

## Navratri and Dandiya Raas in the Indus Valley?

By Bibhu Dev Misra

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The Kalibangan cylinder seal K-65 has a complex imagery. An impression of the seal shows two men dressed as *warriors* (since they are wearing their hair in a divided bun at the back of the head) spearing each other. They are holding the hand of a *lady* who is wearing a long head-scarf, bangles in one arm, and a long skirt. Behind them is a woman partially dressed as a *tiger*, wearing a horned headdress with a leafy branch, head-scarf, bangles, and a long skirt.



**Fig 1:** The Impression of Kalibangan cylinder seal K-65 shows two warriors spearing each other, and holding the hand of a lady, while a woman dressed as a tiger stands nearby.

At first glance it appears that the two men, who are dressed as warriors, are fighting over a lady. But if that were the case, why is the woman dressed as a tiger standing next to them? She looks completely out of place in a fighting scene.

It seems more likely that the seal imagery is a depiction of a *martial dance with spears* performed by the Indus inhabitants. Traces of such cultural practices are still present within the various folk and tribal traditions of India.

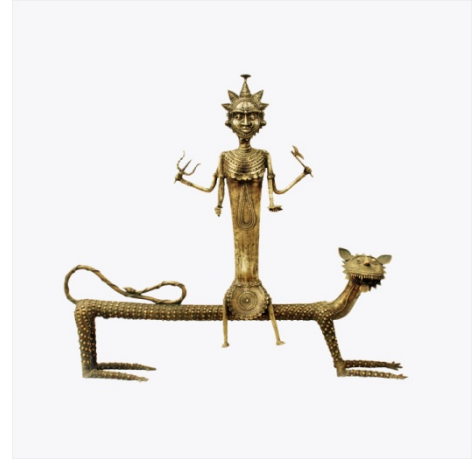
Many tribal groups of Chhattisgarh such as the Gonds, Baigas, Ahirs and others perform a post-harvest dance called the *Saila dance*. The *Saila* is a *martial dance* with fast and vigorous movements, predominantly performed by men, although women also take part. *Men used to dance it holding spears or swords in their hands*. In the modern day, however, the spears / swords have been replaced by *sticks*, because of which the *Saila* dance is also called a *danda nach* (stick-dance). The dancers have small sticks in their hand which they use to strike the stick of the person who is dancing next to them. They move in circles, in a clockwise and anti-clockwise direction, to the beat of drums.

The *Saila* is performed during and after the ten-day *Dussehra* festival dedicated to the goddess Danteshwari. Like Durga, Danteshwari Mata is a *tiger-riding goddess*. She offers protection to the villagers from tigers. Legend has it that the Danteshwari temple at Jagdalpur was built by the kings of Bastar at the spot where the *daanth* i.e. tooth of Sati (wife of Shiva) fell.

We can, therefore, conjecture that the two warriors spearing each other on this Kalibangan seal are performing the Saila dance with spears during the Dussehra festival, while the woman dressed up as a tiger symbolizes the tiger-riding goddess Danteshwari. Interestingly, she is wearing a horned head-dress with a leafy branch in the center, which is still worn by the Bison-Horn Maria Gonds of Chhattisgarh during their dances.



**Fig 2:** A dance of the Bison-Horn Maria Gonds of Chhattisgarh. The men wear horned head-dresses with plumes while the women hold the dancing sticks. Credit: Retlaw Snellac



**Fig 3:** A Dokra idol of the tiger-riding, trishul weilding, Danteshwari Mata. Source: [www.trimandir.org](http://www.trimandir.org)

A more well-known version of the stick-dance is the *Dandiya Raas*, which is a folk dance of Gujarat and Maharashtra, performed during the nine nights of Navratri, in honor of the goddess Durga, who is called *Amba Mata* in Gujarat. The Dandiya Raas originated from Lord Krishna’s *Raas Lila* (dance of love) with the gopis of Vrindavan.

This energetic dance form enacts a mock-fight between the goddess Durga and the demon Mahishasura. It was traditionally performed by men, although women also joined in later. The colourful sticks (*dandiyas*) are believed to represent the *sword or spear* of goddess Durga. At the center of the dance arena is placed a small earthen pot with holes in it, with a small earthen lamp lit and placed inside it. This is called the “Garbo” (from the Sanskrit *Garbha* meaning “womb”) symbolizing the creative potential and divine energy of Amba Mata. *Images and statues of the tiger-riding Amba Mata are placed near the Garbo.*

During the Dandiya Raas dance, men and women wearing vibrant costumes dance around the Garbo, holding colorful sticks. They move in circles and rhythmically strike their own sticks and those of the dancers next to them. The dancers generally form two concentric circles, one revolving in a clockwise direction and the other anticlockwise. They are accompanied by a drum-player who provides the beats. In form and spirit, the Dandiya Raas is very similar to the Saila dance of Chhattisgarh.



**Fig 4:** Dandiya Raas performed by men during Navratri. Source: <http://www.utsavpedia.com>



**Fig 5:** Amba Mata riding a tiger. Source: [www.trimandir.org](http://www.trimandir.org)

The image on the Kalibangan seal can, therefore, also be interpreted as the performance of the Dandiya Raas with spears in honor of the tiger-riding goddess Amba Mata, during the Navratri festival.

Martial dances with spears and swords are practiced by tribal cultures of India, and are particularly popular among the hilly tribes of the Northeast. For instance, the traditional martial art dance of Manipur is called *Thang ta* – the art of the sword and spear. The tribes of Nagaland usually wield weapons such as the spear and the sword, and wear colourful costumes and elaborate plumed head-dresses, during their dances.



**Fig 6:** Thang-ta performance with spear and sword. Source: <http://www.vajramutthi.org/>



**Fig 7:** Naga dancers with spears during the Horbill Festival. Source: <http://www.indiasnortheast.com>

Nor do the tribal folk shy away from dressing up as animals during their dances. In Orissa, a popular tribal dance form is the *Tiger Dance (Bagh Nritya)* which is dedicated to the tiger-goddess Durga. For



the dance, local artisans have their bodies painted with yellow varnish and black stripes like a tiger. Wearing a prominent set of hand-crafted ears, and a tail, they are quite a visual spectacle, as they walk down the village streets, dancing to the tune of musical instruments.

Similar dances are called Puli Attam in Tamil Nadu, Puli Vesham in Andhra Pradesh, Huli Vesha in Karnataka, and Puli Kali in Kerala. Most of these dances are performed during and around the time of *Dussehra*.



**Fig 8:** Bagh Nritya performers from Orissa. Source: Sanctuaryasia.com

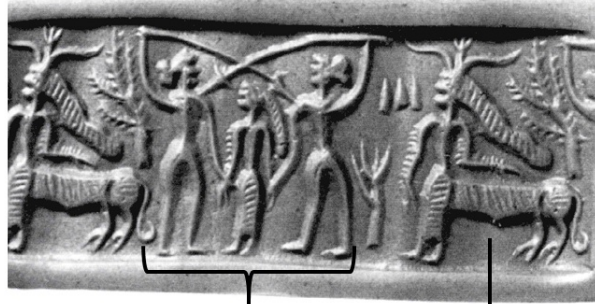


**Fig 9:** Puli Kali dance performed in Kerala during Onam festival. Source: www.hotelpooram.com

Therefore, we can infer that the Indus Valley tradition of performing martial dances with spears in honor of the tiger-goddess has been preserved within the tribal and folk cultures of India. Some of these practices are no longer observed within mainstream Hinduism, which has undergone many modifications over the course of the past 3000 years, due to the emergence of indigenous philosophies, artistic and literary forms, and the influence of external cultures. But the tribal groups, many of who migrated into India following the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization, have been able to preserve certain elements of the ancient Indus heritage, due to their habitats in remote forested tracts, outside the reach of homogenizing influences.

*In conclusion, the theme of the Kalibangan cylinder seal K-65 can be summarized as follows:* It shows a post-harvest folk dance such as Dandiya Raas or Saila being performed with spears during the time of Navratri in honour of the tiger-riding goddess Durga, also known as Amba Mata or Danteshwari Mata. In the modern day, the spear has been replaced by a stick (dandiya) and, instead of a woman dressed up as a tiger, an image or statue of the goddess is kept within the dancing arena.

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*Impression of  
Kalibangan  
Cylinder Seal  
K-65*

Dandiya / Saira dance was originally a martial dance in which men attacked each other holding spears, swords etc. Women also took part in the dance. In the modern day the spear / sword has been replaced by sticks.

Dandiya / Saira dance is performed during Navratri in honour of the tiger-riding goddess Durga (Amba Mata / Danteshwari Mata). During Dandiya, a statue or image of Amba Mata is kept in the dance arena, and the dancers dance around it.

**Fig 10:** Interpretation of Kalibangan cylinder seal K-65

**About the author:** Bibhu Dev Misra is a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology and the Indian Institute of Management and has been working as an Information Technology consultant for more than 15 years. He is also an independent researcher and writer on various topics related to ancient civilizations, myths, symbols, science and religion. His articles have been published in many journals, magazines, and websites. He can be contacted at [bibhumisra@gmail.com](mailto:bibhumisra@gmail.com) and via his personal blog: <http://bibhudev.blogspot.com>