



Dhanuyatra of Bargarh : World's Biggest Open-Air-Theatre

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Dhanuyatra of Bargarh, world's biggest open-air theatre, is unique in many respects. It is a theatre having the biggest assembly of actors that a play can ever have, with almost the entire population of Bargarh, a small town of Orissa state and its near by villages making the cast. It is a cultural extravaganza where the same mythological play is enacted year after year but neither the audience nor the actors seem to get tired. In fact, it is a conglomeration of several open-air theatres, with the action taking place simultaneously at different stages and both actors, audiences moving from place according to the requirement of a particular scene. There is nothing new in the play but the uniqueness lies in the way it is enacted and the willing participation of the public en masse including government servants, politicians, businessmen and spectators.

The play comprises three mythological episodes i.e. 'Krishna Leela', Mathura Bijaya' and 'Kansa Badha'. The age-old story of Lord Krishna killing the tyrannical King Kansa of Mathura forms the central theme of the play. King Kansa the maternal uncle of Lord Krishna, invites Krishna and Balaram to witness and participate in the festivity of Dhanuyatra, which is held in his capital

Mathura. But Lord Krishna could surmise the evil design of assassination behind the invitation and kills tyrant Kansa freeing his subjects from perpetual oppression. The play ends with the death of King Kansa. It is believed that, Dhanuyatra in its present form has started in 1948 as the aftermath of independence as a performance charged with nationalistic fervour. Kansa, the demon king, symbolises the imperialist

British government on its way out and Lord Krishna stands for the nationalistic aspiration of the people.



During Dhanuyatra, for eleven days Bargarh town is virtually transformed into Mathuranagar, the

capital of King Kansa while the nearby Ambapalli village across the river Jeera becomes Gopapura, the abode of Lord Krishna. Jeera flowing between the above two places stands for river Yamuna. The vehicular traffic stands suspended inside Bargarh town for the entire period of yatra. Public utility services like water, supply, electricity, education and health services are absolutely in top gear. The total administration of the town and the people are taken over by King Kansa. Everyone in the town irrespective of caste, creed and profession becomes subject of King Kansa and abides by his will. Inside the town one can



move freely but on foot and only Kansa moves on a well decorated elephant. The entire town becomes an open air stage being decorated beautifully to give a feeling of Mathurapura. King Kansa becomes the centre of attraction and he prevails throughout the yatra. Play goes on in the form of Kansa's visit to different parts of the town for a few hours in the morning and the 'darbar' (Ranga-Sabha) sits for six to eight hours every evening. King Kansa during his visit to different places, if detects anything wrong then the person concerned is produced before him immediately and fined. If the offender dares to argue the fine doubles. Fine is collected on a proper receipt and deposited to a public fund. Normally the political big bosses and local dadas are prone to King Kansa's fine. Anybody is free to raise any question relating to public interest issues in Kansa 'darbar'. The most interesting and amazing aspect is that everybody including police, magistracy, engineers and public at large co-operate with the event for the common cause. That's why King Kansa is piloted and escorted by his royal police (government police) during his visit to different areas of the town every morning on the elephant top. Kansa darbar hall is erected at a height of 8 to 10 feet from the ground level at Dhanuyatra field of Bargarh town. This well decorated darbar hall suitably places microphones and colourful lights for the benefit of the people. Some chairs are also arranged on the ground for Kansa's Officers (govt. officers).

At Ambapalli, Lord Krishna is the focus of everybody's attention. The play starts with his birth in prison, meanders through his childhood and adolescent mischiefs. It reaches its climax when he emerges in a beautifully decorated chariot from across river Jeera to embark on his final expedition to Mathura to kill King Kansa. Verses from 'Mathura Mangala' are engraved on every wall of Ambapalli, which becomes the mythical Gopapura during the yatra.

This festival offers an occasion for the display of glorious cultural traditions of the area. The play carries distinctive Orissan folk music and dramatic traditions like, "Champu and Chhanda". In early days actors were using "amitrakshara chhanda" in their impromptu dialogues and verses from 'Mathura Mangala'. Besides, Dhanuyatra provides a platform to cultural troupes from other parts of the state as well as neighbouring states to display their talent to a culturally sensitive audience. It also showcases the 'Sanchara' dance, an immensely popular dance from locally called "Gahak Bahak".

People from far and near come to Bargarh to view this most popular festival. The popularity of this festival is evident from the fact that by the invasion of satellite television Dhanuyatra is still celebrated in Bargarh with much pomp and enthusiasm year after year. Every household in the town overflows with guests. This also provides rare opportunity to the traders and business communities in and around to sale their products. Traders and businessmen from Raipur, Nagpur even from Mumbai, Delhi come to Bargarh during Dhanuyatra. Men, women and children dressed in their best of clothes roam about adding lustre and gaiety to the festival. Temporary amusement parks, music concerts, medical camps, food counters etc. are organised in Bargarh town during this period. People of different religion including Sikh, Muslims, Christians, Jains and Buddhists enjoy this world famous festival which has perhaps the largest possible cast of actors and actresses enacting on the Dhanuyatra area (stage) spreading upto 10 kms. The festive atmosphere engulfs the entire town for complete eleven days and people eagerly wait to see the arrival of King Kansa on his elephant and Lord Krishna on his horse driven chariot forgetting the distinction of their caste, creed, class, colour thus fostering the spirit of love and universal brotherhood.

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