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# Tradition and Transformation: Contemporary Challenges of Prahllad Nataka

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## ABSTRACT

*Prahllad Nataka is a prominent devotional theatre tradition of southern Odisha, particularly concentrated in the undivided Ganjam district and adjoining regions of Andhra Pradesh. While its literary evolution reflects royal patronage and regional adaptation, the continuity and institutional consolidation of the form have been primarily sustained through the guru–shishya parampara (teacher–disciple tradition). This study examines how decentralized pedagogical networks of Gurus transformed Prahllad Nataka from a localized devotional performance into a structured regional theatre tradition. Drawing upon historical accounts, oral narratives, and field-based documentation of Guru lineages, the paper analyzes the processes of revival, reform, and standardization initiated during the early twentieth century. Particular attention is given to the role of reformers who systematized rāga–tāla patterns, regulated performance duration, refined costume codes, and preserved ritual discipline. The Guru in Prahllad Nataka functions not merely as an instructor but as director, composer, ritual custodian, and community leader, thereby embodying a multidimensional cultural authority. The study argues that the survival of Prahllad Nataka in the face of modernization, economic precarity, and institutional neglect is largely attributable to its embedded guru-centric transmission model. By foregrounding lineage as a living institution, the article highlights the significance of ritual pedagogy and community-based knowledge systems in sustaining traditional theatre forms in contemporary South Asia.*

**Keywords:** Devotional Theatre Tradition, Guru–Shishya Parampara, Rga, Tala, Narasimha Mask, Court Centered Theatrical System.

## INTRODUCTION

Prahllad Nataka is one of the most prominent devotional folk theatre traditions of southern Odisha, particularly flourishing in the undivided Ganjam district and adjoining border regions of Andhra Pradesh. Rooted in Vaishnavite mythology and centered on the legend of Prahlada and Narasimha, the form has evolved through a long process of literary adaptation, royal patronage, and community participation. While its textual and musical structures reflect classical influences, its survival across generations has largely depended upon the guru–shishya parampara (teacher–disciple tradition).

Unlike court-centred theatrical systems, Prahllad Nataka developed as a decentralized, community-based ritual theatre sustained by village Gurus who functioned simultaneously as directors, music composers, trainers, costume designers, and custodians of sacred performance codes. Through oral transmission, rigorous rehearsal practices, and ritual discipline, these Gurus institutionalized the form beyond royal patronage and embedded it deeply within rural cultural life. The present study examines the role of the guru–shishya system in shaping, standardizing, and sustaining Prahllad Nataka as a structured regional theatre tradition.

### Gurussihya tradition of Prahllad Nataka

The literary development of *Prahllad Nataka* reflects a long process of regional adaptation and royal patronage across the border areas of present-day Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Several poets, kings, and scholars contributed to its textual evolution. The major writers associated with the tradition are:

- i. **Ramakrushna Chotaray** – Jalantara, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh
- ii. **Raja Ramachandra Surdeo** – Tarala, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh
- iii. **Raja Padmanabha Narayan Dev** – Paralakhemundi, Gajapati, Odisha
- iv. **Kishore Chandra Jagadev** and **Harichandan Jagadev** – Surangi, Patrapur, Ganjam, Odisha
- v. **Madanamohan Shinghdeo** – Dharakote, Ganjam, Odisha
- vi. **Biswabihari Khadenga** – Sadashivpur, Balipadar, Buguda, Ganjam, Odisha

Among them, Ramakrushna Chotaray is regarded as one of the earliest and most influential contributors to the textual foundation of *Prahllad Nataka*. Later royal authors enriched the language, poetic structure, and dramatic presentation according to their literary proficiency and regional taste.

### Reformers of Prahllad Nataka

According to traditional accounts, during an early performance of *Prahllad Nataka*, the younger brother of Ramakrushna Chotaray was tragically killed. Following this incident, the performance tradition was discontinued for a considerable period.

After a long gap, the Das brothers of Ichapuram in Andhra Pradesh requested Ramakrushna Chotaray to hand over the script for practice and performance. He entrusted the manuscript to the late **Giribar Das**, who, along with his brothers, revived and systematized the performance tradition. From Ichapuram, the form gradually spread to the border regions of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh.

During the first half of the twentieth century, *Prahlad Nataka* attracted the patronage of the kings of undivided Ganjam. Inspired by its devotional and theatrical appeal, several rulers composed their own versions, refining the literary language and dramaturgical structure. Notable among them were Raja Padmanabha Narayan Dev, Kishore Chandra Jagadev, Harichandan Jagadev, and Madanamohan Shinghdeo.

Simultaneously, several Gurus introduced significant reforms in literature, music, performance techniques, costume design, make-up, and stage arrangement. The prominent Gurus of the early reformative phase include:

- i. **Giribar Das** – Ichapuram, Andhra Pradesh
- ii. **Khiramani Das** – Ichapuram, Andhra Pradesh
- iii. **Damburu Das** – Ichapuram, Andhra Pradesh
- iv. **Iswar Pradhan** – Jhakamaka Palli, Digapahandi, Ganjam, Odisha
- v. **Arjuna Badatya** – Padmapur, Sheragada, Ganjam, Odisha
- vi. **Kanhu Charan Dora** – Padmapur, Sheragada, Ganjam, Odisha
- vii. **Ghanadshyam Badatya** – Nalabanta, Aska, Ganjam, Odisha

These reformers played a crucial role in institutionalizing the performance tradition. They standardized musical patterns, refined costume codes, regulated performance duration, and expanded the theatrical network across villages. Their contributions transformed *Prahlad Nataka* from a localized devotional play into a structured regional theatre tradition.

#### **Gurus of Prahlad Nataka**

The survival and continuity of *Prahlad Nataka* across generations have been largely sustained by an extensive lineage of Gurus. These Gurus not only preserved the textual and musical tradition but also transmitted performance techniques, costume practices, ritual discipline, and stage conventions through the *guru–shishya parampara* (teacher–disciple tradition).

The majority of these Gurus belong to different villages of Ganjam district, particularly in the regions of Sheragada, Digapahandi, Patrapur, Sanakhemundi, Bhanjanagar, Kukudakhandi, Aska, and Belaguntha. Their collective contribution institutionalized *Prahlad Nataka* as a regional devotional theatre tradition in southern Odisha.

Below is the consolidated list of Gurus along with their respective places:

#### **Sheragada Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Late Laxman Satpathy – Karadakana
- ii. Lalmohan Satpathy – Karadakana
- iii. Binayak Muni – Karadakana
- iv. Santosh Kumar Rana – Dhabalapur
- v. Dukhishyam Swain – Hugulapata
- vi. Late Arjuna Panigrahi – Sunathara
- vii. Kandha Dora – Padmapur
- viii. Nanda Pradhan – Padmapur
- ix. Kandha Pradhan – Padmapur
- x. Nilachala Pradhan – Padmapur
- xi. Kanhu Charan Shibal – Padmapur
- xii. Nanda Kishore Shibal – Padmapur

#### **Digapahandi Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Late Trinath Pradhan – Bomakei
- ii. Simanchal Patra – Bomakei
- iii. Anchal Pradhan – Bomakei
- iv. Khali Parida – Padmanabhpur
- v. Bharata Boxi – Bhisimagiri
- vi. Arjuna Jena – Bhisimagiri
- vii. Arjuna Badatya – Bhisimagiri
- viii. Bhima Gauda – Dekhali
- ix. Gobinda Patra – Sidheswar
- x. Krushna Maharana – Sidheswar
- xi. R. Ganga Dora – Sundhipalli
- xii. Brundaban Patra – Sundhipalli
- xiii. Brundaban Jena – Sundhipalli
- xiv. Arjuna Panigrahi – Tentiapada
- xv. Sedu Panigrahi – Tentiapada
- xvi. Iswar Pradhan – Janameripalli
- xvii. Anant Mishra – Talasingi
- xviii. Kuna Sahu – Dauni
- xix. Nilachal Pradhan – Kaithada
- xx. Golak Pradhan – Mundapota
- xxi. Gokulananda Pradhan – Mundapota

#### **Patrapur Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Kashinath Sahu – Tikarpada
- ii. Bipracharan Pradhan – Kharanipada

- iii. Danardana Pradhan – Kharanipada
- iv. Prafulla Sethi – Gopinathpur
- v. Rabindra Gauda – Patrapur

#### **Sanakhemundi Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Rankanidhi Sahu – Erendra
- ii. Ranka Pradhan – Erendra
- iii. Bipracharan Pradhan – Chanameri

#### **Kukudakhandi Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Saheb Bishoyi – Baulajholi
- ii. Saheba Jena – Baulajholi
- iii. Sarathi Rana – Baulajholi

#### **Bhanjanagar Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Ramachandra Badatya – Khukundia
- ii. Gokula Badatya – Khukundia
- iii. Baidyanath Pradhan – Khukundia
- iv. Krushna Sahu – Nuagada

#### **Dharakote Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Sunu Maharana – Jagamohan
- ii. Nityananda Patri – Dharakote

#### **Aska Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Ghanashyam Badatya – Nalabanta
- ii. Pratap Bhuyan – Jharapari

#### **Belanguntha Region (Ganjam)**

- i. Maheswar Rana – Palaksandha
- ii. Bijay Rana – Palaksandha
- iii. Pila Laxman – Palaksandha

#### **Other Areas of Ganjam**

- i. Sajiba Patra – Sahashapur
- ii. Rajendra Reddy – Sahashapur
- iii. Dasarathi Reddy – GadaGovindapur
- iv. Dandashi Sauntia – GadaGovindpur
- v. Bijaya Sahu – GadaGovindpur
- vi. Golaka Gauda – Sankuru, Buguda
- vii. Banamali Behera – Ch. Karada
- viii. Bankini Satpathy – Khajuria, Rangeilunda

The wide geographical distribution of these Gurus indicates that *Prahllad Nataka* evolved as a community-based ritual theatre deeply embedded in rural cultural life. Unlike court theatre confined to royal patronage, this form flourished through decentralized pedagogical networks. The Gurus functioned as directors, music composers, trainers, costume supervisors, and ritual custodians simultaneously.

Their role ensured:

- i. Preservation of rāga-tāla structures
- ii. Maintenance of sacred performance codes
- iii. Continuity of the Narasimha mask worship tradition
- iv. Adaptation to changing audience expectations

Thus, the Guru lineage forms the backbone of the living tradition of *Prahllad Nataka*.

#### **Concluding Remarks on Prahllad Nataka**

- i. *Prahllad Nataka* evolved under the strong influence of South Indian devotional theatre traditions, particularly *Bhakta Prahllad Natakam*. In matters of music, costume, and make-up, it bears close resemblance to Therukoothu of Tamil Nadu and Kathakali of Kerala. Its literary compositions employ a notational structure reflecting both the Carnatic (South Indian) and Hindustani (North Indian) musical systems, demonstrating a rare confluence of two classical traditions within a folk theatrical framework.
- ii. The popularity of the version composed by Ramakrushna Chotaray encouraged several rulers and poets to create their own adaptations. Among the prominent contributors were Raja Ramachandra Surdeo of Tarala, Madanamohan Shinghdeo of Dharakote, Kishore Chandra Jagadev of Surangi, and Biswabihari Khadenga. However, over the last four decades, no substantial literary transformation has occurred in the textual structure of the form, indicating a strong adherence to tradition.
- iii. While many folk and traditional theatre forms of Odisha have experienced significant transformations under globalization and postmodern cultural shifts, *Prahllad Nataka* has largely retained its original musical style. The rāga-based singing tradition and conventional instrumentation—Mardala, Harmonium, Turi, Jhanja, Cymbal, and Ramtali—continue unchanged. Modern musical instruments and popular singing styles have not been incorporated, preserving its classical-devotional integrity.
- iv. Traditionally performed over seven nights, the duration was later reduced to three nights and eventually to a single overnight performance (12–15 hours) due to changing audience preferences and modern lifestyle constraints. Despite this temporal compression, the ritualistic structure of evening-to-dawn performance remains intact.
- v. Although women's participation has increased in many folk theatre forms, *Prahllad Nataka* continues to restrict female performers. Attempts to introduce women artists such as the initiative by Guru Bipracharan Pradhan—were unsuccessful.

Senior practitioners argue that the physically demanding, high-pitched singing and vigorous dance movements pose practical challenges. Additionally, concerns regarding dignity, safety, and preservation of traditional values have influenced this restriction. The form strictly prohibits the inclusion of modern film or album songs, thereby maintaining its devotional purity.

- vi. Costume and make-up practices have largely remained unchanged. Though some contemporary materials are occasionally used, the traditional design continues to dominate. Interestingly, modern accessories such as branded black sunglasses (e.g., Ray-Ban or Fastrack) are sometimes adopted to enhance the fierce visual identity of royal characters, indicating selective adaptation without altering the core aesthetic.
- vii. Economically, the livelihood of most artists remains precarious. Only a handful of Gurus and experts earn sufficient remuneration through this art form. Many performers migrate to states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra (Mumbai), Telangana (Hyderabad), or Tamil Nadu (Chennai) in search of employment, reflecting the fragile economic base of the tradition.
- viii. In the past two decades, *Prahllad Nataka* has occasionally been used as a governmental awareness medium addressing social, political, and health issues (e.g., malaria, dengue, AIDS). Some Gurus believe such utilitarian use compromises its devotional dignity and aesthetic sanctity.
- ix. Despite being a major folk theatre form of Odisha with national and international cultural significance, no dedicated institutional framework for systematic training, documentation, or research has been established by either state or central authorities.
- x. No substantial initiatives have been undertaken by governmental or private bodies to revive inactive or “dead” troupes of *Prahllad Nataka*, leading to gradual decline in certain regions.
- xi. Many Gurus are reluctant to encourage the younger generation to adopt this profession due to limited financial security and social recognition. The dominance of film, television, and digital entertainment has overshadowed traditional performers, contributing to declining prestige and reduced youth engagement.
- xii. Nevertheless, the ethical and devotional purity of *Prahllad Nataka* remains intact. There is no scope for nudity or vulgarity within its performance structure. Its disciplined aesthetic continues to attract mature, culturally aware audiences.
- xiii. Like other traditional theatre forms, it continues to struggle for commercial sustainability and broader public appreciation. However, it has expanded beyond Ganjam into neighboring districts such as Gajapati and Rayagada, demonstrating regional resilience.
- xiv. The growth and popularity of the form have contributed to the establishment of numerous Narasimha temples in Ganjam district, often built under the patronage and dedication of Gurus and performers. Thus, the theatre has significantly influenced the religious landscape of the region.
- xv. The global COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted performances due to government-imposed restrictions. This crisis intensified economic hardships for artists, especially landless and economically vulnerable performers, many of whom migrated for survival.
- xvi. *Prahllad Nataka* stands as a unique synthesis of South Indian classical influence and Odishan devotional folk tradition. Despite pressures of modernization, economic instability, and institutional neglect, it continues to preserve its musical discipline, ritual sanctity, and ethical framework. Its survival now depends on systematic documentation, institutional support, financial sustainability, and culturally sensitive modernization strategies.

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