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OVERVIEW

PERFORMING ART

Ojapali Dance of Assam: A Brief Overview

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Abstract

'*Ojapali*' dance is a performing art popular in different parts of Assam since the *Pre-Shankardeva* era. This article is a brief overview on the *Ojapali* dance of Assam as compiled based on the reviews and scholarly discussions related to the genesis and practice of this dance in different occasions. Attempts has also been made to compare the performances of this art in different parts of Assam.

Keywords: *Ojapali, Performing arts of Assam, Traditional dance forms*

1 Prelude

Indian music is a combination of Song, Dance and Instrument. It is ancient belief that the creator of music is *Lord Brahma*. It is also believed that *Lord Brahma* conferred it to *Mahadev Shiva*, who conferred it to Goddess *Saraswati*. The Indian music has developed under rituals of different religion. In an another view it has been mentioned that music is originated from folk and accordingly the folklore and folk music of different types and forms have been developed. Besides that, the development of music has also been made possible under religious rituals in different religions. The term folk culture implies their beliefs and conventions, rules and laws, practices and art form created by the people of a society that associate and bind them with each other. Among all art forms, music is the most prominent form. Folk music is a reflection of the social culture and is entertaining in character. Folk music is a composition by people that deliberates different activities, emotions and notions of human lives. *Lok Sangeet* is a music tradition that is prevalent in the folk society and continues verbally through generations. Assam, situated in the north-eastern region of India, features a hybrid culture that has evolved with times. Its culture is a mixing pot where rituals, customs heritage, lifestyle, faith and beliefs of various people are assimilated. In India, Assam has identified itself with a distinctive cultural heritage and traditions. Out of the diverse traditional cultures, *Ojapali* is one of the oldest performing art. The

Assamese folk culture can be divided into four categories such as-

1. Oral folk culture
2. Social folk practices
3. Physical culture
4. Folk art

Oral folk culture consists folk songs, poetry, stories, languages etc. The social folk practices include caste related festivals such as *Bihu*, *Lingava* and *Tusu puja*. The physical folk culture comprises of utensils of household, decoration, painting, cooking etc. Folk art includes various art forms such as puppetry, *dhol* playing, *Ojapali*, music, folk dance and Devadasi etc. There is an enormous diversity of Assamese folk culture. As mentioned above the life style of a community or ethnicity means its folk culture. *Lok paribeshya kala* has many forms such as Puppetry or *Putala nach*. *Khulia*, *Dhulia*, *Nagara Naam* as well as dramatic *paribeshya kala*, *Ojapali*. *Ojapali* is an ancient music based Semi dramatic performance program for worshipping god. It has its different forms. *Ojapali* tradition of music is an oral tradition and it continued from generation to generation under '*Guru-Shishya parampara*' or teacher student tradition. Mostly the villagers and common people are the artists of *Ojapali* music and performance as this is a religious tradition and performed in ritualistic occasions, festivals and other auspicious occasions in the temples and other auspicious places. Today the *Ojapali* artists are financially

not so sound and their lives are not very smooth sailing. They are mostly villagers and commoners and they belong to middle and poorer section of the society and have been taking this art form since ages. Due to modernization rapid transition to globalization this rich cultural heritage is facing the threat of change and extinction. If this art form and culture is not preserved, it may soon be lost. The new generations are also not interested to take this tradition, considering the financial hardship and negligible financial gains out of this art and practice. Through this study attempt has been made to enter into the root of this cultural heritage and to find out ways to work for its preservation.

2 Background

In India, the semi-drama program is a direct conveyor and treasurer of *Kathakata* (story-telling) tradition. The storyteller describes the mythological and epic stories or theories through songs and dance in *Kathakata*. Same is observed in the same case *Ojapali*, the *Oja* (Lead artist) describes the stories or different subjects from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Purana* through songs, dance and recitation. The *Kathakata* and the *Ojapali*, both the traditions are related with religious context. That is why it could be believed that the source of *Ojapali* tradition is embodied in Indian *Kathakata* tradition. There are many beliefs and theories about the origin of the *Ojapali*. Those are Daivid theory or *Oishwarik* theory, *Parijati* theory, *Byashkalai* and *Kendukalai* related theories. But in all these theories none is based on reality and traditions. So it is difficult to find out the originality of *Ojapali* tradition. Therefore, it is confirmed that *Ojapali* tradition was originated from the *Kathakata* tradition and evolved. Ancient books, inscriptions, various art and sculpture, temples, walls of different devalayas show that the tradition of music, dance and acting was there in Kamrup Pragjyotishpur from the very ancient time. The *Natyashastra* of Bharat Muni beholds the concrete evidence of the tradition of dance, music and acting in ancient Kamrup Pragjyotishpur. The *Kalika Purana* in 11th and 12th century mention has been made of vocal music instrumental music, dance with 108 kinds of *Mudras* (dance postures) have been found. Most of those postures are being used in *Ojapali* as *Nritta* or *Nritya* Hasta. In 13th century in the '*Smriti Ratnakar*' written by Vedacharya mentioned about the Vishnu Puja or Jagar Puja or Vishnu Jagar anushtan where *Ojapali* dances were performed. In Basudev Puja, *Ojapali* was performed which was known as '*Gandha Choupari Sabha*' in the remote areas of Darrang district of Assam. The artists of *Byah Sangeet* took resources from 12th - 15th century poets like Hem Saraswati, Rudra Kandali and Madhab Kandali. In *Byah* music or '*Byaha Ojapali*' and '*Satriya Ojapali*' there are many *ragas* which resemble with the *raga* based poetry books of '*Geeti Ramayana*' and '*Usha parinay*' composed by Durgaba Kayasta and Pitambar Kabi. It is evident that in the 9th - 10th century *Byah Sangeet* or *Byah Ojapali* inculcate and unlied to shape and form, prospered with musical substances in 12th - 13th century and then established as *Sattriya Ojapali* in the 15th century which stands as a prominent genre to the traditions of ancient dance drama

of Assam. During the period of *Bhakti Dharma* Movement in 15th - 16th century, the pioneers of *Bhakti* Movement, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdev were also attracted by the *Byah Ojapali* tradition. At the time of Srimanta Sankardev's '*Chihnajatra*' and on the occasion of preaching *Bhagawata* by the Vaishnavite Saints, *Ojapali* was performed as mentioned in *Charit puthi*. During the *Bhakti* movement, Guru Srimanta Sankardeva invited "Choto Boloram" of Darang Rowta, who was a *Dainapali* of a popular *Byah Oja* team of that time and enjoyed this form of music and dance and made him his disciple. The following is the evidence that was written by Daityari Thakur in *Charit puthi* "*Sankardeva-Madhavdeva* Chapters as-

"Anilanta Narayana Bhakti Anupaam
Vyahar Pali Tente Choto Boloram"

It can be mentioned that across the Indian *Kathakata* tradition prevailing from ancient period of *vedic* era as direct sustainable and viable instrument *Ojapali* takes subject matter of Assam from ancient epic. Being as a dance form of old *raga* based music of Assam and in the form of semi-dramatic type, ballad form of dance feature the process of evolution and development of all these forms make the present existing living traditional '*Sattriya Ojapali*' in Assam. *Ojapali* is an ancient and unique folk music of Assam and it represents the rich tradition and cultural heritage of the state. This art is mainly based on the performance of narrative poetry through songs, dance and drama. It is usually performed by a group of five to six men, the lead artist is known as the '*Oja*', who is accompanied by assistant artists known as '*pali*'. *Oja* narrates the themes from the mythological stories along with songs, *Mudras* and dance and *pali* repeats the songs by playing cymbals and marking time with their feet. The chief among the *pali* is the '*Dainapali*' or the right-hand aide, who further makes the theme interesting through his humorous dialogues. The simple meaning of the term '*Oja*' is pandit, a scholar of rules and regulations, who have in depth knowledge on scriptures, dancing and singing, *raga-raginis*, *swar-sanchar*, rhythm, acting etc. The *Oja* singers should have beautiful bodily postures, melodious voice and sharp memory. The *Oja* stands in the center of a circle when performing the *Ojapali*. The word '*Dainapali*' is derived from the two terms '*Daina*' and '*pali*'. A small pair of cymbals called '*Khutitaal*' is the main instrument used during the performance. The *Ojapali* folk music is a male dominated music tradition but women also present the traditional *Ojapali* singing in the '*Api Ojapali*' tradition sung in some places of Assam, such as Kamrup, Vyaskuchi and Nalbari. Now in Assam there are three types of *Ojapali* which are in practice-

1. *Byahgoa Ojapali*
2. *Marai* or *Sukannani Ojapali*
3. *Sattriya Ojapali*

In *Byahgoa Ojapali* the stories of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Bhagawat Purana* and other purana are mainly performed. *Marai* or *Sukannani Ojapali* is based

on *Shakti* tradition, relies on different religious episodes, such as the stories of the gods and goddesses puranas local goddess or village goddess called *Devi Manasa* (Goddess of Snake) and the tasks they accomplished on disguising the human forms. Some *Ojapali* groups include moral teaching and messages while describing the lyrical stanzas in their style of dialogues or question answers without losing their link with the original context of the narrating story. Sometimes a song is also presented to create awareness *Sukannani Ojapali* artists sing *Pada* from *Padmapurana*, which was based on *Beula-Lakhindwar's* Story. Sukabi Suknarayan was the writer of these *Padas* so it is known as *Sukannani Ojapali*. *Ojapali* is a combination of dance, music and instrument based performing art. *Oja* should be expert in all sides. There is a saying that-

“*Hate Mudra Mukhe Geet Pawedhare Taal*
Mayur Sadrish Nache Sehi Oja Vaal”

Sattriya Ojapali, developed in middle ages in Assam. It is a living tradition and is a strong part of *Sattriya* Dance. Creations of Sri Sri Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdev in 15th and 16th century of ‘*Bhakti*’ movement and later based on its inheritance, creations by subsequent saints and their contributions makes the integrated etymology of today’s ‘*Sattriya Nritya*’ form taking the ancient traditional ‘*Byah*’ music to propagate and spread ideals of nava-Vaishnavite religion into masses and to attract the mass people, the new creative form, including the ancient ritualistic semi-dramatic presentation as a medium of worship was introduced as ‘*Sattriya Ojapali*’ in subsequent time. Taking the ancient traditional byas music substances, *Sattriya Ojapali* was established, but the technical style of *Sattriya Ojapali* is established upon the main presentation style of *Sankari* style (*Vaishnavite*) or on already formed *Sattriya* music style at the time of *Bhakti* movement. The songs were presented on the incarnations of Lord Krishna on the earth, his childhood activities, such as *Kaliyanag daman* (Supreme of a huge serpent, kaliya), *Raashlila* (a romantic dance), *Killing of a demon King, Kans* and various episodes of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagawat Purana* etc. In *Sattriya Ojapali*, the devotional traditional songs are presented by the artist in traditional manner on the subject based on poetic treatises of Assam like *Kirtan Dasham*, *Mahabharata* written in Assamese text, whereas in *Byas Gowa Ojapali* the stories of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Bhagawat Purana* and other purana are mainly performed. Now a day in Majuli on the occasion of Sri Shankardeva’s birth and death anniversary the devotees of Kamalabari Satras performs *Ojapali* and sing ‘*Kansabadha Pada*’. On the occasion of Madhabdeva’s birth and death anniversary Kamalabari performs ‘*Prahlad Charit Pada*’. Based on the uniqueness of the contents *Ojapali* can be divided into two groups-

1. *Mahakavya* or epic based *Ojapali*
2. Non Mahakavya based *Ojapali*

In *Mahakavya* form of *Ojapali* is related to the vaishnavite essence. In this type of *Ojapali*, contents are usually taken

from epics viz. the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and *Purans*. The main aim of this subject matter is to express the essence of *Rama* or *Krishna Mahakavya* based *Ojapali* are-

1. *Byah Sangeet* or *Byah* singing *Ojapali* or *Byah Ojapali* or *Sabhagowa Ojapali*
2. *Ramayan Ojapali*
3. *Bhaora Ojapali* or *Bhoria* or *bhaira Ojapali*
4. *Durgabori Ojapali*
5. *Sattriya Ojapali* or *biyohya Ojapali*
6. *Panchali Ojapali*, and
7. *Dulari Ojapali*

On the other hand, in non Mahakavya or non-epic based *Ojapali Padas* are related to Sakta anusanga and mainly based on folk myths. In this *Ojapali*, *Padas* are recited from *Padma Puran*, *Mahakavya*, *Sri Sri Chandi* in lieu of epic. Here *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* etc epics are not to be taken as base source of musical medium. This form of *Ojapali* is known as “*Manasha Sangeet*” also. The Subdivision of non-epic based *Ojapali* are-

1. *Sukananni Ojapali*
2. *Bishahari gan gowa Ojapali*
3. *Mare Pujar gaan* or *Maregoa*
4. *Padma Puranar gaan gowa Ojapali*
5. *Tukuria Ojapali*

Among the various types of *Ojapali*, *Byah gowa* variety is the most ancient. In the non-epic based *Ojapali* music, the *Sukananni Ojapali* is ancient tradition. In *Ojapali* music are found in mixed use of Sanskrit Language. In ancient time most probably Sanskrit language was used. The complexity of Sanskrit language, lack of education among the local population led to the conversion of these compositions into local languages. Some songs in *Ojapali* contained Sanskrit mixed ancient Assamese words especially in slokas of *Byas* and *Sattriya Ojapali*. In this context, a song called ‘*Malita*’ can be taken for an example, wherein certain distorted forms of Sanskrit terms are observed. *Ojapali* tradition is more prevalent in the rural areas and places such as *Vyaskuchi*, *Nalbari*, *Sipajhar*, *Mangaldoi*, *Jagara*, *Nagaon* and *Majuli* of Assam. It is evident from the history that though *Ojapali* tradition is on Hindu religion but it can bound the religion bonding in both Hindu and Muslims. Because earlier Muslims peoples also used to sing *Ojapali*. Music has been changing well as developing into different forms. It has, been said in “*Bharatiya Sangeet Vadya*” that The ‘*Ghana badya*’ developed up to the middle ages have not shown any more significant progress in term of classical music. Its main reason is that *Ghana Vadya* (instrument made of bronze) were used specially in devotional music and classical music during ancient times. The status of *Ghana Vadya* of the middle ages has remained unchanged even up to modern times. The *Ghana Vadya* are used in the *Ojapali* music as instruments for introducing rhythm in pace steps gestures etc. The *Ghana Vadya* such as *Khutitaal* and *Kartaal* are used when singing the *Ojapali* music *Khutitaal* is tied to both ends with a rope and is played using both hands. It is smaller to *Kartala* in size. In *Sukananni Ojapali*, used ‘*dhol*’ musical instrument in a standing position is used with the *Deodhani* dance. In ancient instances

of *Ojapali* mention the use of instrument like *ektara*, *lau-tonkari* and *dotara*. An evidence of *veena* being used in the *Byas Ojapali* is found in the ancient references.

3 Conclusion

In Assam there are some unique folk music representing rich tradition and cultural heritage of the state and one of these is '*Ojapali*'. It symbolizes the religious beliefs of the local people. The *Ojapali* music is a beautiful coordination of four art forms of songs, instrumental music dance and acting. The qualities of the both *desi* (folk) and *margi* (classical) are found in *Ojapali* music. *Ojapali* folk music is also originated and used for religious occasions. It has many *raga* elements, which indicates that *Ojapali* is a developed form of folk and it is also a semi developed form of *margi* or classical music. *Ojapali* is such a devotional music tradition prevalent in Assam, in which the presence of the ancient narrative poetry is extremely obvious. The use of *ragas* and *raginis* in the *Ojapali* music proves that the two forms of the folk and classical music are mutually complementary. From the study of *Ojapali* it is evident that *Ojapali* traditional music of Assam is an excellent example of the *ragabound*, devotional folk music. The *Ojapali*, what was its nature earlier and how it was sung in ancient age is a difficult proposition to narrate. But *Ojapali* music is still maintaining both the nature and traditions of music that is *margi* and *desi*. In modern times, the scope of stage presentation of *Ojapali* music has increased. It has emerged as a performing art. The Ministry of culture provides artist pension and grants to the well-known artists of the *Ojapali* music for patronizing this art form. Mostly the *Ojapali* artists belong to rural areas and their means of livelihood is this form of art only. Lack of education and economic vulnerability are widely rampant among these artists. The governments have made several efforts to address their problems. The "Sangeet Natak Academy", Guwahati have taken initiative to patronize the *Ojapali* music. The government has also undertaken some training programs for patronizing these art forms. Moreover, workshops, seminars and review programs are organized wherein the scholars demonstrate these art form. The student can approach a mentor for learning this art. The Sangeet Natak Akademi has also made an arrangement for training of these art forms by opening a training center and providing institutional grants to the qualified artists for imparting this training. Efforts have been taken to preserve these art form through audio and video recording. The artists of this art form are presently in a difficult situation and lack of enthusiasm, numerous songs have become extinct for lack of resources to preserve those. These art forms will be extinct in the coming time for numerous reasons, including the impact of modernism, dwindling interest of the population, economic vulnerability and lack of education. Hence, patronizing these art forms is crucial. However, it still calls for its due attention, appreciation and nurturing from the members of the society at large.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this reported communication.

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