

Legends of the Kaibarta: The Folk Theatre Art of Ghoda Nata in Odisha

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Abstract - Ghoda Nata, also known as Chaitali Ghoda Nata, is a significant folk theatre tradition of coastal Odisha, deeply rooted in the ritual life and livelihood of the Kaibarta fishing community. Originating from the *Kaibarta Gita* of Achyutananda Das and the *Kaibarta Purana* of Budhimanta Puhana, this performance tradition combines myth, ritual, music, dance, and narrative to preserve collective memory and religious identity. Performed mainly during the Chaitra-Baisakha period, Ghoda Nata centers on the worship of Goddess Basheli and employs a symbolic dummy horse as its core performative element. This paper examines the origin, development, performance structure, characters, music, costumes, ritual practices, and contemporary transformations of Ghoda Nata through literary sources and field study. It also highlights the challenges faced by practitioners in the modern era, including economic insecurity and declining youth participation, while noting recent changes such as increased female involvement. The study underscores Ghoda Nata's cultural value as a living folk theatre form and emphasizes the need for its documentation, preservation, and institutional support.

Keywords – Traditional folk theatre, Kaibarta Gita, Kaibarta Purana, Dhagadhamali, Ritual performance and Coastal Odisha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ghoda Nata is a well-known traditional folk theatre form from Odisha, closely connected to the life and livelihood of the fisher community along the coastal region of the state. The content of Ghoda Nata has its roots in the “Kaibarta Gita”, a text written by Bhaktakabi Achyutananda Das during the Panchasakha era of Odia literature. The origins of Ghoda Nata are discussed in two important Puranas from ancient and medieval Odia literature: the “Kaibarta Gita” by Achyutananda Das and the “Kaibarta Purana” by Budhimanta Puhana. This folk theatre form not only entertains but also conveys essential cultural and spiritual narratives of the Kaibarta community in Odisha.



Origin and Development

Guru Padmasri Dr. Uchhab Charan Dash, a prominent performer, trainer, and expert in Ghoda Nata, emphasizes that the origins of this art form are deeply intertwined with the traditional livelihood of the Kaibarta community in coastal Odisha. This connection is illustrated by the descriptions found in the “Kaibarta Gita” and the “Kaibarta Purana”. The ritualistic traditions surrounding Ghoda Nata are highlighted in the following verses:

During the Puranic era, as the world was engulfed in a cataclysm, the Kalpabata began to sway in the turbulent waters. The Almighty Vishnu meditated and created a divine being from grime taken from his armpit to stabilize it. It floated on the surface of the water. This being, which began to swim and hold onto the Kalpabata, amazed Lord Vishnu. Upon asking about his birth and ancestry, the being revealed he was not related to anyone except Lord Vishnu himself. Pleased with his devotion, Lord Vishnu adopted him as his child and named him King Das. The term “Das” means “devotee,” and because he was born from Vishnu's grime, he was categorized as part of the Kaibarta community. This act saved the world through King Das's efforts.

Maha Pralaya Je Ghotila Abani

Kalpabata Nabudai

Nirakara Bishnu Joga Nidrajanti

Se Kalapa Bate Rahi!!

Bata brukhya jale sthira hoiba kipari
 Kehu rakhiba ehaku drudhe sthira kari II
 Emanta bichari prabhu jagata karana
 Karna mulaku aunshi dele tatakhyaana II
 Karna mulaku aunshi dele Narahari
 Jhadi jala re padai karnara mauli II
 Jale nabudi mauli Bhashamana hela
 Sehi mauli ru eka purusha janmila II

(Translation: "How will the Kalpabata remain steady? Who will hold it to save it from the Holocaust? The Almighty Lord Vishnu carefully created a piece of grime from the lower back of his ear and threw it into the water. It floated, and a divine man was born from it.")

During this critical time, as King Das held the Kalpabata steady against the waves, a great fish named Raghava swallowed him. The Kalpabata trembled once again and disturbed to Lord Vishnu's meditation. Lord Vishnu searched for his devoted child but could not be able to find him. So he started to meditate and used his magical powers to view past events. He transformed into a fish to search for King Das and discovered him in the belly of the Raghava fish.

Dhyane Jani Bishnu Raghava
 Badhi Kale Udhara II
 Shapa Dele Janme Janme Kaibarta
 Heba Hanta Tohara
 Niti Prati Tote Badhiba II
 Tara Ahara Pain
 Kaibarta Tara Ahara Pain II

(Translation: "Lord Vishnu, with his divine knowledge, rescued him from the Raghava fish and cursed him to always be hunted by the fishing community.")

After this experience, King Das became a devoted disciple of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu instructed him that the fish was his enemy for having swallowed him. To seek revenge, he needed to earn a living through fishing. To assist him, Lord Vishnu created a horse named Baseli to help King Das journey to Singhal, his kingdom. This occurred on the full moon day of Chaitra, according to the Hindu calendar. Furthermore, a celestial architect named Vishwakarma constructed a boat along with a golden net for King Das. Lord Vishnu guided him on how to sustain himself through fishing and

selling various products, such as fried paddy, sweetened fried paddy, Khaja, Kakara, Arisha, Laddu, Sakara, and more.

Bija Dei Dasaku Kahile Je Hari
 To jibika Dasha Raja Suna Mana Deri II
 Jala pakai Jala ru Dharibu Tu Mina
 Chudha Mudhi Biki Kara Kutumba Palana II
 Lia Ukhuda Haste Je Banaibu
 Sahi Sahi Galikandi Bulina Bikibu II
 Kakara Laddu Khaja je Sakara
 Bikibu Mundai Munde Pasara Tohara II
 Naba chalai jalare Jala Pakaina
 Mina dhari karibu tu kutumba palana II

(Translation: "Lord Hari instructed Das: To earn a livelihood, you must fish from the waters, selling your catch to support your family.")

Contents of the Kaibarta Gita of Ghoda Nata

The main focus of the Ghoda Nata performance is its origin, which is detailed in the Kaibarta Gita by Achyuta Nanda Das. This traditional ritual is observed for eight days, starting from Chaitra Purnima and continuing until the eighth day of Baisakha in the Hindu calendar. During this time, performers travel from village to village to promote the cultural and religious traditions of the Kaibarta community. The Ghoda Nata performances include many subplots derived from Odia Purana, epics, and myths, making the theatrical tradition engaging and popular. Some notable performances include "Sati Jajnika," "Karama Bai," "Gita Panda," "Shakuntala," "Sati Radha Rani," "Ghoda Janma," "Naba Keli," "Radha Krushna Milana," "Rama Hanu Judhha," and "Rama Sita Judhha." Today, Gurus continue to present their versions of theatre, using various topics from ancient and medieval Odia literature to capture audience attention and achieve their commercial success.

Denomination of Ghoda Nata

This type of theatrical tradition is known as Ghoda Nata, Chaiti Ghoda, or Chaitali Ghoda Nata. Mainly a dummy horse plays a crucial role in its performance, with the wooden-headed and bamboo-constructed horse being central to its ritualistic tradition. This is why it is called Ghoda Nata. The performances occur during the month of Chaitra in the Hindu calendar, further emphasizing its ritualistic and religious significance, hence the name

Chaitali Ghoda Nata. Performers also sing songs specifically composed for Ghoda Nata.



(Image of Ghoda used in Ghoda Nata, collected from the file of Uchab Charan Das. It depicts the structure of Horse Basheli the adorable deity of Ghoda Nata.)

Style of Presentation of Ghoda Nata

Ghoda Nata in Odisha is predominantly a dance and song-dominated form of traditional folk theatre. It partially adheres to the grammar outlined in the Nattiyasashtra, written by Bharata Muni. Initially, various slokas are sung by the narrator, known as Rauta, in a segment called Nandi Gaana. During this part, several deities, including Guru, the five primary deities of Hinduism, and Goddess Sarala (the deity of art and literature), are invoked to ensure the success of the performance and the well-being of the audience and society. Some examples of Nandi Gaana include:

Gururbramha Gururbishnu Gururdeva Maheswara
Gurursakhyat Parambramha Tasmai Sri Gurave
Namaha!!

(Translation:- “The Guru is regarded as Brahma, the lord of creation; Vishnu, the lord of preservation; Maheswar, the lord of destruction; and Parambramha, the supreme god. We bow to that Guru with utmost devotion.”)

Gane Narayane Rudre Ambike Bhaskare Tatha
Bhinnabhinnam Nakartabyam Panchadeva
Namastute!!

Translation:- “We bow to the five adored deities: Lord Ganesh (the god of knowledge), Lord Narayan (the god of preservation), Lord Rudra (the god of destruction), Goddess Ambika (the goddess of power), and Lord Bhaskara (the almighty sun),

seeking their blessings for the success of our performance.”

Matascha Sarala Devi Pita Cha Parameswara
Sakhyate Kamaladevi Bakyadevi Namstute!!
(We bow to the Goddess Sarala as our mother, Lord Parameswar as our father, Goddess Kamaladevi (Goddess of wealth) and goddess Saraswati (Goddess of speech) for their blessings.)

Karanja Patara Kala,
Au Dine Bandili Mata Sarala,
Dwitiyare Banduchi Maa Mangala,
Trutiye Banduchi Kataka Chandinku,
Jananilo Kanthe Basi Pada Khela!!

(I prayed to Goddess Sarala, Goddess Mangala and Goddess Cuttack Chandi to bless me with right word in right time during the period of performance.)

❖ Kapakhai Katamata Au Dine
Badhei Gadhila Khata
Au dine hugula Katuri Benta
Dhagadhamalia Gita Mu Gaibi
Chaitali Ghodanata!!1!!
Tela Pakaili Kane Au Dine
Mayuri Rabila Bane
Au Dine Jauthili Bane Bane
Bayaka Bhai Tu Bajaibu Dhola
Mahuria Bajaibu Gita Tane!!2!!

❖ Akhu Baripate pashi Asili Mu
Akhu Bari Khara Khara
Au Dine Kathuria Tarabara
Au Dine pancha Tiriki Pandara
Au Dine Shohala Gale Satara !!!
Au Dine Satara Pare Athara
Au Dine Laxmana Bindhile Shara
Au Dine Hanu Gala Lankapura
Dekhe Mo Pashila Madhu Banara
Badha Kala Akhaya Kumara !!2!!
Au Dine Bate Chahalia Bara
Dekhe Mo Hunka Mati Kharakhara
Au Dine Nadia Gacha Chahanra
Dekhe Mo Pokhari Hudare Ghara
Dekhe Mo Ghara Kataka Jillara !!3!!
Dekhe Mo Grama Nama Chaudwara
Dekhe Mo Maa Maushinku Mora
Dekhe Mu Janae koti Juhara
Goti Goti Hoi Kete mu Naibi
Mora Eka Thabe Namaskara!!4!!

(Those were various introductory descriptions of Ghoda Nata composed on the style of Dhaga Dhamalia and presented at the starting of performance to introduce the Content.)



(Picture Collected from the photo file of Uchhab Charan Das. This picture depicts the Style of Performance. Here the Gayaka was singing the contents of Ghoda Nata and Rautas were dancing holding their dummy horse in their waist)



Following the Devotional chanting (Mangalacharan) and introduction (Prastabana) by Rauta, which includes the traditional Dhaga Dhamalia song accompanied by musical instruments, the Ghoda Nata performance commences. In this introductory segment, Rauta provides a brief overview of the performance's form and content. The text of the Prastabana, composed by the eminent Guru Padmashri Uchhaba Das, is presented below.

After the introductory performance, the main show of Ghoda Nata begins. The entire content is performed in a style based on an ancient and widely recognized form of folk singing known as *Dhaga Dhamalia Gita*. This is complemented by folk dance, rhythm, and song. Initially, performances focused solely on the origin and ritualistic aspects described in the Kaibarta Gita and the Kaibarta Purana. However, over the past three decades, performers have expanded their repertoire, incorporating numerous topics from ancient and medieval Odia mythological literature into their shows.

The content is presented by the Rauta according to the wishes of the Rautani. Occasionally, they introduce comedic elements to entertain the audience. The entire performance involves singing and dancing by the Rauta and Rautani. Additionally, horse wearers perform dances synchronized with the horse's rhythm and accompanying songs. Two actors

also engage in mimicry for audience amusement. Throughout the performance, various folk tales and local proverbs are woven into the plot. The performance concludes with Bharata Bakya, during which Rauta sings a prayer for the well-being of the artists, the audience, the state, and the nation.

Characters of Ghoda Nata

A typical troupe of Ghoda Nata consists of ten to eleven artists, with five to six performers and the rest as musicians. The leader of the troupe is known as the Gayaka, who may also be referred to as Sutradhara or the "Thread-wearer" of the play. The Gayaka plays a vital role throughout the performance. The chief assistant to the Gayaka is called Rauta. There is also a female artist in the Ghoda Nata troupe, known as Rautani, who plays an important role in dancing and singing. Additionally, two actors contribute by performing dances in rhythm with the musical instruments and creating various mimics and entertaining moments for the audience. On either side of the stage, two dancers perform while wearing dummy horses around their waists. The remaining participants play various musical instruments to accompany the music.

Traditional Musical Instruments Used in Ghoda Nata

Mainly Dholak, Jodinagara, Mahuri and Gini are played for the musical accompaniment of Ghoda Nata.



Jodinagara



Dholak



Mahuri



Gini

Costume and Make-Up

The costumes in Ghoda Nata follow a traditional style. Male artists typically wear silk, single-colored, half-sleeved, full-length kurtas paired with dhotis. The distinction between Rauta, the actors, and the musicians is made through different colors of their costumes. The Rauta stands out by wearing a turban, which signifies his importance. His costume is comparable to that of a king, as the character of Rauta is seen as the incarnation of the Dasa King of Singhal described in the Kaibarta Gita. Rautani, the sole female artist, wears a traditional Sambalpuri saree accompanied by a blouse, with no additional costume elements. The musicians wear the same style of costumes as the actors. All performers, including Rauta and other actors, adorn themselves with various colored plastic bead malas (necklaces), while Rautani is embellished with different types of traditional gold and silver-colored ornaments. The make-up for performances is very simple, avoiding any stylized or modern trends. Rautani's make-up resembles that of the dancers from the Sambalpuri dance tradition.



(Picture collected from the photo file of guru Uchab Charan Das. It depicts the style of costume and make-up of Rauta and Rautani.)

Prevalence of Ghoda Nata in Various Districts of Odisha

According to the Kaibarta Gita by Achyuta Nanda Das and the Kaibarta Purana by Budhhimanta Puhana, Ghoda Nata's origin and development are linked to coastal Odisha. The ritualistic and

religious aspects of Ghoda Nata are deeply connected to the traditional livelihood of the Kaibarta Community in this region. Consequently, Ghoda Nata is popular in coastal districts such as Puri, Cuttack, Kendrapada, and Jagatshinghpur.

Ritualistic Tradition of Ghoda Nata

Although it is a form of traditional folk theatre, the rituals associated with Ghoda Nata are strictly observed and are closely tied to the life and livelihood of the Kaibarta Community in coastal Odisha. The performance season extends from Chaitra Purnima to the Ashtami of the month of Baisakha and is celebrated with religious festivities and ritualistic activities, as described in the Kaibarta Purana or Kaibarta Gita. On the morning of Chaitra Purnima, the community places their beloved deity, Maa Basheli, on a new white cloth with traditional decorum along with their musical instruments. They gather at a worship site, which is cleaned with cow dung and decorated with rangoli and chita. During the worship, a dummy horse symbolizing Goddess Basheli is adorned with a garland and various colored flowers. The community then expresses their devotion through traditional rituals before procuring a holy bamboo to create the dummy horse. Following its rituals, the Gayaka retrieves a piece of bamboo and cuts it into twelve pieces to form a horse body. A wooden horse head is attached and decorated with clothes of vibrant colors. The horse is then worshiped with pani (mixed jaggery juice), which is the favorite offering of Goddess Basheli. Villagers traditionally invite the troupe with fish and betelnut to perform Ghoda Nata. Occasionally, melanas (community gatherings) are organized during this time. This tradition of performance continues until the eighth day of the month of Baisakha. The community observes specific religious restrictions and rituals with dedication and joy. After the festivities, the dummy horse is returned to the worship place, where it is revered by the Gurus and their families.

II. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON GHODA NATA

1. Based on the information gathered during the field study, it is evident that the status of Ghoda Nata in the early 21st century was not favorable. There were identifiable changes in both its literary and performance aspects.
2. Originally, Ghoda Nata was performed exclusively during the religious and ritualistic festivals of Goddess Basheli, with content primarily derived from the Kaibarta Gita. Over time, it evolved into a more structured dramatic form, incorporating literary elements from ancient and medieval Odia literature, as well as stories from various Puranas and Upa Puranas, enriching this traditional folk theater.
3. Prior to 1950, Ghoda Nata was performed only during the Chaitra Purnima festival for eight days, deeply tied to the life and livelihood of the Kaibarta community in coastal Odisha. Nowadays, however, performances may occur at any time of the year depending on audience interest.
4. There have been no changes to the traditional costumes and makeup used in Ghoda Nata. Male artists wear silk-made, single-colored, half-sleeved, full-length kurtas and dhotis. The difference between Rautas (the main performers), actors, and musicians is marked by the variety of colors in their costumes. The Rauta wears a turban to signify importance, and their costume resembles that of a king, as this character is seen as the incarnation of the Dasa King of Singhal, described in the Kaibarta Gita. The only female artist, Rautani, wears a traditional Sambalpuri saree and blouse without any additional costumes. Musicians typically don the same style of costumes as the actors. Additionally, Rautas and other actors wear colorful plastic bead malas as ornaments, while Rautani is adorned with traditional golden and silver jewelry.
5. Makeup for performances is kept simple, without stylized or modern techniques. Rautani's makeup resembles that of Sambalpuri dance performers.
6. There has been no change in the performance space. Since the early 20th century, Ghoda Nata has been performed under a canopy supported by four bamboos or in open air, typically in village streets, in the temple yard of Goddess Basheli, or in front of patrons' houses. No permanent stage arrangements have been established for these performances.
7. Ghoda Nata does not employ heavy electric lighting or sound systems; minimal lighting is used, with only three to four hanging or standing microphones for sound.
8. The influence of modernity is somewhat felt in vocal music, where contemporary bhajans and album songs are occasionally performed. However, the use of Western or electronic musical instruments in accompaniment is not permitted. Traditional instruments like Jodi Mahuri, Jodi Nagara, and Dhola have been consistently used since the early 20th century.
9. Over the last three decades, female participation, especially in the role of Rautani, has seen an increase. Previously, this role was exclusively performed by male artists. Now, professional paid female singers are often invited to perform Rautani's songs instead of relying solely on the troupe's artists. Approximately 200 women singers and dancers are now able to earn a livelihood through Ghoda Nata, providing them opportunities for both reputation and financial independence.
10. During the data collection period, it was noted that many artists and experts struggle to sustain themselves through earnings from Ghoda Nata. Only a few Gurus and experts in this genre manage to earn a sufficient income. Consequently, many artists have been compelled to seek jobs in places like Gujarat, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata, and Dubai to meet their financial needs.
11. According to Gury Manas Ranjan Dalai from Oladiha, Salepur, Cuttack, the musical aspect of Ghoda Nata relies heavily on traditional instrumentalists from the local Scheduled Castes, who have played instruments such as Jodi Mahuri, Jodi Nagara, and Dhola as part of their ancestral professions. However, there is a notable decline in interest among the younger generation to continue this tradition.

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