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VISUAL REINTERPRETATION OF DANDA NATA SUANGA IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

This review examines how published accounts of Danda Nata and related Suanga forms may inform contemporary painting without transferring regional features to Athmallik, Odisha, without local evidence. It offers a purposive, interpretive review of ten scholarly works and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The literature describes Danda Nata as a composite ritual-theatrical practice involving devotion, seasonal and agricultural life, music, bodily movement, humour and character-based drama. Studies from Boudh, Kandhamal and the Leela Danda/Banibutal tradition also indicate variation in characters, narratives and dramatic emphasis. However, the reviewed sources do not establish Athmallik's Suanga character inventory, costume, makeup, ornaments, gestures or locally attributed meanings. Nor do they provide a tested process for translating local documentation into a painting series. The article maps the available evidence, interprets it through visual-culture, performance-studies and practice-led perspectives, and proposes a six-stage framework for future research. It also outlines ethical principles for community participation and transparent artistic interpretation. This is a literature review and conceptual proposal; it reports no new fieldwork, interviews or completed paintings.

INTRODUCTION

Danda Nata is a ritual and theatrical tradition associated with parts of western and southern Odisha. Published accounts describe devotional discipline, music, bodily exertion, dramatic episodes and community participation as interconnected elements (Bag, 2014; Satpathy, 2016; Tripathy, 2024). Sources refer to phases such as Dhuli Danda, Pani Danda, Agni Danda and Suanga Danda, although names, sequence and conventions may vary locally. No single regional description should therefore be treated as universal.

Suanga is relevant to visual arts because performers construct characters through costume, makeup, ornaments, gesture, posture and interaction. The visual field also includes group movement, ritual objects, performance space, spectators and narrative encounters. Accounts of Dhuli Danda, for example, discuss ritual action, agricultural life and pranks (Tripathy, 2024; Tripathy & Mallick, 2024). These descriptions generate questions for visual inquiry; they do not verify the appearance of Athmallik Suanga.

Folk painting can be reinterpreted through individual decisions and changing media (Roy, 2013). Yet interpreting a living performance tradition requires evidence, attribution and cultural responsibility. The reviewed literature discusses western Odisha generally or focuses on Boudh, Kandhamal and Leela Danda/Banibutal. It does not document Athmallik's local visual vocabulary. Transferring characters, colours or meanings from another location without confirmation could misrepresent comparative material as local tradition. This article therefore identifies what the literature supports, what remains unknown and how future documentation may inform painting.

Review of Related Literature

Bag (2014) discusses ritual phases, sacred objects, music and theatrical episodes as parts of Danda Nata's wider cultural experience. Satpathy (2016) situates Danda within western Odisha folk theatre, connecting song, dance, ritual and community life. Tripathy (2024) describes Dhuli Danda through ritual, exercise, play, movement, sacred drama and dance in an agricultural and seasonal context. Together, these accounts suggest that visual analysis should consider posture, group action, objects and performance space as well as costume.

Character and visual identity are also important. Bag (2014) considers characters in relation to social identities and notes changes in costume, music, style and makeup. Tripathy and Mallik (2023), focusing on Sola Suanga in Boudh, describe character-based performance with dramatic and satirical elements. Such studies suggest that appearance may communicate identity, relationships and humour. The Boudh character set, however, cannot be treated as an inventory of Athmallik characters.

Mishra (2019) discusses Leela Danda through a Radha–Krishna narrative, musical narration, chorus refrains, humour and male performers taking both male and female roles. Swain (2026) describes Bani's role in bringing Radha and Krishna together and identifies Radha, Krishna, Duti and Chandrasena. These accounts show how narrative relationships and dramatic agency can shape performance, but do not establish that the same characters occur in Athmallik.

Tripathy and Mallick (2024) examine Dhuli Danda in Kandhamal through pranks and episodes reflecting everyday life. Sharma and Pavithra (2026) discuss western Odisha folk theatre in relation to collective memory, oral narrative, identity and participation, while noting pressures such as migration, modernisation and declining patronage. UNESCO (2003) places communities and transmission at the centre of intangible heritage safeguarding. These sources justify investigating humour and continuity, but do not demonstrate that painting itself preserves a tradition.

For the visual-arts method, Roy (2013) provides a broader Indian folk-painting context for continuity and change. Marinkovic (2021) discusses tacit knowledge in painting, while Candy and Edmonds (2018) outline practice-based research in creative arts. These works support documenting studio decisions and reflection; they are not direct studies of Suanga.

Research Questions

1. What do the reviewed publications establish about the ritual, narrative and visual dimensions of Danda Nata and related Suanga forms, and where were these claims documented?
2. Which features can generate questions for painting, and which must remain unassigned to Athmallik until locally documented?
3. What practice-led and ethical framework could guide future research from local documentation to a reflective painting series?

Objectives

1. To synthesise literature on the ritual, narrative, per-

formative and visual dimensions of Danda Nata and related Suanga forms.
2. To distinguish region-specific evidence from features unverified for Athmallik.
3. To identify visual-arts and methodological gaps.
4. To propose a practice-led framework and ethical protocol for future documentation and painting.

Research Design and Method

The article uses a purposive, interpretive literature-review design. Its unit of analysis is the published source and the claims it makes about Danda Nata, related performance forms, folk painting, practice-led research or intangible cultural heritage. Ten scholarly works and one international convention were considered.

Sources were included when they directly concerned Danda Nata, Dhuli Danda, Suanga, Leela Danda/Banibutal or western Odisha folk theatre, or supplied a relevant conceptual or policy framework. Each was examined for geographic scope and evidence type: cultural or ritual description, narrative analysis, visual-culture discussion, practice-led method or policy. The review reports authors' descriptions and interpretations; it does not independently validate historical claims or assume equal methodological strength across sources.

A complete search log was not available. Databases, search strings, date limits and the final search date therefore cannot be reported reliably. The review is not systematic or exhaustive. Odia-language publications, local archives, institutional records, additional dissertations and community-held documentation were not systematically searched. The absence of Athmallik-specific material in this source set is a review limitation, not proof that no local documentation exists.

Conceptual Framework

Visual culture treats images as meaningful within social practices rather than as decoration alone. Bag (2014) frames Danda Nata as visual cultural heritage, while Mitchell (2002) provides a general account of visual culture. A painting inquiry should connect formal description—line, colour, form, rhythm and composition—with community-grounded explanations.

Performance studies directs attention to embodied action, music, timing, dramatic episodes, spatial relationships and spectatorship. The reviewed accounts describe Danda Nata as a composite event (Satpathy, 2016; Tripathy, 2024); Schechner (2013) offers a general framework for examining performance. This perspective prevents Suanga from being reduced to costume alone.

The UNESCO Convention (2003) foregrounds community participation and transmission. Painting may interpret selected features, but cannot replace the performance, skills or relationships sustaining the tradition. Practice-led research treats making and reflection as sites of inquiry (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Marinkovic, 2021). Bakhtin's (1984) concept of carnival laughter may prompt questions about humour, but should not be imposed on Athmallik without contextual evidence. Rasa may be used in future analysis only if local documentation and specialist consultation justify it.

Findings and Thematic Synthesis

Three findings emerge. First, Danda Nata is represented as a layered ritual-theatrical practice in which ritual, movement, music, agricultural context, humour and drama may intersect (Bag, 2014; Satpathy, 2016; Tripathy, 2024; Tripathy & Mallick, 2024). Visual inquiry should therefore extend beyond costume to gesture, group action, objects, performance space and audience interaction.

Second, related forms are not interchangeable. The Boudh study of Sola Suanga, the Kandhamal account of Dhuli Danda and the Leela Danda/Banibutal accounts foreground different character structures, episodes and relationships (Mishra, 2019; Tripathy & Mallik, 2023; Tripathy & Mallick, 2024; Swain, 2026). They offer comparative prompts, not a transferable inventory for Athmallik.

Third, the reviewed sources do not establish Athmallik's Suanga character names, costume, makeup, ornaments, gestures, materials or community-attributed meanings. They also do not provide a sustained visual analysis of line, colour, shape, texture, rhythm and composition as a basis for a painting series, or a tested process linking observation to sketches, colour studies, material experiments and finished paintings.

These gaps can guide fieldwork. Researchers should ask whether colours are conventional, symbolic or artistic choices; record gesture sequences before translating movement into static compositions; confirm character names and relationships; document actual materials; and study the arrangement of performers, spectators and performance ground. Community members should clarify whether objects are sacred, functional, character-specific or decorative. Humorous episodes should be recorded with their context and audience response.

Each artwork should distinguish locally documented features from artistic decisions. Scale, brushwork, fragmentation, surface, composition and colour intensity may be transformed creatively, but artist-created choices should not be presented as traditional meanings.

Proposed Practice-Led Framework

A six-stage framework is proposed, but has not been implemented or validated. Stage 1, cultural documentation, records the Athmallik context and locally recognised characters, costume, makeup, ornaments, gestures and meanings through consent-based engagement. Outputs include a source log, character inventory, contextual notes and consent records; confirmed and uncertain details must be distinguished.

Stage 2, visual analysis, uses observation, drawing and photography only with permission to produce sketches, gesture studies and annotated records. Stage 3, formal interpretation, examines line, colour, texture, rhythm, composition and relationships, labelling each transformation as observed, interpreted or invented. Stage 4, studio exploration, tests materials, surfaces, scale and alternative compositions, supported by dated notes explaining decisions.

Stage 5, artistic synthesis, develops a coherent series and invites community review before public display. Feedback and responses to factual or ritual concerns should be recorded, recognising that community views may differ. Stage 6, critical reflection, compares finished works with the documentation record and explains significant departures.

Evaluation should consider documentation traceability, community feedback on factual and ritual accuracy, transparency about artistic departures, peer review of reflective records and, where appropriate, viewer responses. These are different forms of evidence and should not be collapsed into one score. Disagreement should be recorded rather than concealed.

DISCUSSION

The literature establishes ritual, narrative, performative and visual dimensions of Danda Nata and related forms. It provides prompts for investigating character identity, movement, relational composition, objects and performance space. Yet examples from Boudh, Kandhamal and Leela

Danda/Banibutal remain unverified for Athmallik. The proposed framework offers a route from documentation to studio experimentation, but its effectiveness must be tested through fieldwork.

Comparative material must be labelled as such. Using a Boudh or Kandhamal character description to represent Athmallik without confirmation would blur regional evidence and artistic invention. Likewise, the appearance of an object does not establish its symbolic meaning. Researchers should record what was observed, what participants explained, what remains uncertain and what the artist introduced.

The review is limited by its small purposive source set. Odia-language literature, archives, unpublished materials and community records were not systematically searched. Some supplied references lack complete publication metadata and require verification. Sources differ in focus and methodological detail; their claims were not independently confirmed. Theoretical works support interpretation and method rather than providing direct evidence about Suanga. No fieldwork, interviews, images or paintings are reported.

CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that Danda Nata and related Suanga forms offer rich possibilities for visual inquiry because ritual, embodied action, humour, narrative and character presentation intersect in performance. It also demonstrates why regional distinctions matter: studies of Boudh, Kandhamal and Leela Danda/Banibutal cannot establish the visual vocabulary of Athmallik Suanga. Within the reviewed sources, that local vocabulary remains undocumented.

This article contributes a regional evidence map, a focused conceptual interpretation and a six-stage practice-led framework with an ethical orientation. Contemporary painting can interpret Suanga responsibly only when local practice is documented first, comparative sources are distinguished from local evidence, artistic departures are transparent and community participation is included. A broader search of Odia-language scholarship and local archives, followed by consent-based fieldwork and a documented painting series, is needed to test this proposal.

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