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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF SNAKE CHARMER'S SONGS IN ODISHA – A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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#### ABSTRACT

The snake charmer is an ancient art form which is prevalent in the Indian society since the *puranic* days. But it is more popular and vibrant in the Odishan society. Odisha- a land of high hills and dense forests, is infested with gigantic snakes like *Ahiraj* (King of snakes), pythons, *Sankhachuda*, and poisonous snakes like *Cobra*, *Tampa*, *Chiti*, *Ardalia*, *Boda*, etc. The *sapua kelas* (snake charmers) of Odisha maintained their livelihood by hunting snakes and demonstrating their games in different villages and cities of Odisha. The *sapua kelas* are found throughout the length and breadth of Odisha. But, they are mostly concentrated in the villages around Champua subdivision of Keonjhar district and Patia near Bhubaneswar of Khurda district which may be called as the country of *sapua kelas*. An attempt has been made in this paper to portray the social significance of the snake charmers' songs of Odisha.

#### INTRODUCTION

The snake charmer is an ancient art form which is prevalent in the Indian society since the *puranic* days. But it is more popular and vibrant in the Odishan society. It is the practice of hypnotizing a snake by playing and waving around a musical instrument known as *Nageswara* (flute) with folk songs.<sup>1</sup> A snake charmer is a person who entertains people by controlling the behavior of dangerous cobras dancing with the tune of the folk songs. The *Sapua-kelas* are found throughout the length and breadth of Odisha. But, they are mostly concentrated in the villages around Champua subdivision of Keonjhar district and Patia near Bhubaneswar of Khurda district which may be called as the "country of *Sapua-kelas*". In these places the professional snake charmers are living in a large number. Odisha a land of high hills and dense forests is infested with gigantic snakes like *Ahiraj* (King of snakes), pythons, *Sankhachuda*, and poisonous snakes like *Cobra*, *Tampa*, *Chiti*, and *Boda*.<sup>2</sup> Usually, a lot of persons are engaged (even the members of one family) for hunting the snakes. There was a crazy among themselves for hunting large and poisonous snakes like *Ahiraj*, *Sankhachuda*, *Tampa*, *Ardalia*, *Bada*, etc. The process begins by poaching snakes by the snake charmers from the forests and mountainous areas of Odisha. After hunting the snakes, the snake charmers first destroy their poisonous teeth. Thereafter, snakes are kept in the two tightly closed baskets tied with ropes, in starving condition for 3 to 4 days. This was done to weaken and control them.

Then the snakes are gradually taming and giving training alongwith the previously trained snakes for dancing at the tune of music. After the harvesting season is over, snake charmers (*sapua kela*) of this region loaded with two tightly closed baskets tied with ropes, move from village to village to show their game. They keep long hair, a moustache and put on silver bangles and golden earrings. Their song is called *Padmatola* (plucking lotuses). It deals with Krishna's plucking of golden lotuses from the lake *kalindi*. *Kaliya* a seven- hooded giant snake was the sole monarch of that lake. It made the water so poisonous that any animal drinking it, perished. *Kansa* ordered Nanda to supply him immediately with a hundred load of golden lotuses only found blooming in that poisonous water of the lake. His purpose was to kill Krishna, his inveterate enemy.<sup>3</sup> But, Krishna boldly enters the water, plucked flowers and created a great disturbance in the kingdom of *Kaliya*. Messengers sent by the king, were killed one by one. At last the king of snakes angrily stung Krishna. Krishna fell senseless in the water. Baladeb brought Krishna to dry land and sprinkled nectar brought by Garuda from heaven. Krishna now revived, captured the king of snakes and danced on his seven hoods mercilessly till he got fully exhausted and submitted to him. The snake-charmer, a devotee of Lord Krishna captures snakes in his name. As soon as he sings *Padmatola*, enchanted by the music, the cobra comes out of the hole, dances moving its broad hood with the sandal mark of Krishna. The charmer captures it with the help of a stick and breaks its poisonous tooth. If it stings him by accident, his friends applies *Jalamahura* (an antidote to poison) to his wound and

administers to him a little anti-poisonous medicine called *Gada*. The snake charmer gets up fully cured within 15 minutes.<sup>4</sup> The other sight of interest in the play is *Govinda musa* (a trained rat named Govinda). The rat plays to the tune of the charmer's songs. It acts almost a drama of the *Odia* family life. It acts the part of a daughter-in-law, pretends to draw the hanging rope with the little hands quickly as if drawing water, being afraid of mother-in-law, displays the tragic effects in its tearful eyes when it pretends to break the pitcher by accident. Next it searches for the earrings lost in haste. It sometimes draws water a little and seems to watch *Dedhasura* (husband's elder brother) a little. For the custom is that she should conceal herself at his sight. Then, it places a small stick on its shoulders and seems to carry a heavy load to a distance place. It dances like an actress, carries on exercises like a hero and begs like a beggar. The charmer plays on *Nageswara*—a folk musical instrument, sings songs and talks interestingly throughout the show.<sup>5</sup>

### The Snake Charmer's Song

Padmabati, the queen of Kamsa, was fasting

- It was the “*Dhanitiri*” fast.
  - Govinda Hari,
- At Kamsa's orders, Banamali went to pluck the lotus.
  - Govinda Hari,
- As he entered the Lake Kalindi,
- The Snake Kali you stung him.
  - Govinda Hari,
- Unable to bear the terrible pain of the
- Poisonous sting,
- Srikrishna fell senseless on the water,
  - Govinda Hari.
- Bala Deva came and lifted him up, O Govinda Hari.
- Then he called upon *Garuda* who brought nectar (from heaven)
  - Govinda Hari.
- As the nectar was sprinkled on his body
- Banamali got up,
- O Govinda Hari.<sup>6</sup>

### A Snake in Charmer's Basket (A Ballad)

Father-in-law has an abounding affection for me. So much so that he renames me as “inauspicious”. Always he asks me what caste I belong to. Strange, he has not known my caste as yet; And how should I describe the affection of my mother-in-law. A vile viper she calls me. (With her sharp nails) she scratches my soft cheeks. The chattering of her teeth terrified me. When she beats me, her eyes glow like fire balls. At night she places a rope by my head (so that I may hang myself). (When I wake up) I mistake the rope for a snake and get frightened. Then I get up, spread a part of the cloth I put on, and sleep by the distance. How can I describe the history of the other members of the family?. The affection of each one of them will cover a book. They always treat me as an outsider, except when I cleanse the offal. (If I hesitate) they argue “none but your husband has taken his meal there.” I have not seen my husband as yet and do not know if he be fair or black. I have been sleeping on my mother-in-law's lap since I came here. She provides no light in the kitchen. I kindle the coconut leaves and manage somehow – O Mother. I use the stems of “*Chana*” as firewood and coal –O Mother.



They give me a little fire in a coconut shell and ask me (repeatedly) if the cooking is finished. In the dark I carry the earthen pot full of steaming rice. If I sit, she calls me a round piece of stone. If I speak, she says the daughter-in-law is very harsh in tone. If in my sorrow I (sometimes) fall asleep, she remarks the Daughter-in-law is very idle. If I shed tears (to relieve my heavy heart). She asks, “Which of your relations is dead?” O Mother, my voice is too feeble to speak out their (many) virtues. They mix water in my cooked curry. It is beyond my power of speech to describe their vice—O Mother. They mix salt in my cooked curry (to get me insulted). They say “The goddess of wealth had made her abode in our house. She vanished as soon as your inauspicious feet touched the place.” Now I (desperately) look at the hills and dales and tears flow from my eyes incessantly.

What can I do?

My grandmother is dead.

My uncle is poor and helpless.

My father's (economic) condition is wretched from my very birth.

I cannot turn again to my father's house.

So I drag on (miserably) like a snake in the snake-charmer's basket. The place where the mother-in-law's house is built, is only six cubits long and contains some coconut trees. What fortune did you see in that and gave me in marriage there—O mother? I carried with me the utensils of Cuttack and Kantilo, utensils for the family god from Calcutta, golden plates from

Baripada, Sofas, bedsteads, chests, painted boxes of various kinds, a Gun and different kinds of sarees from Jambu and Puri. But my mother-in-law tells me repeatedly that my father had given me nothing (as dowry). Patiently have I borne all insults and my heart is turned as hard as a pillar of stone.<sup>7</sup>

**Musical Instruments:** The musical instruments associated with the songs of snake charmer consists of a mouth-blown air reservoir made from a gourd which channels air into two reed pipes.<sup>8</sup> It is known as Nageswara (also known as pungji). They also used flute, khanjani and veena. The snake charmers used to be a fixture in the markets and festivals. They not only maintain their livelihood by showing their games but also spread the ideas of morality, ethics and environmental protection. According to them snakes are the valuable wealth of our society. They should not be killed or destroyed. They are the friends and well wisher of the farmers. They protect the crops and corns of the farmers by killing the rats and other insects.<sup>9</sup> The irony of the fate is that, the songs and games of the snake charmers which provided recreation, entertainment and subsistence to thousand and thousands of the rural people and spread the ideas of morality, universal brotherlihood, truthfulness, honesty and victory of righteous over evil forces are declining fast. These folk songs which are the valuable wealth of our society are not given the due recognition that they deserve.

Thus, from the above analysis it is inferred that the folk songs of the snake charmers are not only significant from the entertainment point of view but also spread the ideas of environmental protection, morality, ethics. But, they are now at stake. The government has banned them not to catch the snakes from the forests. In view of their crucial destiny they are not provided with any alternative profession to substantiate their livelihood.

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