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## Paik akheda the martial arts of Odisha: A historical analysis

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### Abstract

In ancient and medieval times, Orissa passed under the names of Kalinga, Utkal, and Odra Desa. Ancient Kalinga was a powerful state and extends its boundary from the river Ganges to the river Godavari. The history of Kalinga goes by its own significance. The military glory of Kalinga is marked from the time of Ashok (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C) the Mauryan Emperor of Magadha. The martial arts of Odisha, though popularly known as '*paik akheda*' in present days origin from the ancient war skill. It has some literary meaning. The term 'paik' derived from the Sanskrit word '*padatika*' which means foot soldiers. They were recruited from all the classes and castes. The paik enjoyed the cultivated lands, as cash for their military services, which was called Paik *Jagire*, did not pay them. The 'akheda' is a place or club house in the villages of Odisha where they practice all sorts of martial activities in front of their paik Guru (teacher). The paiks of Orissa used sixteen types of weapons. Most important thing is that, at the age twenty they are eligible to join in the army after obtaining necessary training from their Guru. They retired from their military services at the age forty. However, after their retirement, they can work as a watchman at palace, treasury, and fort. Some of them also utilize their service as paik guru and trained young at their village akheda. Further the elder son of the family was bound to join in the army and the younger son look after the cultivation and their family. The single son of the family is not entitled to join in the army. From this we can very well understand the recruitment process of the Kalingan army. There is no doubt these famous martial arts have been derived from ancient war skills and presently exhibited by the paiks and their Guru in different festivals of Odisha. These martial arts are classified into two different parts like martial arts with weapons and without weapons. Sometimes state and district level competitions were organised by the State Government. However, the paiks and paik gurus are trying their level best to retain their traditional martial spirit as a valorous race and for the memories of the bygone days.

**Keywords:** Martial arts, Paik, Paik Guru Akheda, ancient war skill, weapons, war dress

### Introduction

The term "Martial Arts", simply means 'art concerned with the waging of war'. Many of the martial arts we know today stem from ancient war skills <sup>[1]</sup>. Gone are those days when martial arts were given prime importance in the battlefield. With the advance of the modern science war strategy was changed. Each nation has developed their own technology in the field of defense organization. Since, war-far has changed considerably in the last hundred years, these once ancient skills have been transferred into artistic disciplines in the modern program of physical education and sports. Even in modern days, some martial arts of different countries of the world included in the Summer Olympics as a competitive sport. The martial arts training are not just the learning of skilled fighting techniques; there must be disciplined training, a moral philosophy, dedication, a sense of duty and respect <sup>[2]</sup>. Any martial skill which is not beneficial to both exponents and society is not a martial art. A thug may use a martial art technique in a fight, but this does not make him a martial artist: had he been taught true martial arts he would not have been a thug. This shows the importance of martial arts in human living.

### Martial arts of the different Parts of world

The martial arts of different part of the world are termed separately like Barsilat in Malaysia, *Capoiera* in Brazil, *Kali* in Philippines, Taekwondo (modern sports included in the Olympics) in Korea, *Samba* wrestling in Russia, La savate kicking art of France, *Kendo* (with weapons) and *Aikido* (without weapons) in Japan, *Karate* and *Kung fu* in China etc. In India many ancient war skills termed as martial arts are found in different regions with different names.

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These famous martial art are known as Kalaripayat in Kerala, Silambam (staff-play) in Tamil Nadu, Dhal Lakadi in Gujarat, Cheibi gad-ga, Thang-Ta and Sarit-Sarak (armed and unarmed combat) in Manipur, Karrattam (staff play) in Andhra Pradesh and last not the list *Paik Akheda* in Odisha.

### Historical background of martial arts of Odisha

So far as the present state of Odisha is concerned, which was known as *Kalinga*, *Utkal* or *Oddradesa* in ancient and medieval times, it had a glorious traditions in martial arts. By the time of the Mahabharata, Kalinga, Utkal Odra had entered into an Aryan policy as powerful kingdoms. The Mahabharata in Vana Parva <sup>[3]</sup> clearly indicates that the Ganges mouth marked the northern extent of the land of the Kalinga people. By the time of Mahavira and Bhudha the Kalinga-Utkal region on the entire east of India had acquired recognition and fame. The power and greatness of ancient Kalinga is evident from the political relation between Kalinga and Magadha during the Maurya era. When Chandragupta Maurya had almost completed the making of his great empire, the Greek ambassador at his court, Megasthenes <sup>[4]</sup>, observed in curiosity the existence of an independent territory on the border of the Maurya Empire, which he described as the *Gangaridum Calingarum Regia* and marked its eastern limit on the bank of the Ganges. It was Kalinga the Greek sources contained references to the powerful army of Kalinga because of which “that country has never been conquered by the foreign king” and further that the Kalinga land possessed an elephant force which caused fear in the mind of the nation. The famous Kalinga war between Ashok and the people of Kalinga, the war of Kharavela with Satavahan and Magadhan rulers, the historical expeditions of Narasimhadeva-I against the Muslims of Bengal and the far flung conquest of Kapilendradeva etc.; are some of the glaring instances of her great martial achievements. The art, architecture, cultural heritage and military systems of Orissa were unique and distinct in nature. The physical training of the foot soldiers was vigorous and systematic in nature. The ancient dictum “*Kalinga Sahasikah*” <sup>[5]</sup> identifies people of Kalinga as a valorous race full of vitality, chivalry and the spirit of adventure.

The word ‘Paik’ seems to have been derived from the Sanskrit word, *padatika* or foot soldier. The ‘Akheda’ literally means that the closed place or the clubhouse that transforms a person to a paik. It is the institution that creates paiks for extending their services for the smooth administration of the state by the king and also to fight against the enemies obeying the order of the king. The paik learnt all sorts of physical activities and techniques of war from his Guru. The paiks were recruited from all classes and castes; but mostly they rare belonging to chasa or the cultivating caste <sup>[6]</sup>. Occasionally, individuals of the reserved castes such as Panas, Bauris and Kandaras were also recruited. Even more savage inhabitants of the remote hills, called Kandhas, (a particular tribe of Odisha) were enrolled <sup>[7]</sup>. The Brahmins were not encouraged to enlist themselves as foot soldiers. Besides, the thieves, robbers, cheats and such other category of persons were debarred from enlisting themselves in the army. Social status and conditions of the family were taken carefully into account in the enrolment of the soldiers. The permission of the head of the family was generally obtained for recruitment into the army <sup>[8]</sup>. In case there was only one son in the family and in cases of recent marriages, enrolment was not permitted. The elder son of the family was bound to join the military duties of the king and the younger son was supposed to look after the cultivation and family of his house. At the age twenty, they are eligible to

join in the army after obtaining necessary training from their Guru. They retired from their military services at the age forty. However, after their retirement, they can work as a watchman at palace, treasury, and fort. Some of them also utilize their service as paik guru and trained young at their village akheda. For their Military services, the paiks were not paid in cash. They were given rent free service lands which they cultivated with their own hands in times of peace and subject to the military and police duties whenever called upon by their chiefs. The Paiks enjoying their agricultural lands on hereditary basis <sup>[9]</sup>. Those non- serving Paiks constituted more or less the standing militia which could be mobilised at a short notice by the chiefs. Only a message was required to be passed to them and the machinery of mobilisation moved a pace placing at the disposal of the king, the requisite number of men as the occasion demanded.

### Classification of paik and their rank

In a war, a number of types of soldiers and officials of the higher ranks are found. This shows that the efficiency of a soldier was taken into account to place him in the rank, suitable for his physical strength and ability <sup>[10]</sup>. The Paiks were divided into three ranks and were distinguished by the names taken from their occupation or the weapons, which they used. They were called Paharis, Banuas and dhenkiyas. The *Paharis* carry a large shield made of woods covered with hides and strengthened with knobs and circles of iron, and the long straight national sword of Orissa, called the *Khanda* (sword). They are stationed chiefly as guards. The *Banuas* use the Matchlock principally and have besides a small shield and sword. It was their duty to take the field, principally and so on distant expeditions. The *Dhenkiyas* were filed principally and so on distant expeditious. The *Dhenkiyas* were armed with bows and arrows, and a sword. They were supposed to perform all sorts of duties.

Madalapanji <sup>[11]</sup>, the temple chronicle of Odisha, mentions three types of infantry soldiers. They were namely, *Itikars* (lance bearer), *Dhanuki* (archer) and *Phadikares* (sword man). The *Itikars* and *Dhanuki* were able to fight successfully in the hilly areas and from a distant place, they could repulse enemy attack. The infantry soldiers in Odisha were generally classified into four major divisions under different commanders like *Bahinipati*, *Paikaray* (commanders of infantry divisions), *Dalabehera* (officer commanding detachments) *Nayaks*, *Gadanayak* (garrison commandants) and *Bahubalendra* (officer in- charge of non-combatants). There were further Sub- divisions of Paik soldiers of Orissa mainly forced the infantry regiments of the latter rulers.

Information is also available regarding the number forming an infantry corps. Twenty-seven Paiks were to form a ‘Dala’ or detachment. Seventy Dalas constituted a *Bhiana* comprised of (70 X 27) one thousand eight hundred and ninety Paiks. All these Paiks were placed under one *Dalabehera* who acted as the commander of the Division. It was followed by one *Vaidya* or a doctor for five *Bhianas* or one hundred and twenty five Paiks and on a bullock-cart for Seven *Bhianas* or one hundred and seventy five paiks. In each *Bhiana*, again, there were six cooks and twelve servants in addition to *Dagaras* (messengers) and *Badyakaras* or the Musicians. The king issues order to when the battle would be fought. News spread throughout the whole kingdom very quickly. The very fact that an auspicious day has to be found out to take a start was very much important. The right time was chosen for this purpose, suggests that considerable importance was attached to the military manoeuvres. In the method they adopted for the

summoning the army, we have a further proof of the same sentiment <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **Musical equipments used by paiks and their bravery sacrifice in the war**

The Paiks marched to the battlefield to the beat of the drum and other Musical instruments like Bheri, Singha, Turi, Dholki, Changu, Dhupa, Khudua, Jhanja etc. and the practice of singing songs during the marching of the soldiers was very popular. It not only heightened the importance and grandeur by providing immense inspiration to the pains. Efforts were also made to keep up their spirits. The performance of Bhopas, Gayas, Bahalias, Kimbi rias, and Kathias (they were the subordinate staffs of the infantry soldiers who encourages at the time of war) was a part and parcel of the battle procession <sup>[13]</sup> to provide entertainment for the Paiks, dance and feats were performed. Speeches were also delivered with a view to infuse patriotic feelings into their heart and enthusing them to fight against the enemy with courage, vigour and zeal. The king also encouraged his troops with heroic addresses and exhortations. The mainly stirring address of one subordinate Raja during this period to his courtiers, who advised him to make a retreat, is really superb and is worthy of mention in any literature.

The rule, generally observed in this regard, was as follows: -

“As to open fight, a virtuous king should call his army together and specifying the place and the time of the battle addresses thus:” I am a paid servant like yourself; the country is to be enjoyed together with you”, you have to strike the enemy specified by me”. His ministry and priests should encourage the army by saying thus: It is declared in the Vedas that the goal which is reached by sacrifice, in which the priests have been duly paid for, is the very goal which brave men are destined to attain <sup>[14]</sup>.

The ideal of courting death in the open field was set before the soldiers. The Paiks regard death in the battlefield to be honored by them as they were recruited for the service of the nation.

At this stage the motto of every Paik is found as.

“We do not mind for death; there are many others, it's better to die on the battlefield rather than to accept defeat and be cursed forever <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **Weapons used by the Paiks**

The weapons used by the Paiks were numerous. Bows and arrows were frequently used. Other weapons like khadga, bjara, barchha which were used during the *Puranic* days were in vogue. Besides, various other types of weapons were used by the Paiks in the battlefield. The deadly weapons like Havalina, the reference to which is found in Sanskrit works were used by them; the paiks were known the use of guns and muskets <sup>[16]</sup>.

The Paiks were equipped with the weapons like *nail*, thunka, baruda kumpa, jhuli kata, sagadin ali, olata dhara khanda, khapur, *dhal*, kanda, katari, bank achuri, katidhal, katimala, rudhi. and dhanu <sup>[17]</sup>.

### **War costumes used by paiks**

Paiks who were the greatest warriors used a special kind of dress in the battlefield. This was mainly designed to ensure their safety and security. Uniform wardress was insisted upon. It consisted of a cap and vest made of the skin of a tiger or leopard, a sort of chain armour for the body and the thigh and a girdle formed by the tail of some wild animal. Besides, by the terror inspired by these unusual habits, they further

brightened the ferocity of their countenances with vermilion, thus exhibiting altogether as savage and fantastic an air as one could well conceive <sup>[18]</sup>.

*Paik Kheda* (military literature), on the other hand, furnishes us with a list of sixteen military costumes of infantry soldier of the Medieval Orissa. They are *ghantimala*, *ghagudi*, *olamala*, *ganthia*, *kavacha*, *kaling*, *bahuti*, *hoda*, *baghapati*, *vala*, *rupachandra*, *katha*, *rudhi mala*, *chakra*, *handiapati* and *jhoba* <sup>[19]</sup>.

### **War Dance and Military Literature of Odisha**

The various war dances of Orissa like *Naga Nacha*, *Paika Nacha*, *Ranapa Nacha*, *Chhau Nacha* etc., are associated with martial traditions of Orissa. With the help of drumbeats and other war music they perform the dance, which recalls our past military glories. The stories of the dances are usually borrowed from the Indian mythology and puranas. Some stories also relate to ancient war stories of Orissa. The military literature of Orissa like *Paika Kheda*, *Samara Taranga*, *Rana Taranga*, *Phiringi kali Bharata*, *Khalikota Rajanka Yasa*, *Vir sarvasva*, *Vira parakrama*, *Bhudapanka Yudha*, *Yudhagita*, etc., describe the military glory and the war that was conducted by various Rajas with the formidable British power.

### **Classifications of martial arts of Odisha**

In the present scenario, the Martial arts ‘Paik Akheda’ is seen in various parts of Odisha. The Paik Guru and their paiks demonstrate these martial arts in the Bijaya Dasami (Durga Puja a Hindu festival). Sometimes, the State level Paik Akheda competitions have been organised by the Government. The present martial arts of Odisha can divided into two parts (a) Martial arts without weapons and (b) Martial arts with weapons. The martial arts without weapons consists of (i) Bhui nghan Bidya (floor exercises) which is same as all the modern gymnastics stunt, (ii) Danda, Baithak and Mati Kusti (wrestling is conducted on the soft soil called fluka), (iii) Ghara (steps) and Challi (marching). Before learning the skills of various weapons fighting, they first keep their body fit with the help of danda, baithak and other floor exercises. Then, they learn the types of *Ghara* (steps) namely *aka ghara* (one step) *duie ghara* (two step) *tini ghara* (three step) and *chari ghara* (four step). The paiks of Odisha demonstrate various types of challi (marching) at the time of the demonstration and also in the competition.

Martial arts with weapons:

- (a) Dhala Tarabari (Sword and shield)
- (b) Banka Churi (Curve knife)
- (c) (staff play with one hand and both hand)
- (d) Banati (Fire arm)
- (e) Gada Mudugara (Indian club)
- (f) Patta (Long sword with forearm guard)
- (g) Banna (Long sword with hilt)
- (h) Ranapa (War foot)
- (i) Naga phasa (Cobra knot)

Apart from these weapons, the paiks of Odisha used another old rare war equipments like Singhat (a long knife attached with sharp horn of the animal), battle axe, Yamad hara (draggers), tenta (spears) and demonstrate exceptional martial activities. These activities are Haladi and Chandan Pochha (cleaning sandalwood and turmeric paste from the body with movements of sharp swords in both hands), Nijhama (a heavy lezium of wooden structure with iron rings will be lifted by a person and different movements will be carried artistically), Akalana (lifting a heavy stone from the ground) and

Sagadachaka (lifting a bullock cartwheel over the head and try to do a circular movement with their neck).

### Conclusion

Wars are no longer fought on an individual level; more often than not the enemy dies without ever seeing the man who killed him. Gone are the days when two Paiks met face to face upon the battlefield to fight for honour and justice, or warriors armed with spear and sword battled it out steel against steel, when the victor was the man with the highest amount of skill and courage, modern warfare does not allow sportsman like conduct or individualism on the battlefield. Now days the martial art *Paik Akheda* is seen in various parts of Odisha. The physical and martial activities with and without weapons arts are demonstrated by the Paik Guru and their disciples in the *Bijaya Dasami* (Dashara festival). The other festivals like Dolo jatra, Raja Sankaranti, Makar Sankaranti, Gamha (Rakhi) *Purnima* etc, are quit important for them. The glory of the past, though diminished still survives today like the fire in a flint in the martial races of the land. Even if, the present days do not need their continuance for any valid material benefit, yet they are trying their level best to retain their traditional art for the sake of mental pleasure as memories of bygone days.

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