

Origin and Evolution of Ojapali: A Folk Performing Art of Assam

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Abstract

Ojapali, a form of performing art that is popular in the Northeastern region of the India, especially in Assam. Ojapali focuses on the stories from epics and puranas. There is a belief that Ojapali have derived from Indian kathakata tradition and it is presented in a group. Ojapali is divided into two main parts- epic Ojapali and non-epic Ojapali. It is one of the oldest art form of Assam. Before, this art form developed as a mode of religious activity only and the temples performed an important role in the evolution of Ojapali. But later, the purpose of knowledge on moral and ethical principles also culminated in the process providing it greater respectability.

Keywords – Ojapali, Assam, Performing Art, Epic oriented, Non-Epic oriented

I. Introduction

Ojapali is a special form of performing art, revered especially all across the state of Assam since ancient times. Apart from providing entertainment to the folks, it educates people on the religious and moral ethos. Simultaneous conglomeration of song, dance and performance in its exhibition aptly qualifies it as a ‘sangeet’ or music as is being conceptualized by the oriental aestheticists. Among the folk drama varieties, it is a quasi-dramatic form of performance. It occupies a special place in the realm of classical music and dance in Assam. Scholars are of the opinion that it stems out of the pan Indian tradition of story tellers or narrators called the ‘kathaks’. The kathaks- comprising one or more persons, used to narrate, demonstrate and recite with musical instruments the stories from the great epics and the Puranas to the assembly of audience.¹ In ‘mahabhashya’, Patanjali used the word ‘**granthika**’ with similar meaning. The granthikas also used song and dance to interpret, analyse and describe the ancient events to the audience. The commonality clearly indicated that Ojapali has roots in and resemblance to the important Indian tradition of storytelling. Like in the Indian tradition, in Ojapali also, the subject matter of the performance is derived out of the great epics and the puranas. But the tradition is rooted in religious faiths and beliefs. So undoubtedly the kathak tradition is the root where from the Ojapali in Assam has evolved. Later on, various Arya and non-Arya elements also mingled into it.

In Kalika Purana, both the words- Kamrupa and Pragjyotishpura are used as the name of the region now known as Assam. There are ample evidences of song, dance and drama performances being in practice since very ancient days. “In the thirteenth chapter of the Natya Shastra it is mentioned that there were four types of drama performances- called ‘Natya-Pravritti’ around the country at that time- named Avanti, Dakshinatya, Panchali and Odramagadhi. This classification is based on four types of ‘vritti’ named Bharati, Satwati, Kaishiki and Aarbhati. The Odramagadhi pravritti is found in the areas like Onga, Bonga, Kalinga, Vatsa, Odra, Magadha, Pundra, Nepal, Pragjyotishpura etc. It implies that a form of drama with some exclusive features was prevalent in Pragjyotishpura since prior to the 2nd or 1st century BC. Drama is inclusive of song, dance and rendition of music. The Ojapali is deeply

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influenced by the Odragamadhi genre of performance. Therefore, it is easily understood that Ojapali type of performances were found in the Pragjyotishpura-Kamrupa since prior to the 2nd or 1st century BC.²² The temples played important role in the evolution of Ojapali. In fact, such performing art forms developed as a mode of religious activity only. But the purpose of dissemination of knowledge on moral and ethical principles also culminated in to the process providing it greater respectability.

II. Aim & Objectives

The main aim of the study is to analyse the origin and evolution of Ojapali; its heritage and classification. In fact this study contains overall evaluation of the art form Ojapali.

III. Methodology

The study is entirely based on content analysis method. Secondary sources of data are used in the study, which are obtained from books, journals, magazines etc.

IV. Legends associated with the performing art of Ojapali

Among the various opinions being put forward regarding evolution and growth of Ojapali, a few of them receives more attention of the scholars.

According to the first, Indra- the king of the devas once arranged some dance by the celestial nymph in his court Urvashi for entertainment of Arjuna for his defeating of the Asura who are archrivals of the devas. But while dancing, Urvashi fell attracted to Arjuna and expressed her desire to him. On knowing this, Indra also encouraged Arjun for accepting the offer. But Arjuna refused. This enraged Urvashi and cursed him for remaining eunuch for a year. During that year Arjuna lost his warrior self and became known as Brihannala and danced around in the earth with the gandharvas. Oja pali is the song and dance variety propagated by Brihannala during that tenure. He trained Uttara, the daughter of king Virata in that education.

On the other hand, other variety of Ojapali- called the Viyahar Ojapali is believed by its practitioners to have been learnt in dream by a woman named Parijatee. She taught it to her disciples who were known as the Vyasa. Therefore it descended down to the future generations.

Another story is that the Ojapali is created by two siblings named Vyashkalai and Kendukalai. Vyashkalai created Viyahar Ojapali and Kendukalai created Sukanani Ojapali. Thus, Vyash sangeet and Manasa geet- two musical varieties were introduced from two brothers.

However, such stories are without any objective basis. There is no evidence till date to establish the existence of the characters like Parijatee or Vyashkalai and Kendukalai. Vyash sangeet is a known musical variety. Vyashkalai seems to be a title, perhaps being assigned for expertise on it, rather than a personal name as such.

Comparing the various legends associated with the emergence of the Ojapali it appears that rather than having links to some individual characters, it bears closer affinity to the pan Indian tradition of storytelling with performance- named kathaka. Recitation of stories from the epics and the Puranas in Ojapali resembles closely to the Kathaka tradition. Both the performances directly connect to the audience and has religious overtone throughout. Besides, 'in the Vedas, there are two characters named Upasthapaka and Udgata. The upasthapaka

teaches the Yajna, the offerings and elaborates on the mantras. The task of the Udgata is to sing the slokas of the Sam Vedas. The word ojha or oja emerged out of the Sanskrit word Upaddhyaya. In Assam also the premiere performer of Ojapali is called the Oja.³ Based on similar such affinities, lineage of the Ojapali from the pan Indian kathaka tradition is easily understood. Similar types of performances are observed in the other parts of the country as well- like the 'Panchali Gaan' in West Bengal, 'Pavada' in Maharashtra, 'Harikatha' in South India, 'Ramleela' in North India and 'Yakshya gaan' in Karnataka.

V. Classification

Ojapali may be classified into several categories according to subject matter, style of performance, and text. The performance of it changes according to the context or occasion.

Depending upon the subject matter or the text, Ojapali is classified into two classes-

- (a) Epic oriented Ojapali.
- (b) Non-Epic oriented Ojapali

Epic Oriented Ojapali

The Ojapali in this genre recites stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, the Puranas etc. Vishnu or Krishna is the central character in such stories. Of late, however, songs in the theme of shaktism also are seen to have been performed. However, such epic oriented Ojapali are classified in to several sub-classes; like-

- (i) Vyash Sangeen or Viyahar Ojapali or Sabhagowa Ojapali
- (ii) Rayman Ojapali or Ramayan singing Ojapali or Rayman Sangeet
- (iii) Bhaira(Bhaura/ Bhauriya) Ojapali
- (iv) Durgabaree Ojapali
- (v) Satriya Ojapali or Biyahiya Ojapali
- (vi) Panchali Ojapali
- (vii) Dularee Ojapali

Non-Epic Oriented Ojapali

This other variety of the Ojapali is associated more to the shaktism or its varied forms like the Manasa Puja. They observe some structural differences also from the previous category. The Manasa Sangeet is a premiere theme of this category. Like the previous one, this second variety is also seen in various sub-classes; like-

- (i) Sukanani Ojapali or Rong Guwa Ojapali
- (ii) Vishahari Gaan
- (iii) Songs of Maare Puja or Maare Gaan
- (iv) Songs of Padma Purana
- (v) Tukuriya Ojapali.

VI. Ojapali: An Overall Assessment

The Ojapali tradition in Assam is prior to the times of the vaishnavite saint- Sankardeva. Because elements of Ojapali are observed in various performing art forms propagated by Sankardeva for spreading the bhaktism in the region. The support cast to the Oja in his performance are called the 'Pali's'. The 'Pali's' again are of several varieties- like Dynapali, Aagpali, Gurpali etc. Among the Epic oriented Ojapali forms, the Vyaas Sangeet is considered

the best. “We know about at least two forms of Ojapali with some exclusive features or characters. In one form, the Oja wears a loose type of body wear flowing all the way down to the knee length and to the wrists in hands called Jamai or Sapkon. On head they put on a hat of the shape like the tip of the boat. In ankles they put on a jingling ornament called Nupur. The ‘Pali’s play the bell shaped ‘taal’ - a two piece instrument clinged to two first fingers in the two hands, the sound being produced by banging one on to the other piece. This type of Ojapali is the Viyaah Ojapali or Vyaash. Viyaah Ojapali is also called Vaishnav Ojapali. They are performed in the occasions like Vishnu-Puja, Vasudev Puja, Gundh- Choupari, ordinary assembly of the folks etc.”⁴ The biyahar Ojapali is called Sabhagowa Ojapali in Darrang. Various ragas are applied during the singing in this type of the Ojapali. However gradually such ragas are disappearing in to oblivion. The other type of the japali is called Manasa Ojapali or Sukanani Ojapali. In it, the stories of Beula- Lakhinder, Chando Sadagar (Chando -the merchant) etc are used to sing in different tune and rhythms. However, unlike the Vyaash Ojapali, the ragas are not seen to have been in play.

With the various exclusive features the Ojapali has graduated up on to a special class of music- having five organs or five distinct elements. Those five elements are alaap (the vocal prelude), Guru Vandana (eulogy of the guru), Vishnu Pada (songs with the Vishnu as the central character), Sangeetalap (rendition of music), Zhuna or Juna. They are performed in that order. In guru Vandana, normally the Vishnu is accorded the status of the Guru. The third organ in the performance namely Vishnu Pada is basically dance-centric. The Sangeetalaapa itself includes various elements called- Malita, Raga, Bana, Diha, Pada etc. the last organ named Zhuna- bears touch of eroticism and are for some light entertainment of the folks. Thus the craft of the Ojapali is a gamut of finer skill on various elements. Dance, dressing, dialogue and gestures, Oja needs all the four features.

VII. Conclusion

The cultural arena is significantly enriched by the elements like Ojapali. This art form that have evolved out of the pan Indian tradition has assumed local characteristics in every nook and corner of Assam wherever it is practiced. Ojapali is basically a dual featured performing art form in Assam depending on its structure and subject matter. They emphasized primarily in propagating religious faith, simultaneously educating them on the ethical and moral principles as well. However, it is a matter of deep regret that it is now on an obvious trend of descendancy. Despite that, it is undeniable that this quasi-dramatic Odramagadhi form of performing art is still occupying a special place in the imagination of the assamese folks.

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