



## PAIKA WARRIORS AND MARTIAL ART TRADITION OF KHORDHA

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**ABSTRACT** In the ancient times Odia Paika warriors had shown their Prowess, war-skills, valour and patriotism for their nation and motherland. The combat skills and valour of Odia Paika warriors have been found mentioned in various 'Purana' (mythological scripture) as well as in the page of historical books. An ancient Aranyak also describes about the valour and martial arts skills of the Odia Paika warriors. Some kings of 'Suryavanshi' dynasty of India had also praised a lot regarding the warrior-skills and great valour of Odia Paika warriors as found mentioned in the books written by these kings. The 'Paika' warriors of Khordha are pride of Odia people and community as well. The weapons used by the Paika warriors like swords, shields, daggers, spears etc. are found preserved in the houses of Paika families in various regions of Odisha.

**KEYWORDS :** Paika, Warrior, Khordha, Odia, Odisha

In the ancient battle of Mahabharat held in Kurukshetra in India, these were several brave Odia warriors and battle-commanders and kings like Shratayu, Prince Bhanuman, Ketuman and Shukadeb etc. who along with their Odia warriors had fought the battle of Kurukshetra and had shown their prowess in the battlefield. The martial arts skills of Odia Paika warriors were unparalleled. Hyuen Tsang the great Chinese Buddhist monk and a renowned scholar who had explored various places of India, had also described about Khordha, which was the land of Odia Paika warriors.

As per the descriptions by Hyuen Tsang the dark coloured huge shaped elephants were mostly found in the dense forest of Khordha in Odisha formerly called as Kalinga. He had mentioned that the elephants of Khordha forest were famous in India for their black-colour and gigantic shapes. In those days the elephants from Khordha forest were also exported to some foreign countries, as described by the Chinese scholar Hyuen Tsang. Even today there is an elephant sanctuary in Chandaka forest area in Khordha region of Odisha.

From these informations and evidences it can be confirmed that during the age of Mahabharata i.e. during the period of B.C.900 Kalinga was said as the vast region of Khordha. Once upon a time Khordha was actually the name of Odisha. Actually as per the historians Khordha was the then capital of Odisha. The people who resided in Khordha were mostly 'Odra-Paika' people and their language was called Odia, and in course of time this vast region was called Orissa presently called Odisha.

In the past the Paika people were also gifted with agricultural lands by their respective kings. The Paika people engaged themselves in farming their agricultural lands. In this way they earned their livelihood and looked after their families. Some researchers have opined that the bravery and valour of Paika warriors was compared with the sharpness of 'Khyura' (razor or sharp knife). 'Dhar' means sharpness of a sword or knife or razor. So some research scholars have opined that the name 'Khordha' was originated from these two words viz. 'Khyur' and 'Dhar'. During the battle time the Paika warriors fought the battle and rest of the period they engaged themselves in farming. This was their way of living. The warriors' community of Khordha was also called 'Khandayat' which means who have mastered the skills of swords fighting. These warriors cum farmers communities of Khordha were called Paika as well as Khandayat. Dussehra or Durga Puja is the main festival of these Paika or Khandayat people. 'Khandayat' caste people are also known as 'Kshyatriya' caste people in Odisha as well as in some other states of India. As per the ancient tradition, Paika or Khandayat caste people celebrate Durga Puja or Dussehra festival in a grand manner. Besides doing Puja-rituals and prayers before the supreme goddess Durga, Hindu people of Odisha mostly Khandayats use to demonstrate Paika Akhada martial arts skills of Odisha. During these martial arts demonstration the Paika or Khandayat people use to show their fighting skills which include sword fighting skills, acrobatics, traditional gymnastics, knife-fighting skills, archery skills, spear fighting skills. These martial arts demonstrations are usually organized by the local Puja committees or organizers. These martial arts demonstrations are witnessed near some Durga Puja pandals or

some other venues. Sometimes the martial arts performers are also honoured and awarded by the local Puja-organizing committees. In this way the Paika people are awarded and encouraged by various organizations and groups of people. Earlier during the ruling period of Raja and Maharaja or kings and emperors the horses and elephants owned by the kings and emperors were provided required training for various purposes. These training of king's horses and elephants were first started on certain auspicious day and times as per the Hindu almanac.

The training of royal horses was started on the auspicious day called 'Ashwa Panchami' as per Hindu almanac. Like was the king's pet elephants were trained especially from the auspicious day called 'Gaja-Sashthi' as per the Hindu almanac. On those auspicious occasions, Gajapati Maharaj (the then emperor of Odisha) used to distribute golden coins, weighing about 678 grams to 873 grams gold among his special and brave soldiers and patriots of his state. The kings used to reward the brave heart soldiers who had fought for their motherland. Earlier during the ruling period of Rajas and Maharajas, when there was any apprehension of any danger or possible attack from foreign enemies, the concerned informer staffs of the ruler king used to inform the king's soldiers and others people of the state, by beating 'Nagra' a big drum like musical instrument. With the beating of Nagra the King's staff used to make aware the states soldiers about the upcoming battle against their enemies. On hearing this emergency information about possible battle the Paika warriors of that concerned region used to assemble soon and prepared themselves for their battle journey. Before commencing for their battle journey the Paika warriors used create roaring sounds in order to express their aggressiveness for the battle. Pandit Godavarish Mohapatra a renowned patriotic writer and poet of Odisha, had written some patriotic poems in those days, in praise of brave heart and ferocious Paika warriors. But with the lapse of time when the ruling period of Gajapati kings was over, then gradually the influence and power of various Paika leaders like Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mohapatra, Tapanga Dalabehera etc. of Khordha region diminished. There was one Rajguru (the royal advisor) of Gajapati king of Puri, who in order to instill Patriotism among the then Paika warriors had written a voluminous scripture called 'Durgastav Chandrika', as found mentioned in the ancient Odia almanac called 'Madala Panji' (the ancient Odia almanac) that Durga Utsav is an auspicious festival which is celebrated by the Odia Kshyatriya or Khandayat caste people as a victorious festival. This tradition of celebrating Durga Puja is still continuing in various Khandayat dominated villages of Odisha. During the celebration of Durga Puja festival in Odisha, the Khandayat caste people use to perform auspicious Puja rituals by keeping their ancestral awards called 'Khand' near the idols or images of goddess Durga. The Khandayat caste people apply vermilion (Sindoor) on their swords and in this way they seek the blessings of the supreme Hindu goddess Durga. After doing the Puja rituals before goddess Durga the Khandayat caste people apply that auspicious 'Sindoor-Tika' (vermillion mark) on their foreheads. In Odia language this custom of applying auspicious vermilion in one's forehead is called 'Sindoor-Shiri'. The tradition is followed by the 'Khandayat' caste people of Odisha. It is believed that by applying this sacred vermilion on one's forehead it would shower blessings of goddess

Durga and the person's physical as well as mental power would be rejuvenated by the grace of goddess Durga. Many 'Dalei', 'Dalabehera' (Paika Caste People) of Khordha area have still preserved their ancestral traditional weapons in their homes. Those traditional weapons are called 'Khanda' (sword). Hard bamboo sticks, Barchha (spears) and 'Sanju' (body-shields for protection).

Earlier some devotional songs and poems in this context were also composed by various poets of Odisha. The stanzas found in those Odia songs and poems have described about the divine power connected to swords used by the Khandayat warriors. Although in the modern times with the advancement of science and knowledge modern weapons are found used by the military soldiers but in the ancient times the way of fighting and military skills and strategies were purely traditional and different. In the ancient times, 'Khanda-Yuddha' (sword fighting skills), boxing or fist-fighting, wrestling etc. martial arts techniques were practiced by the Paika caste people in Khordha region. Now a day while practicing sword fighting skills, the Paika warriors use thin bamboo sticks instead of real swords. In Odia language this type of practice with sticks is called Patta Khela' is still continuing in several villages of Khordha, Puri, Cuttack districts of Odisha. In Khordha and Puri regions of Odisha the Paika caste people use to practice martial arts skills with bamboo sticks and shields (a traditional weapon used for defense tactics).

The Paika warriors and their successors in Bolagada and Ranapur regions of Odisha use to practice Paika-Akhada martial arts tradition and techniques with bamboo stick along with a hard wooden or metallic hand covering. They use this type of hand shield or covering equipment in order to avoid hand injuries during any stick or sword attack from their opponent. Apart from this the 'Paika-Akhada' practitioners of Odisha have also been practicing somersaults and acrobatics, Gada (club) fighting skills, moving Banati (a rope whose both the ends are attached with hard ball-shaped bundle of rope), these bundles of ropes are blazed up with fire-flames. A practitioner of 'Banati' use to hold the middle of rope and then moves the rope and then moves the rope attached with fire flames. The fast movement of these blazing fireballs attached with the rope wards off assailants to a farther distance. The traditional 'Banati'(blazing rope) skill is also demonstrated during the world famous 'Rath Yatra' held every year in Puri, in Odisha. Even some young girls today use to demonstrate this 'Banati' martial art stunt during the famous Rath-y The weapons used by the Paika warriors like swords, shields, daggers, spears etc. are found preserved in the houses of Paika families in various regions of Odisha.

Some of the Paika-Akhada weapons are also found preserved in Odisha State Museum, in Bhubaneswar and also in the Madras (Chennai) Museum. These types of ancient weapons have also been excavated from various caves and forest areas of Khordha and Puri regions of Odisha.

During the period of 1817 after Paika revolt the British rulers who ruled India, disarmed the Paika warriors and thus reduced the powers of the Paika warriors. But after the independence from Britishers the Paika warriors of India and their successors once again were able to preserve and maintain their glorious tradition of the past. Some years ago a Paika training academy was established in 'Gurujanga' area of Khordha. But in course of time due to Government apathy this training academy had not been able to survive.

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