

Banibutal (Leela Danda): Tradition and Performance in Western Odisha

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Abstract

Banibutal, also known as **Leela Danda**, is a traditional folk theatre form of Western Odisha. It is performed within the broader cultural setting of Danda Nata and is mainly based on the love story of **Radha and Krishna**. The performance combines dance, music, songs, dialogue, acting, humour, and traditional stage practices. It is found mainly in parts of **Sambalpur, Bargarh, Sundergad**, and neighbouring areas of Western Odisha.

The central character of **Banibutal** is **Bani**, the sister-in-law of **Radha**. Although **Duti** acts as a messenger between **Radha and Krishna**, it is Bani who finally helps them meet. Therefore, her role is central to the development of the story. The performance also includes characters such as **Radha, Krishna, Chandrasena, Kutila** and **Duti**. Through these characters, the performance presents *love, humour, social relationships and human emotions*.

This article examines the **story, characters, performance style and relationship of Banibutal with Danda Nata**. It also discusses the similarities and differences between the two traditions, particularly in relation to *folk dance, music, acting, stage presentation, religious practices and social purpose*. While Danda Nata has a strong religious and ritual character, Banibutal gives greater importance to entertainment and dramatic presentation. The study argues that **Banibutal** or **Leela Danda** is an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of Western Odisha. However, changing social conditions and the decline of traditional performance practices create challenges for its continuity. Proper documentation, research, transmission of traditional knowledge, and participation of younger generations are therefore necessary for its preservation and future development.

Keywords: Banibutal, Leela Danda, Danda Nata, Folk Theatre, Western Odisha, Radha-Krushna, Bani, Kutila.

Introduction

In the Danda Nata tradition of Western Odisha, the **sixteen Suanga performances** hold a special place. Under the influence of Danda Nata, a **Shrungara rasa-based folk theatre** called **Banibutal** or **Leela Danda** or **Thetel** is performed. It has gained considerable popularity among the people. However, excessive use of erotic elements may sometimes be considered inappropriate. The love play of **Radha and Krushna** is the main theme of this folk theatre. It is also an ancient and rich theatrical tradition. It is mainly performed in areas such as **Balangir, Subarnapur, Sambalpur, Sundargad, Bargarh** and other parts of Western Odisha.

The main characters of this performance are **Radha**, **Krishna**, **Duti**, **Chandrasena** and **Bani**, who is Radha's sister-in-law. Among them, **Bani** is the central character. Although Duti, the female messenger, acts as a link between Radha and Krishna, their actual union is made possible by Bani. Therefore, Bani's role appears more important than that of Duti. Bani remains present throughout the performance, from the beginning to the end, and gets the opportunity to perform continuously.

Apart from **Radha**, **Krishna**, **Bani**, **Duti** and **Chandrasena** appear in the performance. Compared to Danda Nata, the subject matter of Banibutal is limited and specific. The main purpose of this **folk theatre/ Folk dance drama** is to show the role of **Bani in bringing Radha and Krishna together**. The task which **Duti** fails to complete is successfully completed by **Bani**. In Banibutal or leela danda **Bani** the central character known as with different name as **Banibutal**, **Kutila** (as per Achyutananda Das's Gopala Oagala), **Tillotama** (Haribansha) and **Sukumari**.



"Kutila" means *not straightforward, crooked, clever, cunning, or deceitful*. Therefore, because of these characteristics reflected in Bani's character, she is known as **Kutila**. The main reason why **Bani** is referred to as **Kutila** is, her *character traits and dramatic role*. Here, the term **"Kutila"** refers not merely to her name but to her **clever, suspicious and strategically calculated behaviour**.

There is an interesting explanation rooted in local folk tradition as to why **Chandrasena's sister is referred to as "Bani" or "Banibutal."** Here, the word **"Butal"** is popularly understood as being derived from the English word **"bottle,"** and **"Banibutal"** is consequently interpreted as **"broken bottle."** This naming can be understood as, the character of **Bani**, the sister of **Chandrasena**, is presented as a distinctive and unconventional character. It is said that the word **"Butal"** was added to **"Bani,"** giving rise to the name **"Banibutal."** The term is interpreted as meaning **"broken bottle."** In Western Odisha. The metaphor of a **"broken bottle"** is popularly associated with the character's *unusual, unconventional and comic presentation*.

Story of Banibutal

The story of **Banibutal** can be briefly described as follows. Radha's husband, **Chandrasena**, goes out of the house to graze cows. At home, **Radha** stays with her mother-in-law **Jatila** and sister-in-law **Bani**. Radha looks for an opportunity to meet Krishna. **Jatila** is an old woman and has poor hearing and eyesight. Krishna's meeting with Radha takes place in a banana garden. Suddenly, **Bani**, Radha's sister-in-law, meets Krishna there. Since Bani does not know Krishna and cannot recognize him, she becomes frightened and thinks that he is a thief. She calls Radha loudly.

After all his efforts to meet Radha fail, Krishna finally takes the help of his enchanting flute. As soon as Radha hears the sound of the flute, she forgets social restrictions, family honour and social responsibilities and becomes deeply attracted to Krishna. She cleverly makes a false complaint about Krishna and manages to convince her mother-in-law.

However, Radha's cleverness is noticed by Bani. She understands the real reason behind Radha's false complaint. She also knows about the personal problem of her brother Chandrasena. Therefore, without the knowledge of her brother and mother, she takes Radha to Krishna and helps them meet. Finally, the union of Radha and Krishna takes place.

The meeting between Radha and Krishna, which could not be achieved with the help of Duti, is successfully arranged by Bani through her intelligence and cleverness. Therefore, the performance is called **Banibutal** and the name is appropriate because **Bani** plays the most important role in bringing Radha and Krishna together.

Similarities and Differences between Banibutal and Danda Nata

Banibutal and Danda Nata have similarities in several aspects. In particular, similarities can be seen in *dance, acting techniques, performance style* and *stage presentation*. However, there are also some differences in their form and purpose.

In Danda Nata, religious discipline, rules and rituals are strictly followed. On the other hand, the main purpose of Banibutal is entertainment. It contains elements of *Shrungara* and in some places, certain elements that may be considered vulgar. Danda Nata is performed during a particular religious period, whereas Banibutal can be presented at different times according to local practice.

The beautiful combination of *dance, song, music* and *acting* is an important feature of Banibutal. Therefore, Banibutal or Leela Danda can be regarded as an important **folk theatre tradition of Western Odisha**. It reflects the artistic creativity, social life and traditional performance culture of the region and deserves proper documentation and preservation for future generations.

Acting and Performance Style in Banibutal

In the **Leela danda** tradition, **Banibutal** or **Kutila** is an important central character. In different scenes and songs, Bani is addressed by names such as *Sukumari, Lilabati, Tilotama, Trijata, Shiratula, Malmali* and *Shurunani*. Other important characters include **Radha, Krishna, Duti**, and **Chandraseṇa**. The **Dhulia (drummer)**, locally known as Dhulia Mamu, also plays an important role.

The performance mainly uses **Dhulia and Mardalia** for instrumental music. In some places, two artists play these instruments, while in others, one artist plays both. Other supporting characters also join the performance according to the story. A special feature of Banibutal is the *direct interaction between the performers and the audience*. Sometimes, the audience also takes part in the performance. Banibutal is a combination of *music, dance, acting* and *dialogue*. Although music has a major role, acting, dialogue, and humorous presentation make the performance lively and attractive. **Shrungara (love)** and **Hasya (humour)** are the main rasas seen in its performance.



Thus, Banibutal is not merely a dramatic story. It is a valuable **folk theatre tradition of Western Odisha**, combining songs, instruments, dance, acting, dialogue, and emotional expression.

Story and Character of Bani in Banibutal

The main story of the folk play **Banibutal** is based on the love and meeting of **Radha** and **Krishna**. **Bani** creates obstacles in their meeting by stopping the messages sent by Krishna through the messenger. These incidents make the play humorous and entertaining.

Kutila or Bani is usually presented as **Jatila's daughter**, and therefore Radha's sister-in-law. She is suspicious of **Radha** and **Krishna's** relationship and tries to discover or expose their meetings. Her character provides **comic** and **dramatic elements** to the performance. Through her **dialogue, gestures, expressions** and **acting**, she creates situations that intensify the dramatic conflict. She often represents the **social restrictions** and **opposition** surrounding Radha and Krishna's relationship. Her scenes can also provide opportunities for **humour, satire** and **lively interaction** with other characters. In the overall structure of Leela Danda, Kutila or Bani helps connect the **Shrungara (love)** aspect with **Hasya (comic)** and sometimes **Virodha/anger** and **conflict**.

Bani is presented as Radha's sister-in-law and the younger sister of Chandrasena, known as **Sukumari**. She is playful, clever, humorous and mischievous. She is also shown as a bold and unmarried woman. Her character combines humour, wit and satire. When Bani enters the stage, she first offers prayers to her deity. Then she introduces herself and describes her family and birth. Through this introduction, the audience learns about her character and role in the play.

Bani often makes fun of men through satirical songs. She speaks warmly with women in the audience, addressing them as **Bhauja, Bada Ma, Khudi, Maus, Aai**, etc. With male spectators, she creates humour through feminine gestures, jokes and witty dialogues. Her relationship with her elder brother **Chandrasena** is full of love, teasing and arguments. She asks him to bring things like **anklets, alta, perfume** and **Sambalpuri sarees**. She also asks him to arrange her marriage. Her playful behaviour makes their relationship entertaining.

Bani obeys Chandrasena and stays close to Radha. She tries to prevent Radha and Krishna from meeting. Her arguments with Krishna's messenger and her humorous insults towards Krishna create much comedy in the play.

Dhulia Mamu is Bani's close companion. Bani shares her feelings and problems with him. Together, they also perform a humorous scene of searching for Bani's missing husband among the audience. She sometimes points to a young man and jokingly claims that he is her husband. This direct interaction between actors and spectators is an important feature of Banibutal. Bani also guides Dhulia Mama about the use of musical instruments, rhythm and beats according to different situations. Thus, **song, music, rhythm, dialogue** and **acting** work together to make her character lively and attractive.

In Banibutal, every major character Chandrasena, Radha, Krishna and the messenger Duti, introduces themselves through songs. They describe their birth, identity and role in the story, based on mythology or local legends.

Banibutal: Folk theatre tradition and religious awareness

Banibutal is a popular folk play enjoyed by people of all ages in rural areas. The performance of the Bani character is especially attractive. The actor presents the character so naturally that the audience often accepts Bani as a real woman.

Folk theatre has a close connection with **religion, social life** and **folk beliefs**. Religious practices and rituals have influenced the origin and development of folk theatre. Thus, religious awareness is an important foundation of folk theatre. Folk theatre also reflects **social customs, beliefs** and **cultural life**. It provides entertainment while preserving social and cultural awareness. Even with the popularity of modern theatre, folk theatre continues to have a strong place in people's minds.

The play has different names in different areas. In **Sambalpur, Bargarh and Sonepur**, it is known as **Banibutal**, while in **Balangir and Kalahandi**, it is also called **Thetel**. Though the name and performance style may differ, the basic theatrical tradition remains similar. Even today, Banibutal survives in the villages and towns of Western Odisha. However, modern stage techniques, cinema, modern music and instruments are gradually changing its traditional style. Therefore, preserving its original form, folk memory and cultural identity is very important today.

Costumes and Makeup in Banibutal

In Leela danda, each character has a different costume and makeup according to the role. The main characters are **Krushna, Radha, Kutila, Dutika, Chandrasena and Dhulia Mamu**.

Krishna's Costume



Krishna wears a **yellow dhoti (Pitambar)** with a colourful waist cloth and a shoulder cloth. His most important costume item is the **crown with peacock feathers and flowers**.

He also wears traditional ornaments such as necklaces, armlets, bracelets, earrings and anklets.

A **flute** is always kept in his hand. For makeup, his face is given a light **blue** or **dark complexion**. **Sandalwood** and **vermilion** marks are applied to the forehead, while kajal and red colour are used to highlight the eyes and lips.

Radha's Costume

Radha is one of the most important characters. Male actors traditionally perform the female roles, so special attention is given to Radha's costume and makeup. Radha mainly wears a **traditional silk saree**, usually with a matching blouse and veil. Her hair is arranged in a bun or braid and decorated with flowers.

Her face is given a light makeup base, with **sandalwood, vermilion, kajal** and **red lip colour**. Small decorative marks are also made on the forehead.

She wears traditional ornaments such as **Mathamani, nose ring, necklaces, earrings, bangles, armlets, rings** and anklets. Alta is applied to her hands and feet. Sometimes she carries a colourful handkerchief or artificial lotus.

Thus, Radha's traditional costume represents **beauty, purity, grace** and **devotion**, while Krishna's costume reflects his **divine** and **charming** personality.



Bani's Costume



Chandrasena's Costume



Dutika's Costume



Bani is an attractive character in Leela danda. Her costume reflects her strong, strict and somewhat clever nature. A **male actor** plays this female role.

She wears a traditional **Odia saree** and **blouse**, usually a shiny saree. Her face is given light makeup with a large **sindoor mark**, **sandalwood design**, **kajal** and **red lip colour**.

She wears a **hair bun decorated with flowers**, **earrings**, **nose ornaments**, **necklaces**, **bangles** and **armlets**. Brass anklets are worn for dance.

She often carries a **handkerchief or stick**. Her energetic movements with the sound of the **dhhol** and **mahuri** make her performance attractive.

Chandrasena is an important character and represents Radha's social husband. His simple costume shows him as an ordinary **cowherd** and **village man**, unlike Krishna's divine appearance. He wears a **cotton or silk dhoti**, a colourful upper cloth or **gamchha**, and sometimes a waist cloth. He also wears a **turban**, showing his position as a respected village elder.

His makeup is simple, with a light face colour, **large moustache** and a **sandalwood or vermilion mark** on the forehead. He wears **earrings**, **necklaces**, **armlets** and **thick bracelets**. Like other Danda performers, he wears heavy **brass anklets**. His movements are slower and more serious than Krishna's. He also carries a **stick**, used in his cowherd role.

In Leeladanda, Dutika is a clever messenger between Radha and Krishna.

A **male actor** plays this female role. She wears a colourful **silk** or **traditional saree**, blouse and a waist cloth called **Nibi bandha**.

Her makeup includes light face colour, **kajal**, a **large forehead mark**, **sandalwood designs** and **alta** on the hands and feet. She wears traditional ornaments such as **necklaces**, **armlets**, **bangles** and **earrings**. A false braid or bun decorated with flowers completes her look.

Dhulia Mamu's Costume

Dhulia Mama is one of the most important characters. His **drum beats guide the dance and performance**.

He usually wears a short **dhoti**, sometimes with a vest, jacket or kurta. A **turban** is worn on the head. His makeup includes a large **sandalwood or vermilion mark** and **kajal**.

He wears **anklets, Tulasi or Rudraksha beads** and carries a decorated **dhol**. He is not only a drummer but also an important performer and guide of the Suanga.

His energetic acting, movement and drum playing keep the audience engaged.

Present Status

Leela Danda, also known in some areas as **Banibutal or Thetel**, occupies an important position in the traditional folk-theatre heritage of Western Odisha. Emerging as the concluding theatrical component of the wider Danda Nata/Suanga tradition, it represents a distinctive synthesis of **folk dance, music, dramatic dialogue, folk poetry, acting, costume and devotional expression**. Unlike the predominantly Shaiva orientation of the traditional Danda performances, Leela Danda is primarily associated with the **Vaishnavite tradition of Radha and Krishna**. The central theme of divine love provides the performance with a strong foundation of Srungar rasa, while comic and supporting characters contribute to its entertainment value.



However, the **present condition of Leela Danda/Banibutal is a matter of concern**. Earlier studies have pointed to the declining popularity and weakening continuity of the tradition, particularly because of changing social conditions, modern entertainment media, reduced community participation and the difficulty of maintaining the traditional performance system. One study has specifically described Leela Danda as a tradition that has struggled to sustain itself because of its close dependence on established religious structures and its limited adaptation to changing circumstances. Contemporary accounts also indicate that Banibutal is among the traditional folk forms that are gradually fading from regular public cultural life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Leela Danda or Banibutal is more than an entertainment-oriented folk performance; it is a **repository of the cultural memory, devotional imagination, artistic creativity and social identity of Western Odisha**. Its distinctive combination of Radha-Krishna narratives, folk music, dance, dramatic performance and humour makes it an important component of the region's intangible cultural heritage. The challenge before the present generation is not merely to preserve it as a historical specimen, but to **revitalise it as a living tradition** while maintaining its traditional identity. A coordinated effort by artists, communities, scholars, cultural institutions and government agencies can ensure that the unique heritage of **Leela Danda/Banibutal** continues to reach future generations.

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