the people of Ganjam have demonstrated unwavering creative energy in enhancing their folk theaters. In order to perpetuate their traditional theatrical forms, the district's performance artists' aesthetic sensibilities were influenced by the innovative literary texts and musical traditions of Champu, Chhanda, and Chautisa, which were enhanced by the poet Upendra Bhanja, Kavisurya Baladeva Rath, and Gopal Krushna Pattanayak. Two characteristics of Ganjam district folk theater are its religiousness and musicality. The two great Indian epics-Mahabharat, Ramayana and Puranas like Matsya Puran, Kurma Purana and Nrusingha Puran form the thematic contents of these folk theatres. (Kar, I. B. 2008)

Bharat Leela occupies a special place among the folk theatre of South Odisha. This is purely Ganjam’s own creation and familiar as the attractive folk-theatre in the villages. While the religious favour made Rama Leela, Krishna Leela very popular among the common mass, the sense of humour and deep depth of mythological play no less a part in making Bharat Leela a grand success (Charchi, B., 2022).

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BHARAT LEELA

Ganjam district is where Bharat Leela was born. Dinabandhu Das of Kalyanpur, close to Ganjam, is its founder. Subhadra Harana Suanga, his creation, is well-known as Bharat Leela (Das,H. 1983). However, the society of the time did not embrace his composition and labeled it Leela, instead calling it Huguli Bharata. Later on, however, Bhima Panda of Magura, which is close to Aska, greatly enhanced this and added a folk-theatre element. Over time, Dinabandhu Das' palm leaf manuscript was gathered by Shyam Sundar Sabat of the village of Kandha Kharida, which is close to Hinjilicut. He made corrections and added Leela's touch. He called it "Duari Nata" and acted as a Duari himself. As a result, Bharat Leela's inception dates to 1840 A.D. The most well-known director or Guru of Bharat Leela at the moment is Nabaghana Parida of Kabisurya Nagar (Boirani). (Behera, K.C.,1997)

THEME OF BHARAT LEELA

The subject matter of “Subhadra Parinaya” / “Bharat Leela” has been accepted as the part of the story of Mahabharat (Madhyaparva) by Sarala Das, the great son of soil. The base is the immortal love story

between Subhadra and Arjuna. On Raibaria hill lord Krishna arranged Jagnya Demon Gasimha came there and throw both Krishna and Balaram to the Jagnya Kunda and kidnapped Satyabhama queen of Sri Krishna forcefully on chariot. Getting this message from Satadhanu, Arjuna attacked the demon Gosimha and saved Satyabhama. To felicitated Arjuna a grand function was arranged. Royal family gathered with queens and princesses. Subhadra also attended the function. At the first sight Subhadra was attracted with the charming appearance of Arjuna, fell in love with him and mentally decided to marry him. Satyabhama knew and informed the same to Sri Krishna. With the encouragement of Sri Krishna Satyabhama attempted to unite them. Love was one sided Arjun was judicious and ideal. He did not accept the proposal given by Satyabhama in presence of Subhadra. Love and passion of Subhadra burst forth. She became emotional. Satyabhama act as the ideal Hindu women of this country and obedient to her husband. Duari coordinated for the purpose, epic tales and scriptural injunctions were created and sustained interest with argumental dialogues (Charchi, B.2022). He uses a variety of pretexts to argue, but Duari refutes them all by endorsing Subhadra for her unwavering love and loyalty to Arjuna. Arjuna finally gives in to true love and consents to marry Subhadra (*Odisha ra Lokanataka*, (1998)).

Smaller episodes from the Puranas and other holy scriptures are also told as a corollary to the main episode during the characters' arguments and counterarguments. For example, Arjuna claims that since she is a member of the gentle maid society and he is a Kshetriya by caste, they cannot be married. Next, Duari plays a musical narration of a textual scene that describes how and when Kshetriya wedded a mild-maid. In response to Arjuna's claim that Subhadra lacks graceful qualities, the Duari lists the traits of every kind of lady and quotes experts to support Subhadra's superiority. The fight between the two continues until the play's conclusion, which is interspersed with a number of other songs and moral parables (Sahu, B.,(2015)). In contrast, Arjuna and Duari engage in a game of wits in the play's crux. As a result, the repartee is merely an explanation of sastra knowledge. Their arguments from the sacred texts are further supported by quotations from novels and verse. Since a large portion of its comedy is current, this form is somewhat secular (Pradhan, K.C. (1995)

CHARACTER OF LEELA

In the presentation of Bharat Leela only four principal artists participate. They are Arjuna, Satyabhama, Subhadra and Duari. Except Arjun, the other three characters act in different roles without changing their dress and costumes. Artists portraying Satyabhama and Subhadra also dance and sing in the introduction for description of the Leela. They also assist to the musical accompanists in refrains.

There are two more characters of sweeper and maid, who come on stage before introduction of the play. These two characters have no real significance in the play and have been created for audience's entertainment. The role of sweeper playing in Suanga has similarity with this character. In all probability this character has been created to clean the place before entering of king to the stage (Satapathy, M.K.(2016).

DUARI

Duari is the central and the most important character in Bharat Leela. Due to this reason this play is known as Duari Nata. He is called as Dwarpala Daubarika, Duta etc. He is the coordinator between the characters of the play and audience. Unlike the Duari character of Suanga the primitive folk art form of Odisha, he is not illiterate and flattering. The character of Duari is the union of Bidusaka,

Sutradhara, Niyati of Sanskrit play. This character is depicted to be a fair minded and wise person who is well versed in music, humour and poetry. The grand success of the Leela predominantly depends upon Duari, the main central figure of this Leela. Taking away Duari, the entire Leela is meaningless.

He guards the gate and comes on stage listening to Arjun's call. Instead of providing answer, he puts forth questions. He argues with Arjuna in a wise manner and wants to get the answer to Arjuna's questions from Satyabhama. The role of Duari is that of co-ordinator between Arjuna, Satyabhama and Subhadra. If the questions or answers are not proper, he guides and gives the knowledge. He also answers any questions put forth by the audience. Among all the folk art forms of Odisha direct participation of the spectators is present only in Bharat Leela, which makes it unique (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)).

Duari is well versed in banter, proverb, riddle, folk songs and outer expression of the culture of Odisha. He also presents various art forms like Danda Nata, Prahallad Natak, Dasakathia, Kothisala, Ghuduki and Kendara in the play. He narrates the upcoming events of play (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)). His role is important, themes of Leela for proper understanding of the audience. He should have knowledge on different epics, puran, sastras and mediavel and modern Odia literature, he should be enriched with Sanskrit knowledge, moreover he should possess artistic talents like dancing, singing with sweet tone, using different musical instruments need based and presentation. Naturally he is the Guru of the Leela (Charchi, B., 2022).

The role of Duari is now so outstanding that the most aged Duaries are telling that Duari is lord Srikrishna in disguise to co-ordinate for the marriage of Subhadra with Arjuna. Duari is an excellent character in Bharat Leela. This versatile generous character is unique feature seen only in Bharat Leela. A life-time experience is required to establish the character.

The gatekeeper, Duari, is dressed in a Kaba (waist coat), half pants, and an Ange (half shirt). Duari applies pink cosmetics and creates a U-shaped emblem on his forehead. He dons what is known locally as a "ganthibabuli," a knotted wig. It covers his neck and the upper portion of his shoulders. The wig's front side is chipped with petal-like aluminum Tahia (Atiara) and Balachhappa (Hair clips). The Tahia is always pinned up in the wig on the forehead and rests on a Padak, or golden pendant. He also wears triangular and conical chhapas and a spherical Padak (Pendant) on the left side of his breast to symbolize his status as a king's servant (Sahu, B., (2015)).

ARJUNA

Arjuna is the Hero of the Leela and best friend of Sri Krushna. Here Arjuna possesses moral character. He did not accept the love of Subhadra and to marry her because of same Gotra and the sedan reason is that Subhadra is his related sister. He is judicious and his judgment is based on Akhyan upakhyan of puran sastra. He has maintained the Dharma of Khetriya. Arjuna was mesmerised by mantra cited by Subhadra and they got married. Audience give importance to mantra not the changing character of Arjuna. He is accepted as the main character of the Leela (Charchi, B., (2022)).

SUBHADRA

Subhadra is the heroin of this Leela as well as the lovely sister of Balaram and Sri Krushna. At the first sight, she fell in love with Arjuna because of his handsome figure and potentialities with the co-operation of Satyabhama, she tried with her beauty and bounty became meaningful near Arjuna. Her action reaction and expression here in this Leela is alike a beloved reacts with her lover. She is blind in love. She is emotional and her passion burst forth.

At last she involved in mantra, Sadhana, Sadha mantra i.e. Stambana, Mohana, Uchatma, Kuhuka and Olata Bidya under the guidance of Mayabati, daughter-in-law of Sri Krishna. Subhadra is her interpreter as an ideal beloved.

SATYABHAMA

In this Leela, Satyabhama is the side heroin and queen of Sri Krishna. She is pious lady and devoted to her husband act as per the direction of her husband like Hindu Ramani, without considering wrong and right. It is Nari Dharma. She accepts the instruction of her husband and attempt to achieve the goal i.e. anyway to settle the marriage of Subhadra with Arjuna. She was a well-wisher of family and dedicated character in this Leela.

STATE PROPERTY AND PRESENTATION

Bharata Leela is staged under the open sky. No stage is required for the performance of the Leela. Only a square pandal is required for the presentation of Bharat Leela. As there is no permanent square pandal in south Odisha, a temporary pandal is prepared for staging the play. The stage at the center with the audience sitting around it. there is a green room at little distance from the stage. A narrow passage is provided from the green room to the stage for the entrance and exit of the actors. There is a space left just opposite the passage for the musicians and accompanist.

Except the characters of sweeper and maid all other main characters do not leave the stage till the end of the play. A wooden chair is provided on the stage as a throne for Arjuna. Before beginning the play, the musician recites Sanskrit Slokas and Bhajanas to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

After this two main characters Satyabhama and Subhadra come to the stage and dancing with a handful of flowers. They recite Bhajans and dance in country style in praise of the deities and take blessing for the play of success.

For the clearing the stage and introducing humour, the sweeper enters the stage with a broom in one hand and a wine bottle in another hand. Depicting a drunkard, he delivers different humourous dialogues and return after cleaning the stage with the broom.

After this, Arjun enters to the rhythms of war music. He dances rigorously and gives him own identification of courage through a song. He takes the blessing of the spectators with folded hands and begs apology for his inadequacies in advance fulfilling a dramatic convention. When he is at rest, he sits in a corner of the stage in heroic attitudes on the chair that has been supplied for him. Arjuna carries a handkerchief in his left hand and a Khanda in his right while he performs his move. Sakhis, Hadiani, and Hadi, respectively, used the deepalis (ghee lamps), Mayura Pincha (peacock tail), Khajuri Chhanchuni (date leaf broom), Tokei (basket), and Madakacha (wine bottle) as stage props (*Odisha ra Lokanataka*, (1998)).

COSTUME

Wearing a large velvet coat embroidered with Zari and tinsel, Arjuna is dressed like a warrior. An Uttarana hangs on his back, and he is dressed in silk pants. Like a horseback rider, he is dressed in nylon stockings, and plastic Manibandha is used to embellish his wrist bands. On his forehead, he creates a Suryachita sun mark using pink paint (Sahu, B., (2015)). The costume of Duari is set apart. All other characters in the play dress as mythological character, whereas Duari dresses up as a common man. He wears a half pant, coloured shirt and a short sleeveless coat, dresses his hair with golden top

bracelet, ear-ring, ankle-bell. He wears Ghungura in his feet. In past day, he was used a long pointed cap but now a wig having on bid feather.

MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Bharat Leela is written in puranic (Mythology) style and in fourteen lettered verse. But the artists sing in Dandi Brutta (poem in which the letters are not equal) with melodious voice. They present Sanskrit couplets and lyrical poems of different famous poet like, Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladev Rath, Sarala Das, Krushna Singha including Kalidas and Sriharsa, to make the Bharat Leela more enchanting and humorous. The presentation style differ from group to group, but there is no change of original subject. Besides this, they also recite their own poems including the lyrical poems of other poets. Now-a-days as per the demand of the audience, some groups include the song from movies in the play. Initially, musical instruments like Mrudanga, Pakhawaj, Dholak, Flute, Jhumka etc. were used in Bharat Leela. Later on keeping in view the interest of modern people, musical instruments like Harmonium, Tabala, violin etc. are also used attract the audience and better performance.

LIGHT ARRANGEMENT

This Leela does not require special light arrangement. To light the stage is only the purpose. In past days, the show was conducted only in night and the lighting was by "Dihuda". Now it is with electricity.

THEME

Sarala Das' Odia Mahabharat (Madhyaprava) served as the inspiration for Bharat Leela's theme. The timeless tale of Subhadra and Arjuna's love serves as the foundation. The main characters of this Leelas are Duari, Subhadra, Arjuna, Satyabhama and Sri Krishna, Asta Pata Bansi, Balaram, Nandaraja, Purohit, Dagara, Gayakas, Hadi and Hadiani are its side character. The main character of this Leela is Duari. He is largely responsible for the Leela's success. He captivates the audience with his sense of humor (Charchi, B., (2022)).

LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUE

The dialogues of Bharat Leelas are simple and rustic in primary stage of its development. There was no use of prose-dialogue in the play. Later, prose-dialogues were used to enliven the play. At present Bharat Leela is the mixture of prose and poetry. Due to variegated togetherness of simple language, rural style of expression, Chhanda, Epic, Literature and Metaphors Bharat Leela demands a vast space in the heart of public. No written form of language is available in Bharat Leela (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)).

STYLE OF PRESENTATION

Style of presentation of Bharat Leela depends upon the main "Duari". Who is really the guru of this folk-theatre. He decides it basing on the interest of locality, local people and time schedule for performance. He always intends reputation and to be praised by the audience. So he gives stress to reflect his deep knowledge of Puran Sastra, epics and Sanskrit verses etc. Naturally the style of dance is folk-dance, not classical. It is folk-theatre. But sometimes we can find focus of classical dance from the main characters, those who are trained on classical dance somewhere.

Humor is an important factor of this Leela. Duaris used double meaning utterances, physical expressions to create humor. It is a treasure trove of superb art. In Bharat Leela, we discover a fusion

of many rasas, such as Bira Rasa, Karuna Rasa, and Sringara Rasa. Dance played an equally important role in the success of this Leela. It is the area where one can express their secret artistic potential.

Usually the play spans over a period of seven to eight hours for three consecutive nights. For continuous presentation it requires twenty hours. However, the period of presentation depends on the patience and interest of the audience (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)).

There is no certain time limit for the presentation of the play. Generally it is held in the night. But during festive occasions it is held in the day and night. At the time of competition there is no time limit on the plays presentation. Now a days due to the lack of patience and interest the duration of the presentation of the play has been shortened to suit public convenience (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)).

More than one hundred Bharat Leela teams are there by in Ganjam district alone. Among them, the countable fews are Kandha Kharadi, Lochapada, Nuagada, Arakhapur, Kuruli, Guntapada, Choudhury Tikarapada, Khariaguda, Hadichira, Solaghara, Polasara, Dharakote, Sheragada, Banthapalli are important.

Those who are established as outstanding Duari, the names of Dinabdhhu Das, Shyamasundar Sabat, Nabaghana Parida of Kabisurya Nagar, Sanyasi Behera of Sundarapalli, Haribandhu Mohanty of Kalasandhapur, Santosh Kumar Padhi of Pratapur, were notable (*Odisha ra Lokanataka*, (1998)).

IMPACT OF BHARAT LEELA ON SOCIETY

Bharat Leela contains social value. It imparts moral education and entertains the rural audience through humour. During arguments between the main characters, there is a scope for mass education and consciousness basing on Puran Sastra, epics, instances from the scriptures. Specially Duari, put forth more valuable suggestions, the code of conducted of women, types of marriage, Janma Langna, the sin emanating from slaying cows, Brahmins, women and various other moral aspects also incorporate during the discussions to bring discipline in the society. The folk theatre reflect the socio-cultural scenario of the state in different ways. It is manifestation of our social traits.

BHARAT LEELA AT ALL INDIAN LEVEL

Music is the main attraction of folk theatre presented in Odisha. Whereas importance is given to acting in the folk theatre of south India. From this point of view, the music of Odisha is very close to musicology, whereas the acting part of the folk theatre of Southern India theatre forms of other states are found to be similar to some of the character and acting of Bharat Leela. But Bharat Leela is unique in its own aspect.

The presentation of Yakshyagana is seen in the coastal region of Karnatak. The main character Kodangi of Yakshyagana appears in both the roles as *Sutradhar* and Bidusaka, where Dwari of Bharat Leela only carries the role of Bidudhaka. But he accepts the role of Sutradhar if necessary. Like Vidushaka of Kuttiyattam, Dwari of Bharat Leela is powerful character. Both gain expertise in oral acting. Both characters present different philosophical and religious examples before other characters and spectators. Bharat Leela does not draw any similarity with any other folk-theatre of Southern India or Northern India, except the folk theatre, Kuttiyattam of Kerala (Satapathy, M.K.(2016)).

INSTITUTION

Despite the difference in opinion of researchers regarding the period of presentation and its creation, it is beyond doubt that, this folk-art form is prevalent in the district of Ganjam since more than last

two hundred years. Bharat Leela is an excellent medium of Leela, which is never seen any Leela of Odisha. The presentation of enormous portion of Mahabharat in a special style was only through four characters, which has become seen in Bharat Leela. Really, this style of presentation has become helpful in giving the right direction to the folk theatre of Odisha today (Satapathy, M.K (2016)).

In spite of the number of groups practicing this art form there is only a single training centre is available in the district of Ganjam named Jateswar Natya Kala Sansad of Kabisurya Nagar. This institution gets financial assistance from the state and central Govt. Guru Sri Nabaghana Parida, the director of this institution has been awarded by the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi for the year 2004.

From the above discussion it may be concluded that, the folk theatres of South Odisha are very ancient and are quite original to the native soil. Almost all people of these locality accepted Bharat Leela as their entertainment. The irony of the situation is that folk dances, theaters, and art—which gave thousands and thousands of rural residents entertainment, reaction, and sustenance—are rapidly dwindling. They also propagated the ideas of morality, universal brotherhood, honesty, truthfulness, and the triumph of the righteous over evil forces. These traditional traditions, which are a priceless asset to our society, do not receive the credit they merit. Advent of modern media has had a bad impact on the people as a result of which people sit glued to the box for cheap entertainment. They neglect their tradition and cultural inheritance, for which the ancient art form now are in a dying state. In order to prevent the century-old customs and priceless wealth of generations from permanently disappearing from our society, it should be the responsibility of the general public, charitable organizations, and the government to take action for their survival and revival.

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