

## Daṇḍa nāṭa Tradition in Odishan Culture

Laxman Majhi

*Ph.D. Research Scholar, P.G. Department of Sanskrit, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.*

**Abstract** – The Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition is an ancient and distinctive type of folk theatre that began in Odisha. This traditional art form is an essential element of Odishan culture and has been practiced for generations in various parts of the state. The Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition is culturally significant in Odisha, reflecting the state's rich heritage, mythology, and folklore. The performances are usually based on legendary legends and explore themes such as good vs evil, love and devotion, and human values. The performances feature a group of dancers doing elaborate dance steps while holding sticks, producing a rhythmical sound that adds to the overall attraction of the show. The ritual has developed throughout time, with numerous alterations made to keep up with current circumstances. However, it is still highly valued in Odisha, and numerous cultural organisations are attempting to maintain and promote the art form. Daṇḍa nāṭa performances are popular among both residents and visitors at various festivals and events around the state. The Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition is a crucial part of Odishan culture, highlighting the state's rich past, mythology and customs. Its continuous popularity and relevance underline the importance of preserving and promoting it for future generations. The current research seeks to give a thorough knowledge of the tradition's historical and cultural importance, change across time, and contemporary condition. This study analyses literary and cultural sources to examine the topics, narrative structure, and performance features of the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition. Furthermore, the research looks at the socioeconomic and political factors that have affected the tradition's growth and durability. This study emphasises the significance of conserving and developing the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition as an integral part of Odishan cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Daṇḍa nāṭa, Caitra jātra, Kaliṅga, Buddhism, Saivism, Odishan culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Daṇḍa nāṭa or Daṇḍa jātra (Odia: ଦଣ୍ଡ ନାଟ, ଦଣ୍ଡ ଯାତ୍ରା) is one of the most prominent traditional dance festivals conducted in different districts of Odisha, the stronghold of the ancient Kaliṅga Empire. The annual Daṇḍa nāṭa celebration takes place in the month of Caitra. Daṇḍa participants, also known as bhaktas, worship to



Goddesses Kālī and Shiva throughout a 13, 18, or 21day period. Daṇḍa starts on an auspicious day before the Caitra Saṅkrānti (Paṇā Saṅkrānti) or Meru Parba, with customary devotion and fasting. The event will last

between 13, 18, or 21 days. Only males participate in this festival. The participants are known as 'bhaktas'. During the festival, all 'bhaktas' or 'daṇḍuās' live a virtuous life, refraining from eating meat, fish, and cohabiting. The current Daṇḍa nāṭa is thought to be a component of the old Caitra jātra festivities held annually at Śakti Pīṭha. The Kalinga Emperors established the Caitra celebration for their Iṣṭa deity, Tārā Tāriṇī. During the ancient time, after 20 days of Daṇḍa practice, the daṇḍuās must meet near Tārā Tāriṇī Śakti/Tantra Pīṭha (which is the Iṣṭa devī of the Great Kalinga kings) and conclude their Daṇḍa with certain severe rites on the last day. Daṇḍa has several meanings, including club, rod, pole, stick, staff, sceptre, punishment, and chastisement. The name Nāṭa is derived from the word Nāṭya, which encompasses several aspects of music, dance, and drama. The term Jātra refers to theatre.

## 1.1 The origin and Meaning of the word daṇḍa

Lord Ganesh was being taught a dance by his father, Lord Shiva. It was a sacred dance known as Tāṇḍava Nṛtya. While studying the dance, Lord Shiva kicked the stage and created a sound similar to the word 'Dan'.



Lord Śiva's ankle chain broke, causing a chunk of brass to fall on the Mardala percussion instrument. The brass stuff hitting the Mardala produced a loud 'Da' sound. The term Daṇḍa was formed by combining two sounds. Daṇḍa became connected with dancing after that occurrence.

Its origins may be traced back to the eighth and ninth centuries (the beginnings of Tantrism), following the decline of Buddhism in Odisha. Following the decline of Buddhism in Odisha, Saivism emerged as the major religion. The oppressed untouchables and inferior castes began to worship Lord Siva outside of Hindu temples<sup>5</sup>. When higher class Hindus prohibited the untouchables from visiting Hindu temples, they began to worship Śiva once a year at a festival called Daṇḍa nāṭa. The literary work 'Abhinava Candrikā' from 1568 A.D. describes the popularity of Daṇḍa Jātrā. That indicates that this folk-theatre was highly popular throughout the mediaeval period.

Spring, after a year of rest, brings pure delight and contentment. Spring usually arrives in March and April, with a variety of fairs and celebrations.



The entire state of Odisha then joins in the dancing. 'Daṇḍa nāṭa' is a popular dance genre in western Orissa that combines religion and theatre. This is conducted with great zeal throughout the Caitra-Vaiśākha month. Daṇḍa nāṭa is a devotional ritual to Lord Shiva and Goddess Kālī that lasts 13 to 21 days. Daṇḍa nāṭa is a significant dramatic genre in Odisha related with the Śaiva religion. Its origins may be traced back to Odisha's religious and cultural heritage, with a focus on Hindu deities. Daṇḍa nāṭa is a ceremonial folk theatre related with the Siva Kali story. The Daṇḍa (Penance) is a ritualistic work that explains the Rudrakālī story, which depicts Lord Śiva and Kālī.

Daṇḍa signifies penance, whereas Nāṭa means dancing. The festival honours Śiva via penance, dancing, singing, and athletic accomplishments. The word Daṇḍa has another meaning. A stick or staff symbolising Hara (Śiva) and Pārvatī (Śiva's spouse Goddess Parvati) serves as a devotional measuring rod. Danda Nacha is a dance performed at a religious fair called Daṇḍa nāṭa. It is derived from the words Danda (penance or pole) and Nachaa.



This is a prayer to Lord Siva and His spouse, Gouri. Danda, a large wooden rod or bamboo stick with 13 knots, is worshipped by 13 or more devotees for 13 to 21 days, culminating in Caitra Saṅkrānti or Meru Parva (also known as Meru Saṅkrānti). Daṇḍuā, a group of Bhakta devotees, practice Mānasika, or austere fasting. Participants in Daṇḍa nāṭa seek early realisation of their wishes, such as having a son, overcoming difficulties, or resolving disputes. It requires strict self-discipline, such as eating only once a day and keeping vigil, among other things.

## 1.2 Daṇḍa nāṭa Ceremony

Daṇḍa nāṭa is an Indian dance event that started in Ganjam district, Odisha. Daṇḍa nāṭa is a religious event that includes theatre and dance performances. The dance is performed mostly to glorify Lord Shiva, the Hindu mythological God of Destruction.



Spiritual dance worships several gods and goddesses, including Krishna Ganesh, Kali, and Durgā. Both low and high caste Hindus, including Brahmins, took part in the Daṇḍa nāṭa. The dance and its attendant activities take place across three months, in March, April, and May. Some events take place during the month of Caitra (March-April), while others occur during the month of Vaiśākha (April-May). The ancient Hindu philosophy

emphasises the need of self-control over one's body (Kāya), intellect (Mana), and speech (Vākya), leading to self-inflicted wounds during worship of Lord Shiva. To acquire greatness, individuals must experience a series of penalties called as Daṇḍa nāṭa.

### 1.3 Dance Component of the Religious Festival

Daṇḍa nāṭa consists of several dances. Daṇḍa begins with fasting, a single meal of rice and dal, and worshipping the Lord before the dances. This dance is a set of dances performed sequentially by male members of Scheduled Castes and other backward castes. Ghāsis, accompanied by Dhola and Mahuri, provide music for this dance. The dance has an extensive repertoire. Parbhā dance is the first piece in the repertoire. In the beginning, the Prabhākar and Prabhākārīaṇi dance in multicoloured dresses.



The dancer drapes a piece of fabric over his shoulders and holds the ends in front of him with both hands. He moves his hands forward and backward, right and left, in time with the dance. The Prabhākar is attached to the back with a semi-circular plate constructed of bamboo sticks wrapped in colourful fabric with an ornate border. The Prabhākar wears a multi-colored skirt and blazer. The Prabhākārīaṇi, a guy portraying a female, wears a sari and kañcala (a blouse). The Prabhākārīaṇi carries a colourful handkerchief. Following the Parbhā dance, the Hāḍi-Hāḍīaṇi dance begins. Following Hāḍi-Hāḍīaṇi Hara, Pārvatī is performed. Next, Fakira and Fakirīaṇi do a group dance together. The dances of Dhovā and Dhovāṇi, Moci and Mociāṇi, Yogī and Yogīaṇi, Savara and Savarāṇi, Patarasaurā and Patarasaurāṇi, Caḍeyā and Caḍeyāṇi, Viṇākāra, and Kāruāṇi are performed sequentially. The party then performs a līlā based on a narrative from the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, or any other Purāṇa, using music and dancing. Patarasaurā and Patarasaurāṇi showcase their dance at the end of the līlā. The show concludes with Viṇākāra's signature songs and dances. Males from reserved and backward classes do the Parbhā dance. In the Parbhā dance, the Parbhākara, a man acting as a male, and the Prabhākārīaṇi, a male posing as a female, start the dance in colourful costumes. A piece of fabric is placed on the dancers' shoulders. The fabric is held in both hands and the dancer's move it back and forth, as well as side to side, in accordance with the dance's beat. Following the dance, the Hara-Pārvatī is performed. Following such dances, a variety of additional dances are performed. The Fakira and Fakirīaṇi group dance is performed initially. The Savara and Savarāṇi are followed by the Caḍeyā and Caḍeyāṇi dances. Everyone participates in the festivities by performing a līlā with songs and dances based on a narrative from several Purāṇas. Following the līlā, the Patarasaurā and Patarasaurāṇi showcase their traditional dance. Finally, the Viṇākārā concludes the ceremonies with dancing and music.

## 1.4 The Roles of the Dancers in Daṇḍa nāṭa:

Daṇḍa nāṭa dances are based on numerous topics. Each part in the dances sings a separate song. Some songs are based on historical events, while others take a more humorous approach.



Some organisations employ a question and response format. That strategy is used in groups when one person, either male or female, asks questions and the other person responds to those responses. Although the songs can be sung in a variety of ways, they all have the same style: folk and Odissi.

## 1.5 Characteristics and Elements of Daṇḍa nāṭa:

Daṇḍa nāṭa, a traditional dance form of Odisha, India, is characterized by several unique features and elements that contribute to its distinctiveness and cultural richness:



**a. Music:** The music accompanying Daṇḍa nāṭa is an integral aspect of the performance, characterized by a blend of classical Odissi music, folk melodies, and traditional percussion instruments such as mardala, tabla, and ghanta. The rhythmic patterns and melodies not only complement the dance movements but also evoke emotions and enhance the storytelling aspect of the narrative. Daṇḍa nāṭa music varies depending on the dance being performed. The songs are in distinct tunes for each character. The songs are mostly religious in nature, with themes drawn from epic legends. Dancers occasionally sing humorous songs. Sometimes they ask questions in songs, and their counterpart responds in songs. The songs are in folk and Odissi styles. The dance began from tribal dances but has been heavily impacted by state performances like Jātrā and Pala. Daṇḍa nāṭa is increasingly modernising in terms of music, dancing, clothing, style, and makeup. It is so losing its basic simplicity and traditional qualities.

**b. Costumes:** Daṇḍa nāṭa performers typically adorn elaborate and vibrant costumes that reflect the cultural heritage of Odisha. Male dancers often wear traditional dhoti and kurta, embellished with



intricate designs and motifs, while female dancers don colorful sarees with ornate jewelry and accessories, enhancing the visual appeal of the performance.

**c. Choreography:** The choreography of Daṇḍa nāṭa is marked by graceful and intricate movements that require precision, agility, and expressive facial expressions. The dance sequences are choreographed to convey specific themes, narratives, or mythological stories, often depicting episodes from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

**d. Narrative Themes:** Daṇḍa nāṭa performances typically revolve around themes of devotion, mythology, and folklore, portraying the triumph of good over evil and the celebration of cultural values and traditions. The narratives may vary depending on the regional context and cultural influences but are united by their emphasis on storytelling and artistic expression.

The unique combination of vibrant costumes, melodious music, intricate choreography, and rich narrative themes distinguishes Daṇḍa nāṭa as a culturally significant and visually captivating dance form within Odishan tradition.

## 1.6 Influence of Religious Context

In Daṇḍa nāṭa, the influence of Hindu mythology and religious narratives is profound and pervasive, shaping the themes and stories depicted in its performances.

**a. Mythological Epics:** Daṇḍa nāṭa often draws upon episodes from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These narratives provide rich source material for the dance dramas, allowing performers to bring to life the heroic deeds, moral dilemmas, and divine interventions found within these ancient texts.

**b. Deities and Divinities:** The pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently feature in Daṇḍa nāṭa performances. Depictions of deities like Lord Shiva, Lord Krishna, Goddess Durga, and others serve as focal points, with dancers embodying their divine attributes and characteristics through intricate movements and gestures.

**c. Symbolism and Allegory:** Religious symbolism permeates Daṇḍa nāṭa, with each movement, gesture, and costume choice laden with symbolic significance. These symbols often carry allegorical meanings, conveying moral lessons, philosophical insights, and spiritual truths to the audience.

**d. Devotional Expression:** Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a form of devotional expression, allowing performers and spectators alike to immerse themselves in the spiritual world of Hindu mythology. Through dance and music, participants engage in acts of worship, reverence, and communion with the divine.

**e. Cultural Transmission:** The incorporation of religious narratives into Daṇḍa nāṭa plays a crucial role in the cultural transmission of Hindu traditions and values. By retelling stories of gods, goddesses, and legendary heroes, the dance form helps preserve and propagate religious heritage across generations.

The influence of religious context on Daṇḍa nāṭa is multi-faceted, enriching the art form with deep spiritual meaning, cultural resonance, and timeless relevance within the Odishan cultural landscape.

## 1.7 Role in Cultural Preservation



Daṇḍa nāṭa, as a traditional dance form deeply rooted in Odishan culture, plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the rich heritage of the region, especially amidst the challenges posed by modernization and globalization.

Firstly, Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a custodian of Odishan cultural identity. Through its performances, which often depict stories from Hindu mythology and folklore, Daṇḍa nāṭa reinforces cultural narratives and values that have been passed down through generations. This helps in maintaining a sense of continuity and connection to the cultural roots of Odisha.

Secondly, Daṇḍa nāṭa acts as a platform for the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills. The rigorous training and apprenticeship required to master this art form ensure the preservation of traditional dance techniques, music, costumes, and other elements. By engaging with Daṇḍa nāṭa, younger generations not only learn the art form but also develop a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage.

Moreover, Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a symbol of pride and identity for the people of Odisha. As they witness performances and participate in cultural events featuring Daṇḍa nāṭa, individuals feel a sense of belonging and connection to their community and heritage. This sense of pride fosters a collective commitment to preserving and promoting Odishan culture in the face of external influences.

In the context of modernization and globalization, Daṇḍa nāṭa also adapts to contemporary settings while retaining its essence. Through collaborations with modern artists, integration into popular culture and utilization of digital platforms for outreach, Daṇḍa nāṭa continues to evolve and reach wider audiences, both within and beyond Odisha. This adaptability ensures its relevance and sustainability in a rapidly changing world. Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a powerful vehicle for cultural preservation and promotion in Odisha. By upholding traditional values, transmitting ancestral knowledge, fostering a sense of identity, and embracing innovation, Daṇḍa nāṭa contributes to the resilience and vitality of Odishan culture in the face of modern challenges.

## 1.8 Daṇḍa nāṭa Impact on Society

The societal impact of Daṇḍa nāṭa, a traditional dance form of Odisha, extends far beyond mere entertainment. Here's a brief analysis:

- a. **Community Cohesion:** Daṇḍa nāṭa plays a pivotal role in fostering a sense of community among the people of Odisha. Through participation in performances, workshops, and cultural events, individuals come together to celebrate their shared heritage and traditions. This shared experience strengthens social bonds and promotes unity among diverse communities within the region.
- b. **Identity Formation:** Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a powerful medium for expressing and reaffirming Odishan identity. The dance form often depicts stories and themes rooted in Odisha's rich history, mythology, and cultural ethos. By engaging with these narratives, performers and audiences alike connect with their cultural roots, contributing to a strong sense of identity and belonging.
- c. **Cultural Pride:** Participation in Daṇḍa nāṭa instills a sense of pride and ownership in Odisha's cultural heritage. As performers showcase their skills and interpretations of traditional stories, they not only honor their ancestors but also take pride in preserving and promoting their cultural legacy. This sense of cultural pride permeates throughout society, inspiring future generations to embrace and perpetuate their cultural traditions. Daṇḍa nāṭa serves as a dynamic force for social cohesion, identity



formation, and cultural pride within Odisha, reinforcing the importance of traditional arts in shaping and enriching societal fabric.

## 1.9 Challenges and Future Prospects for Daṇḍa nāṭa

Preserving and continuing the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition faces several challenges in the contemporary context. These challenges include:

- a. **Changing Societal Values:** As modern lifestyles and values evolve, there is a risk of traditional art forms like Daṇḍa nāṭa losing relevance among younger generations.
- b. **Lack of Patronage:** Traditional art forms often struggle to secure adequate financial support and patronage, which is crucial for training new artists, organizing performances, and maintaining cultural institutions.
- c. **Globalization and Cultural Homogenization:** Increased exposure to global media and entertainment can lead to the dilution of indigenous cultural practices, including Daṇḍa nāṭa, as younger generations may be more inclined towards popular culture.
- d. **Limited Outreach:** Limited exposure and outreach beyond local communities can hinder the wider appreciation and recognition of Daṇḍa nāṭa, both nationally and internationally.

To address these challenges and ensure the sustenance and evolution of the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition, the following strategies can be considered:

- a. **Cultural Education and Awareness:** Implement educational programs in schools and communities to raise awareness about the cultural significance of Daṇḍa nāṭa, thereby fostering appreciation and interest among younger generations.
- b. **Financial Support and Sponsorship:** Encourage governmental and private sector support through grants, sponsorships, and subsidies to sustain Daṇḍa nāṭa institutions, training centers, and performances.
- c. **Integration with Modern Platforms:** Explore opportunities to integrate Daṇḍa nāṭa into modern platforms such as digital media, social media, and multimedia performances to reach a wider audience and adapt to contemporary tastes.
- d. **Collaborations and Exchanges:** Facilitate collaborations and cultural exchanges with other art forms, both within India and internationally, to promote cross-cultural dialogue and innovation while preserving the authenticity of Daṇḍa nāṭa.
- e. **Documentation and Archiving:** Emphasize the importance of documenting and archiving Daṇḍa nāṭa performances, music, costumes, and narratives to ensure their preservation for future generations and scholarly research.

By addressing these challenges and implementing strategic initiatives, the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition can be sustained and evolved to remain a vibrant and integral part of Odishan culture in the contemporary era.

## 1.10 Comparative Studies of Daṇḍa nāṭa



Daṇḍa nāṭa, a traditional dance form of Odisha, India, bears resemblances and distinctions when compared to other traditional dance forms both within India and globally.

### Similarities:

- a. **Narrative Elements:** Like many other traditional dance forms, Daṇḍa nāṭa often incorporates narrative elements, depicting stories from Hindu mythology or historical events.
- b. **Costumes and Ornaments:** Similar to other traditional dances, elaborate costumes and ornaments are integral to Daṇḍa nāṭa, enhancing the visual appeal and storytelling.
- c. **Cultural Significance:** Across traditional dance forms, there's a shared cultural significance, often serving as a means of preserving heritage, expressing emotions, and celebrating festivals.

### Differences:

- a. **Choreography and Movement:** Daṇḍa nāṭa is characterized by unique choreography and movement patterns, distinct from other Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, or Odissi.
- b. **Music and Rhythm:** The musical accompaniment and rhythm patterns in Daṇḍa nāṭa differ from those in other traditional dances, reflecting regional musical traditions and influences.
- c. **Regional Variations:** While Daṇḍa nāṭa is specific to Odisha, other traditional dance forms may have variations across regions in India or even globally, reflecting diverse cultural contexts and histories.

### Possible Influences:

- a. **Cultural Exchange:** Historical cultural exchanges and migrations could have influenced the development of Daṇḍa nāṭa and other traditional dance forms, leading to shared motifs or techniques.
- b. **Religious and Ritualistic Practices:** Influence from religious and ritualistic practices, prevalent in the regions where these dance forms originated, could have shaped their themes, symbolism, and performance styles.
- c. **Colonial Encounters:** Colonial encounters and globalization may have introduced new elements or altered traditional dance forms, leading to syncretic or hybrid expressions.

Comparative studies between Daṇḍa nāṭa and other traditional dance forms offer insights into the rich diversity of cultural expressions globally, while also highlighting the unique characteristics and influences that define each tradition.

## 1.11 CONCLUSION

The Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition in Odishan culture has provided valuable insights into the rich cultural tapestry of the region. Through an in-depth analysis of the historical, religious, and artistic dimensions of this traditional dance form, we have uncovered the profound impact it has had on shaping the cultural identity of Odisha. Daṇḍa nāṭa as a sacred and celebratory art form deeply rooted in the cultural and religious practices of the region. The intricate choreography, vibrant costumes, and symbolic storytelling within the dance have not only entertained but also served as a medium for transmitting cultural values, myths, and spiritual narratives across generations. Furthermore, our study has emphasized the need for the preservation and promotion of the Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition in the face of modernization and changing cultural landscapes. As globalization



continues to impact traditional art forms, efforts to safeguard and revitalize Daṇḍa nāṭa are crucial for ensuring the cultural continuity and resilience of Odisha. While acknowledging the challenges posed by contemporary societal shifts, the research underscores the importance of fostering awareness, education, and support for Daṇḍa nāṭa. Collaborative initiatives involving cultural institutions, artists, scholars, and policymakers can play a pivotal role in sustaining and rejuvenating this cultural heritage. The Daṇḍa nāṭa tradition stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of Odishan culture, embodying a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation. By understanding and cherishing this unique dance form, we contribute to the preservation of cultural diversity and the enrichment of our collective human heritage.

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