

# Folk Dances of Odisha: As Agents of Social & Behavioural Change

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## ABSTRACT

Odisha, as a culturally rich state, folk media plays an indispensable role in protecting the history and cultural identity from generation to generation. Due to the lack of accessibility and availability of other media, it became very popular in disseminating information, education, and entertainment among rural people. Among all kinds of folk media, folk dance and folk music are the most renowned media for their vibrant music and graceful body movements. In this study, various renowned folk dances, including Gotipua, Dalkhai, Dhemsas, Bagha Nacha, and Mayurbhanj Chhau, are discussed. The study further explores the role of folk dances as agents of social and behavioural change. For this, a qualitative methodology and descriptive method are used to determine the importance of folk dance in shaping social and behavioural change. The research reveals that folk dances are not only for entertainment purposes, but also have major contributions towards national development.

**Keywords:** Folk Media, Social change, Folk Dance, etc.

## INTRODUCTION

Folk media is one of the effective media of indigenous people, which helps in shaping traditional values and cultural identity. It is the most powerful form of propaganda to disseminate desired information among rural communities for its infotainment traits. In folk media, the local people are the creators, disseminators, and consumers, and its features make it quite popular among indigenous groups. They not only informed but also entertained and educated the masses through various forms. Therefore, it is regarded as one of the key media of communication for the people and by the people. Folk media has a pivotal contribution in the preservation of history, culture, language, and heritage (Gender Studies, 2024). The oral tradition performances and storytelling are the major means of cultural transmission. The major characteristics of folk media in regard to society like community cohesion, oneness, and unity in diversity. There are plenty of Folk media forms through which indigenous people communicate, such as Folk Dances, Folk Theatre, Folk Songs, Puppetry, Tamasha, and Nautanki (Radha, n.d.). Among all, Folk Songs and Folk Dances are much popular among these communities because of pulsating foot tapping music fills the senses and urges to shake a leg or two, even though sometimes without understanding the meaning of the song. The beat of the drums, the lilting songs, the graceful body movements filled with unique poses, and simple steps combine to become a joyful dancing movement.

## Folk Dances of Odisha

Odisha was formerly known as Utkal, meaning "utkarsha Kala" for its richness in art and cultural heritage, particularly for its Tribal Ethos and ancient Hindu temples and vistas (StudyCountry, n.d.). However, the splendor of Odisha is not limited to its vistas, temples, and sacred shrines. It's much more and larger than life. The state is home to several popular dance forms and also a plethora of folk dances. Folk dances are indispensably associated with tribal or indigenous culture. As tribal people worship nature rather than any deity, these dance forms are generally performed during festivals, celebrations, harvesting of crops, marriage

ceremonies, and rituals to express their joy, community solidarity, and devotion. In these dance forms, traditional indigenous instruments such as drum, mahuri, dhol and flutes are used. These dances preserve Odisha's endemic heritage, fostering religious identity and cultural transmission through informal training, while adapting to contemporary stages for wider appreciation.

Folk dances are different from region to region reflecting the lifestyle and tradition of the native people. In Odisha, various festivals like Akshaya Tritiya, Makara Sankranti, etc., are celebrated on different occasions, such as during the sowing of seeds, germination, and harvesting. During these celebrations, Folk dances are a significant means of entertainment. According to the archives, these are one of the earliest forms of art commonly used for conveying of information, feelings, and thoughts, even before the evolution of human beings' verbal communication.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objective of this research is to provide information about the renowned folk dances of Odisha, such as Gotipua, Dalkhai, Dhemsa, and Mayurbhanj Chhau, including their origins, attire, and dance steps. The study further explores the role of folk media in shaping social and behavioural changes among rural communities. As it is one of the primary means of communication among indigenous people, its significance and impacts on rural livelihood.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The study emphasizes on various popular folk dances of Odisha and their role in shaping the social and behavioural change among the indigenous people of Odisha. For this qualitative methodology, and a descriptive study is conducted, by using secondary data from various journals, research papers, and websites. The research aims to determine whether folk dance serves as the primary means of communication, its effectiveness, and adaptability in the day-to-day lives of rural people. Whether they serve as a major catalyst for the progress of society in terms of social and behavioural changes.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this research study Social Cognitive Theory, given by Albert Bandura is used to understand the learning from social environment. In Folk dance, the Choreographer, Performer, and Audience are from the same community, it is more effective in terms of information dissemination. The dissemination of information by folk media can influence the thoughts and beliefs of local people, as it is one of the most popular means of communication in rural areas. It reinforces the community approval, ritual participation, and cultural pride to ensure the social and behavioural changes.

### **Famous Folk Dances of Odisha: -**

Odisha boasts a variety of folk forms according to the language, culture and tradition. Each district and territory of Odisha has its own and unique folk culture. The Mayurbhanj district, is renowned for the Chhau dance, while the Balasore-Bhadrak district is famous for the Mughal Tamsa, a dance-drama form of storytelling. Gotipua, Ravan Nacha and Ghoda Nacha are other popular folk dances of this region. In Coastal Odisha, the Ganjam district is particularly popular for Bagha Nacha, Ranapa, and Prahlad Nataka, whereas western Odisha, specifically Sambalpur, is known for Koshli Natak and Dalkhai. Odisha has a substantial indigenous inhabitants. Kandhamal is one of such state that highlights the Lanka Podi Jatra as an ethnic folk dance. The southern Odisha, dominated by the KBK region (Koraput-Balangir-Kalahandi), is characterized by a strong presence of the tribal population and therefore the existence of a popular indigenous culture being carried over through tradition (Gupta & Rath, 2023). In this region, Dhemsa is quite popular. These Folk Dances not only preserve history and language but also help in transmitting the artistic legacy and cultural heritage.

### Gotipua: -

In the Odia language, 'Gotipua' means a single boy, wears the attire of a girl and performs with the instruments like tabla, mardala, gini, harmonium, etc. During the reign of Rama Chandra Dev in the 16th century, mahari dancers declined, but boy dancers in Odisha continued the tradition. Then Gotipua emerges as a traditional folk dance of Odisha. Raghurajpur, Odisha (near Puri) is a historic village known for the origin of Gotipua dance troupes. Gotipua dance is an Odissi style, but the dance steps, costumes, and techniques are of the Mahari style. In this dance form young boys below 14 years are trained in the village akhadas, depicting stories of mythology especially the love story of Radha and Krishna. The traditional costume for this dance form is of vivid traditional 'kanchula', which is worn with specially handcrafted jewelry. The boys keep long hairlike girls, for a braided bun-like hairstyle, woven with flower garlands. Their faces are adorned with red & white powder, along with broadly applied 'kajal' or eyeliner, to give the eyes a captivating look (Gotipua, n.d.). Gotipua is one of the earliest folk-dance forms in Odisha which preserves historical continuity by performing devotional art with a unique presentation skill.



(Courtesy: © 2010 Abhinna Sundar Gotipua Nrutya Parishad | Photo credit: Jean-François Mousseau | Courtesy: Abhinna Sundar Gotipua Nrutya Parishad, Raghurajpur, Odisha, India.)

### Dalkhai: -

Dalkhai is the iconic folk dance of western Odisha showcased in districts like Sambalpur, Bargarh, Balangir, Sonpur, etc. This region is renowned for agrarian practices. Dalkhai is basically referred as the goddess of fertility. In Dalkhai, Dalkhai Devi is worshiped during Nuakhai, Phagun Puni, and Dussehra. Dalkhai is generally a stem of branches worshiped as goddess Durga during the Durga Puja by unmarried girls to wish a long life for their brothers. As Dalkhai is a vibrant musical dance form, a number of musical instruments are

required for the performance. The instruments are Dhol, Tasha, Nishan, Tamki and Mahuri. Both boys and girls wear colourful Sambalpuri sarees and a scarf on the shoulders, holding the ends below in both hands. They are bedecked in beautiful traditional jewellery, flowers, and peacock feathers in their hair (Naik, 2020). It has a crucial role in preserving tribal identity by celebrating agrarian life, worshiping the earth goddess, narrating tales of mythology, and paying honour to womanhood in the western region of Odisha.



(Courtesy: © 2025 All Rights Reserved by Bunkar Valley)

**Dhemsas:** -

Dhemsas is a prominent traditional folk-dance form of the Koraput district, Odisha. It is a group dance performed by indigenous/tribal people of that particular region. It is a vibrant and graceful tribal folk art performed by the Paraja, Gadaba, and Kondh communities. There is no evidence of the evolution of this dance form, but it has been carried forward from generation to generation by the native people. In this dance form, more than 15 members dance together by forming a group. Both men and women hold each other's shoulders and waists perform the legendary dance. It is performed during chaitaparab, pusparab, birth celebrations, marriage ceremonies, etc to honour the local deity. In this dance, Dhol, Tamak, Changu, Mahuri, Runji, etc are utilized. The Adivasis or Desia people dressed in colourful sarees and traditional jewellery, feathers and flowers in their hair. It acts as a bridge in social cohesion by fostering community celebration, faith, and the vibrant way of tribal life in Odisha.



(Dhemsas dance, Odisha, India. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.)

### Mayurbhanj Chhau: -

Chhau dance is commonly known as war dance, very much famous in the Mayurbhanj District of Odisha. The word 'Chhau' is derived from chhauni, which means military camp. This dance form originated from the mock fights and drills of soldiers patronized by the local dynasty. It is a strenuous, mask-free style that depicts the tales of the Mahabharat and the Ramayan. It was traditionally a male-dominated dance form emphasizing martial arts, acrobatics, and Vigor, but in the contemporary scenario, females are also actively participating in this dance (Tamuli & Mishra, 2023). Like other Chhau forms, it doesn't use masks, allowing to convey emotions and drama through the presentation. In this dance form, traditional costumes like dhotis, turbans, sashes, bird feathers etc are used with props like swords, shields and bows. As this dance is a war dance which is practiced by 'paika', helps to keep warriors fit and ready to fight in every uncertain situation. This dance form combines socio-economic background with religious and traditional elements.



(Photographs courtesy of Village Square, from "Ancient Mayurbhanj Chhau dance being revived by government, erstwhile royalty," April 6, 2022.)

### Bagha Nacha: -

Bagha Nacha or Tiger dance is an energetic folk-dance form renowned in Ganjam district, Odisha. In this performance, the story of a tiger is highlighted, showcasing the strength and courage with a charismatic display of art, devotion, and community spirit. It is performed in the month of Chaitra during Thakurani jatra. When male dancers paint their bodies with yellow, red, and black colours to resemble a tiger and perform. The most interesting part of this dance form is that the dancer's transformation as a tiger not only in looks but also in energy, strength and courage. This dance gives tribute to the divine power by showcasing victory over evil

(Bunkar Valley, 2025). This dance form shows the attributes of tiger with unique charm and energy to demonstrate courage, strength, and agility.



(Photographs courtesy of Indic Vibhu, published on X (Twitter), June 2023)

### **Role of Folk Dance in Social Change: -**

As folk dances are the lifeline of rural communities due to their graceful and vibrant infotainment feature, they play a significant role in both community and social development. It embodies group participation by strengthening unity in diversity. Folk dances like Dhemsa, Dalkhai fosters community bonding by sharing traditional cultural identity and pride. It is helpful in disseminating social awareness campaigns such as health communication, promotion of education, abolition of child marriage etc. Gotipua dance shows women's empowerment by taking the attire of a girl in the performance. It depicts the emotion and presentation of a mythological story from a feminine perspective. Folk dances provide voice to the marginalized society by preserving the cultural values and social norms. Mayubhanj Chhau is one of the most popular dance forms shows spiritual and martial expression with preservation of heritage. In the contemporary scenario, women are actively participating in the Chhau dance, showing equality in society. Bagha Nacha represents the victory of good over evil. It pays tribute to the divinity and fosters community bonding and uniqueness. Folk dances are a major catalyst for community development, strengthening social cohesion, reducing communal conflicts, and eradicating myths and misconceptions from society.

### **Role of Folk Dance in Behavioural Change: -**

Folk dances are performed during festivals and celebrations bringing people together, fostering cooperation, mutual trust, and serving as a major tool for conflict resolution. Dance forms like Bagha Nacha and Mayubhanj Chhau depict the mythological stories by promoting physical health and wellness. It shows respect for cultural heritage, devotion, self-discipline, and moral conduct, which helps to reduce stress and anxiety by

providing a disciplined routine. Folk dances like Dalkhai pay tribute to womanhood by celebrating gender equality and women's empowerment. A vibrant environment and group participation act as a therapeutic treatment for positive emotional and mental regulation. Folk dances generally celebrate the agricultural life by showing respect to Mother Earth and natural resources. It helps to enhance personal growth and development by proposing a balance between body and mind to see behavioural change.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Communication is at the heart of transforming any society for its prosperity and development. Folk media acts not only as a cohesive to bring social change but also to shape behavioural changes among ourselves in various forms. It conveys various messages, ranging from agriculture to health and education. Folk dances serve as a catalyst for community participation, group activity, enthusiasm, and encouragement. It is a very popular medium for eradicating myths and misconceptions from society through entertaining and graceful performances by local people. Generally, it encourages and motivates rural people by inculcating education, entertainment, and information. Through these folk dances, all the people of the community gathered in one place, regardless of their social composition or background, which reflects unity in diversity. Traditionally, folk dances are used for entertainment purposes only, but nowadays these are used for the dissemination of development communication as these are the most effective medium among remote masses. As these folk media are now popular, the Government is also using them to observe social and behavioural changes among rural communities.

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