Meru Jatra Festival/ Danda Nata -Odisha

**CONTEXT:**

Odisha’s Ganjam district administration has banned the Meru Jatra festival and congregations related to it at temples on the occasion of Mahavishub Sankranti on Monday.

Meru Jatra marks the end of 21-day-long festival of penance named ‘Danda Nata’. Mahavishub Sankranti is also start of the Odia New Year. On this day, thousands of devotees used to gather at the Tara Tarini hill shrine and other temples.

**Danda Nata:**

- Danda Nata or Danda Jatra is one of the most important traditional dance festivals organized in different parts of South Odisha and particularly in the Ganjam District, the heartland of ancient Kalinga Empire. The Danda Nata festival is being held in the month of Chaitra of every year. As per Ram Prasad Tripathy's article, it is an ancient festival of the Kalinga kingdom and still alive in and around the ancient Kalinga capital Sampa/Samapia i.e modern day Ganjam District. The Participants of Danda are called Danduas (also known as Bhoktas) and they pray Goddesses Kali and Shiva during this 13-, 18- or 21-day Danda period.
- Danda begins on an auspicious day before the Chaitra Sankranti or Meru Parba with traditional worship and fasting. The total number of days for the festival is 13, 18 or 21 days.
- Only male persons take part in this festival.
- The participants are known as the 'Bhoktas'. All the ‘Bhoktas’ or ‘Danduas’ lead a very pious life for all these days during the festival and they avoid eating meat, fish or cohabiting during this period.
- It is believed that the present day Danda Nata is a part of the ancient Chaitra Yatra festivals being celebrated every year at Taratarini Shakti/Tantra Peetha. The Kalinga Emperors organised this Chaitra festival for their Ista devi, Taratarini.
- It is dedicated to Lord Siva and Goddess Kali, who is represented by a Danda or a Pole, decorated with ‘different colored clothes. The participant perform Pani Danda, Agni Danda, Dhuli Danda etc,