



## Rhythm, Ritual, and Identity: A study of Dalkhai Folk Dance Tradition of West Odisha

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### ABSTRACT

*“Rhythm, Ritual, and Identity: A Study of Dalkhai Folk Dance Tradition of West Odisha”* explores the cultural, social, and symbolic significance of the Dalkhai dance as an essential expression of regional identity in Western Odisha. The study examines the historical evolution of Dalkhai, tracing its roots in agrarian life, seasonal festivals, and indigenous belief systems, particularly its association with young women and communal celebrations during festivals like Durga Puja or Dushara Festival. The research explores the role of traditional instruments like **Dhol, Nisan, Tasa, Jhanj, and Muhuri** in the dance Dalkhai, emphasizing its vibrant performance style and ritualistic significance in promoting fertility, prosperity, and social harmony in rural communities. It also examines Dalkhai as a cultural identity marker for both tribal and non-tribal groups in Western Odisha, addressing the challenges of preservation amidst modernization and globalization, while noting revival efforts. Overall, the study positions Dalkhai not merely as a folk dance but as a living tradition that encapsulates the rhythm of life, ritual practices, and the collective identity of the people of Western Odisha.

### Research Objectives

- To explore the history, origin, and socio-cultural values of the Dalkhai dance of Western Odisha.
- To critically examine the role of female dancers in Dalkhai, including their dedication, sacrifice, and contributions.



- To analyze the perspectives, beliefs, and roles of rural and tribal communities toward the dance and the Devadasi tradition.
- To identify the underlying cultural values of women's empowerment, unity, and rural solidarity reflected in the Dalkhai dance.
- To highlight the contributions of female dancers in preserving the continuity of this folk tradition and its overall impact.
- To study the modern challenges faced by the Dalkhai dance and Devadasi tradition, along with measures for their preservation and their contemporary relevance.
- To examine how this dance and the contributions of female performers inspire the younger generation.

### **Geographical location of Western Odisha**

Odisha, a state with thirty districts, is located to the east of India. It is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the east, West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand to the north, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh to the west and Andhra Pradesh to the south. Western Odisha refers to the western part of the state of Odisha. Western Odisha mainly consists of 10 districts, namely *Sambalpur*, *Bargarh*, *Jharsuguda*, *Sonepur*, *Balangir*, *Sundergarh*, *Kalahandi*, *Nuapada*, *Boudh* and *Deogarh* districts.

Western Odisha is characterized by its rich natural environment, including forests, mountains, rivers, and springs. Major mountains in the region include *Gandhamardan Hill*, various hills in Kalahandi and Sambalpur districts, and *Dongra Hill* Mala in Sundergarh. The significant rivers, Mahanadi and Brahmani, traverse this area, with Mahanadi covering 122 km in Sambalpur and Brahmani flowing through Deogarh and Sundergarh. The numerous springs and beautiful waterfalls in the region, like those in Sundergarh and Bargarh, contribute to the area's natural splendor.

Western Odisha is celebrated for its ancient monuments and tourist sites that attract visitors both domestically and internationally. The region is rich in heritage, cultural traditions, and architectural masterpieces, featuring ancient temples adorned with sculptures, attractive springs, waterfalls, and pilgrimage sites. Notable historical sites include *Nrusinghanatha* and *Harishankar* at Gandhamardan mountain, *Chausathi Yogini* Peetha in Balangir, Rameshwar Temple at the confluence of the Tel and Mahanadi rivers, and several other revered temples. The area is also known for its natural beauty, characterized by hills, rivers, and streams, which inspire local folk music and dance.



## Religious Beliefs and Traditions of Western Odisha

In the context of the universe's creation, the roles of man and woman are highlighted, with an emphasis on the greater significance of women, who embody nature and divine energy (**Shakti**). The interconnection between the creative forces in both the animal and plant worlds showcases maternal creativity, as all life is nurtured by Mother Nature, who provides essential resources for survival. This reverence for the maternal force has been inherent in human society since ancient times, influencing religion and cultural practices. The concept of woman as **Adi Shakti** is deeply rooted in philosophical thought, underpinning the evolution of maternal consciousness that shapes religion, power, and tradition. This article explores the tradition of **Shakti worship**, its impact on social structures, family and social religious practices, and the aesthetic dimensions of folk deities and rituals. In Western Odisha, goddess worship is prevalent, with deities integral to social and religious ceremonies across villages, particularly within tribal communities, where the goddess is revered as a manifestation of Shakti.

In the region of Western Odisha, symbols of Shakti worship encompass a variety of objects such as *stones, wood, Shiva lingas*, and implements like *tridents, arrows, and daggers*. *Canopies and bamboo* poles adorned with sacred items, along with the folk instrument Nishan, also represent the goddess, often accompanied by offerings of *vermilion, rice, and flowers*. These worship practices are integral to folk customs and are observed year-round, particularly during agricultural festivals like *Nuakhai, Shembi Yatra, Mati Yatra, and Puspuni*, where communal worship seeks the goddess's blessings for fertility and successful harvests. The agrarian society's beliefs are deeply intertwined with agricultural cycles, venerating Mother Soil as the source of productive power. Festivals from *Chaitra to Pausha* primarily celebrate agriculture, and goddess worship is a central component of nearly every local festival, which also includes entertainment and purely religious observances.

The concept of village deities in Western Odisha is deeply rooted in tribal religion, representing an ancient tradition integral to various communal and social practices. These deities are venerated during significant events such as agricultural festivals, rituals of mourning, and collective endeavours. The village deity's temple is situated at a strategic point near the village entrance, symbolizing protection; notably, the goddess, referred to as *Dwarsini*, historically shielded the village from external threats and calamities like cholera and drought. Shakti temples, which celebrate various goddesses such as *Samleswari, Lankeswari*, and others, reflect the rich Shakti heritage in this region, established under different dynasties. The prevalence of rural deities indicates a strong connection to tribal customs, with traditional leaders and priests often being from the tribal community. This ongoing practice highlights the



significant role of religion in maintaining societal order and cohesion within the communities of Western Odisha.

### **“Dalkhai” in the Religious Tradition of Western Odisha**

As discussed earlier in this paper, the religious traditions of Western Odisha are deeply rooted in the cultural practices of its people. In the forest- and hill-surrounded regions of Western Odisha, the traditional festivals, rituals (*Brata*), worship of deities, as well as dance and music practiced by tribal communities have significantly enriched and influenced the cultural heritage of Odisha. Their festivals are primarily based on agriculture, family life, social structure, and religious beliefs. Worship of deities, music, and dance are inseparable parts of every tribal festival and celebration. These communities organize various forms of songs and dances across different seasons and present them uniquely during festivals. The people of this region are bound together by a strong cultural unity, reflected in their festivals, social customs, and language. Western Odisha, largely inhabited by tribal communities, is deeply influenced by tribal culture and their socio-religious practices.

Among the tribal communities of Western Odisha, the tradition of mother-goddess worship is very ancient. The goddess is worshipped across India as the supreme power and the creator. In the tribal-dominated western region of Odisha, the goddess “**Dalkhai**” represents a folk form of *Shakti (divine feminine power)*. Among the various festivals celebrated throughout the year, Dalkhai stands out as a unique and attractive festival.

#### **Dalkhai**

One aspect of Dalkhai is linked to nature worship, reflecting the deep, historical bond between humans and nature. This relationship has shaped human emotions and led to the development of various rituals and festivals. Tree worship, an ancient tradition, highlights this connection, as forests served as early human habitats providing sustenance. Moreover, the interdependence of plants and animals reinforces humanity's close ties to forests. Nature worship is intrinsic to humanity, with natural elements regarded as deities fulfilling essential needs. This belief system culminates in the reverence for the goddess Dalkhai, central to this study.

Dalkhai is a symbolic representation rather than a specific idol, with worship involving branches from various trees, which signify diversity and highlight the importance of trees within the natural environment and forest-based civilizations. The festival honouring Goddess Dalkhai is a major folk celebration in Western Odisha, recognized for its enthusiastic observance across numerous tribal and



non-tribal communities, including regions such as Bargarh, Balangir, Sundargarh, and others. Despite her absence from formal religious texts, Dalkhai is a key folk deity, worshipped through rituals that reflect humanity's efforts across history to connect with divine power, thereby embedding the festival within a longstanding cultural tradition.

### Origin and Nomenclature of “Dalkhai”

The observance of Dalkhai, known as Osha Brata, lacks formal documentation in religious texts such as the Puranas; rather, it is rooted in oral tradition. The origins of Goddess Dalkhai and her name's etymology remain ambiguous, with various scholarly interpretations and folklore providing different explanations. Notably, researcher *Bhagirathi Nepak* suggests that the name “Dalkhai” may come from the refrain “*Dalkhai re*” or “*Dalkhai bo*,” commonly used at the beginning and end of Dalkhai songs, which likely influenced the festival's naming.

In the Dalkhai worship rituals, various branches from trees like *amla, bar, peepal, aam, bel, and mandara* (*Amla* → *Indian Gooseberry*, *Banyan* → *Banyan Tree*, *Peepal* → *Sacred Fig (Peepal Tree)* *Mango* → *Mango Tree*, *Bael* → *Bael Tree / Bengal Quince*) are collected, adorned with flowers and other offerings, and symbolize the Goddess Dalkhai. These offerings, including sacred items like *duba grass, coconut, and cucumber*, are ultimately consumed as prasada, reinforcing the notion that the name “Dalkhai” derives from the term for *branches (dala)*. The rituals vary slightly by region, but no idols of the goddess are created from materials such as wood or clay; worship is conducted directly through the tree branches. The tribal communities practicing Dalkhai worship, often residing in forested and hilly areas, historically lacked exposure to formal education and settled customs, leading them to adopt tree and branch worship instead of conventional idol imagery. Distinct from mainstream Hindu rituals, Dalkhai worship does not typically involve temples or daily practices (such as chanting, incense offerings, or lamps), and after completion, the branches are often immersed in rivers or streams.

A historical perspective on Western Odisha reveals it was predominantly tribal, with local rulers often being part of these communities, relying on forests for livelihood. Their culture, religion, and society evolved in harmony with their geographical environment, as reflected in various folk festivals like Dalkhai. The worship of deities, such as Goddess Dalkhai, began in natural shelters and transitioned to temples as communities settled. Dalkhai embodies the region's forest-based civilization and has evolved from a tribal tradition to a shared practice among non-tribal Hindus, blending elements of both cultural identities and transcending caste and social divisions.



## Dalkhai as a Symbol of Harmony and Coexistence

In Western Odisha, amidst the diversity of tribal and non-tribal communities, Goddess Dalkhai is regarded as a symbol of unity, mutual relationship, and peaceful coexistence. With increasing contact with Hindus, the process of Hinduization influenced tribal communities, leading them to imagine temples for their deities similar to Hindu traditions. As a result, in later periods, special structures or rooms known as *Dalkhai Kuthi* were established for the worship of Goddess Dalkhai.

Not only this, tribal communities gradually began to accept and worship Hindu deities as well. In the Dalkhai Kuthi, along with Goddess Dalkhai, other deities are also worshipped. This reflects a clear example of cultural synthesis between tribal and non-tribal traditions. From this, it is evident that:

- Deities worshipped in non-tribal society have been accepted in tribal society.
- Similarly, tribal deities like Dalkhai have been embraced by non-tribal communities.

Thus, Goddess Dalkhai is not limited to tribal communities only, but has become a universal deity belonging to all.

### Views of Scholars on Dalkhai

There are many legends associated with the origin and practice of Dalkhai. Research on this subject reveals several interpretations.

- Researcher **Abhimanyu Pradhan** states that during the autumn season, tribal communities, enchanted by the beauty of nature, organize the worship of their presiding deity. Since forest products like fruits, flowers, and branches are widely used in the rituals, it is believed that the name “Dalkhai” originated from this practice. It is considered one of the ancient festivals of tribal people.
- Another prominent researcher, **Dr. Shyamsundar Dhar** (Barudada), explains that the word “Dalkhai” is derived from the Sanskrit term “**Aparna**”, which refers to *Goddess Parvati or Durga*. Therefore, Dalkhai worship can be understood as a form of Durga worship. In this ritual, branches of trees are worshipped as representations of *Vanadurga (forest goddess)*.

### “Dalkhai” - Preparations before the Worship:

Dalkhai is a significant festival celebrated by various tribal communities in western Odisha, including those in Sambalpur, Sonepur, Balangir, Bhawanipatna, Kalahandi, Khariar, Bargarh,



Padmapur, and Patnagarh. Historically, Dalkhai has faced a decline in observance due to shifting cultural preferences. This festival is associated with worshipping branches of trees, symbolizing the goddess Dalkhai, distinguishing it from *Bhajuntia Osha*, where Goddess Durga is honoured. Over time, Dalkhai, initially a **tribal deity**, gained prominence among both tribal and non-tribal populations as they coexisted. The integration of Hindu customs into the Dalkhai worship indicates a blend of tribal and Hindu cultures, exemplified by the construction of temples for Dalkhai Devi, which now incorporate numerous Hindu deities. Thus, Dalkhai culture represents a fusion of tribal traditions and Hindu influences, creating a social coexistence between diverse communities.

- **Dalkhai Puja observances:**

The Dalkhai Osha is a significant cultural fast observed in western Odisha, originally performed by unmarried tribal girls but now embraced by both tribal and non-tribal women, including widows. This festival, held on the eighth day of the bright moon in Ashwin, involves sisters gathering at the **Dalkhai Kuthi**, a specially prepared shrine that features a depiction of various deities, predominantly Goddess Durga. This kothi, possessing sixteen compartments adorned with different deities, epitomizes the divine focus of the festival, with variations occurring across villages.

The ceremonial preparation includes the collection of items such as incense, lamps, and flowers the day before puja, where the ceremonial leader plays the **dhunkel** instrument. This involves a distinct technique using a clay pot and accompanying sticks to produce a mystical sound, synchronizing with traditional songs such as **Dhunkelia Geeta**. The musical aspects of Dalkhai Osha are amplified with a blend of instruments including drums, wind instruments, and cymbals, creating a vibrant auditory experience known as “**Dulduli**” or “**Ganda baja**.”



***During the ritual:***

- Sixteen deities are worshipped in a sacred place called “**Sulah Kothi**.”
- Sixteen musical beats are played, known as “**Sulah Bharni**.”
- At this time, a person may become spiritually possessed (**Barua**), expressing divine energy through body movements in rhythm with the music.

## Rituals and Procedures of “Dalkhai” Worship

On the day of Saptami, all the necessary worship materials are collected and the initial puja (rituals) are performed. The next day is **Ashtami (Durga Ashtami)**, which is the main day of fasting, vows, and celebration of the Dalkhai festival. From early morning till midnight, the devotees (especially young girls) observe fasting and celebrate the festival with great enthusiasm.



**DALKHAI KUTHI (Sohala Kuthi)**

As mentioned earlier, from Saptami itself, traditional musicians (**Bajania**) remain engaged and participate whenever songs and dances take place. It is important to note that the rituals of Dalkhai vary slightly from region to region in Western Odisha.

Seven days before Durga Ashtami, girls collect sand from a pond. They place it in a bamboo container and sow grains like **paddy, wheat, maize, or pulses**. Turmeric water is sprinkled regularly. On Ashtami evening, it is immersed in water. It is believed that if the seeds sprout, the wishes of the devotee will be fulfilled.

- **Ashtami Day Rituals**



At noon, girls go to a nearby pond, river, or stream for bathing. During bathing, they collect 4 or 7 handfuls of sand (depending on region). They build a square sand **altar (bedi)** and establish a symbolic **linga** on it. On the **altar**: Pieces of *cucumber, ivy guard, or lady finger* are fixed using sticks. Turmeric-smeared rice, gooseberry paste, and turmeric are offered. After this: All gather and pray for the well-being of their brothers. Goddess Durga is worshipped. Then singing and dancing begin. At this time: Girls often sing songs expressing emotions, love, and personal feelings (sometimes considered bold or expressive, but they are part of folk culture). In some places, young men also join the celebration. After singing and dancing, everyone returns home.



At home, girls prepare materials for the main puja in the same day evening. **Eight types of flowers and fruits** are required. Some collect **108 pumpkin flowers**, considered sacred like gold. For each brother, a bundle of sacred **grass (Duva)** is prepared: Each bundle contains **108 blades of grass, 108 grains of rice, flowers, tied with sal leaves** and stitched with bamboo sticks. A sacred thread (**Jiunthia**) is tied to it. Branches of gooseberry and other sacred plants are also collected. All items like puffed rice, grains, incense, lamps, etc., are placed on a brass plate and taken to the **Dalkhai shrine (Kothi)**.

### ***Main Worship and Celebration:***

The **Dhunkel** musician begins with devotional songs. Sometimes, a devotee may enter a trance (**Barua/Kalisi**). Rhythmic instruments (Dulduli beats) are played. People ask questions to the possessed person, believing divine answers. After the worship, Girls sing **Dalkhai** songs and perform dances to drum beats. The celebration continues till late night. In the



Navami Morning Rituals, Girls continue fasting throughout Ashtami and do not eat or drink until Navami morning. They again go for bathing. Recreate or use the previous sand altar. Perform the same worship.

### **DHUNKEL**

After worship: They eat simple food like **rice, gram, curd, and jaggery**. Light a lamp and float it in water. Wear the sacred thread (**Jiunthia**) and return home. Wearing new clothes gifted by brothers, girls perform rituals at home. Brothers are seated and worshipped: Sisters apply rice and flowers. Move the sacred grass bundle from head to toe seven times for protection. Gifts are exchanged between brothers and sisters. Finally, they bow to each other as a mark of respect.

### **Song, Music and Dance in “Dalkhai” :**

The Dalkhai tradition encompasses the worship ritual, dance, songs, and musical performances dedicated to Goddess Dalkhai, reflecting the vibrant tribal culture of Western Odisha. Initially performed solely during the Dalkhai worship, these artistic expressions have evolved





to gain broader visibility on contemporary stages. The Dalkhai tradition is steeped in a rich historical background, making it essential to consider its past when studying its dance, songs, and music. Over centuries, Dalkhai has transformed through various cultural influences, indicating its fluid nature and the potential for further evolution.

Musically, the Dalkhai performance includes traditional instruments such as *dhol*, *nisan*, *tasa*, *mahuri*, and *jhanj*, collectively known as ***Ganda Baja or Dulduli, or Panchabadya***. These instruments are integral and performed in sync during the dance, underscoring the inseparability of music from the Dalkhai experience. Historically, the artisans of these instruments belonged to marginalized communities due to the materials used, but modern media exposure has fostered wider participation across social classes.

During performances, singing of Dalkhai songs is typically accompanied by the drummer maintaining rhythm, with dancing commencing after the song concludes. The dance is characterized by expressive movements that engage the eyes, face, waist, and feet, creating an enthralling spectacle enhanced by traditional attire like Sambalpuri sarees and intricate ornaments such as ***kataria and bandaria***, paired with distinctive hairstyles like ***dhalia khusa***. The fusion of song, music, and dance is the quintessence of the Dalkhai tradition, captivating audiences with its charm and cultural depth.

Dalkhai songs, integral to tribal culture, are often mischaracterized as "obscene" by outsiders unaware of



**Guru Betikhai Bariha and her  
Dalkhai Team**

their cultural context. These songs reflect the lifestyle, traditions, and social practices of tribal communities, where bold expressions are common during events like festivals and marriages, often accompanied by alcohol. Dalkhai songs convey emotions related to love and rural life, woven with themes from mythology and everyday experiences. Historically misunderstood by urban populations, Dalkhai has gained recognition

and appreciation beyond tribal communities, now performed in various cultural venues and events across Odisha and beyond.

### **Musical Instruments**



The Dalkhai song and dance of Western Odisha is a vibrant form of entertainment that uniquely combines song, music, and dance. Folk instruments are crucial to this art form, enhancing the experience and enabling lively celebrations at festivals, weddings, and fairs. The use of these instruments allows people to express their emotions and traditions, and their popularity persists even in the modern era, underscoring their importance in folk culture.



Dulduli/Panchabadya

Main Instruments Used in Dalkhai Dance are: Dhol (drum), Nishan, Tasa, Mahuri, Jhanj (cymbals). These instruments are generally played by men. Among them, the Dhol is the main instrument. The accompaniment of Nishan and Tasa highlights the rhythmic richness of this region's percussion tradition. The Mahuri (a wind instrument) is usually not played while the song is being sung. As soon as the song lines end, all instruments Dhol, Nishan, Tasa, Muhuri, and Jhanj start playing together in a coordinated manner, creating a powerful and energetic atmosphere.

### **Dance Formation and Style**

At this moment, young women stand in a semi-circular formation, bend slightly at the waist, and perform various steps and graceful body movements. Dalkhai songs and dances have a unique style. The songs may consist of 2 to 16 lines. While singing, the singer repeats the word "Dalkhai" twice as a form of address and again at the end to conclude the stanza. There are slight variations in singing style depending on the region. After each stanza, the combined sound of all instruments fills the air, creating an electrifying environment. According to the rhythm of the song, the drummer (Dhulia) begins playing the Dhol, setting the tempo for the dance.

### **Costume and Ornaments of Men and Women in Dalkhai Dance.**

Women in Western Odisha have a unique attachment to ornaments, which vary across regions in India. These ornaments not only enhance beauty but also historically served as a means of self-defence. Regardless of social or economic status, women adorn themselves with these items, viewing them as symbols of good fortune. In fact, the significance of ornaments is so profound that poets often cannot envisage feminine beauty without referencing them, as they adorn various parts of the body.



During the dance, women tie their hair in a traditional “**Dhalia Khusa**” style. They decorate it with: *Khiripini, Panpatari, Chaunrimudi*, Fresh flowers around the bun. Ornaments Worn by Women in Neck are *Tankamali, Khagala, Gunjaramali, Pahala Mali*. In Hands are *Taad, Bahasuta, Kataria, Bandharia, Kalari, Bangles*. In Nose: *Nakphuli, Danari, Chakaguna, Phuli, Guna*. For Ears: *Karnaphula Shinkala, Kanfasa, Jhalka, Ganthia, Bentala*. Decorate Waist with: *Gunchi, Waist thread (Anta Suta)* and Feet with *Paenri, Anklets (Paenjhol)*

- **Costume of Women**

Women wear bright, striped colourful Sambalpuri sarees, which are very attractive. Red-coloured sarees like *Saptapari or Bichitrapuri* are especially popular. During the dance: A **Gamcha (cloth)** is placed around the neck and Hair is decorated traditionally with ornaments and flowers

- **Costume of Men**

Male dancers and musicians also follow a traditional dress style: like *Sambalpuri dhoti, Fatei (upper cloth)* Gamcha around the neck and tied at the waist, **Khadu** (bangles/bracelets) on hands and



Pahala Mali around the neck. They tie a Gamcha on the head and decorate it with small branches or leaves from trees, giving a natural and folk appearance.

### Conclusion:

*The study "Rhythm, Ritual, and Identity: A Study of Dalkhai Folk Dance Tradition of West Odisha"* emphasizes that Dalkhai is a vital cultural expression tied to the agrarian and socio-religious fabric of Western Odisha. This dance, integral to festivals like Durga Puja, symbolizes fertility and communal harmony through rhythmic patterns and songs. It serves as a potent symbol of regional identity, preserving the local language and cultural aesthetics, thereby fostering intergenerational connections among young performers. However, challenges such as modernization and commercialization threaten its authenticity. Despite these issues, Dalkhai remains adaptable, gaining recognition on broader platforms. The preservation of this dance is crucial for maintaining the rich intangible heritage of the region through documentation and community engagement.

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