PERFORMING HISTORY, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL POLITICS

A STUDY ON THE OJAPALI PERFORMANCE OF ASSAM

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that dissertation entitled "PERFORMING HISTORY, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL POLITICS: A STUDY ON THE OJAPALI PERFORMANCE OF ASSAM" submitted by DEBAJIT BORA, Theatre and performance studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – 110067, India, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is his original work and has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of this or any other University.
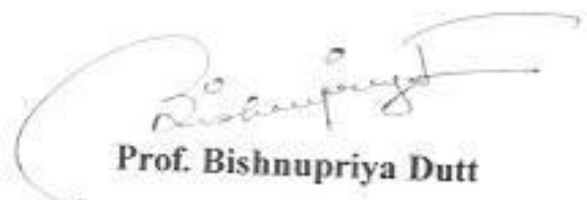
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Declaration by the Candidate

The thesis titled "Performing History, Identity and Cultural Politics: A study on the Ojapali performance of Assam" submitted by me for the award of the of Mater of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in parts or in full, for any other degree , diploma in any university or institution.

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CONTENT

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Introduction

Ojapali, a form once dominant in the entire lower Assam, has become increasingly confined to a few localities of Darang district. It has been cited in local, national and regional accounts as the 'folk' and the 'local' while also in touch with what was seen as the more 'artistic', semi classical forms.[1] The connection to *Ankianat*[2] and the impact of *Sankaradev*[3] was as evident as the local comic elements. The form through a story-telling style also includes a more abstract form of dancing and singing as enactment of the episodes. Hence in mapping the performance forms of Assam in various sources[4], just as *Ankianat* and *Sankaradev'*s impact would be emblematic, the mention or description of Ojapaliwould also feature. By its very inclusion as a more 'local' (read indigenous) category in contrast to the more aesthetic forms, its impact can hardly be ignored. The question which emerges is where do we locate its popularity and how do we read its accounts (ethnographic and historical) in both legitimate histories and official cultural policy documents which includes within it a judgmental mapping of 'high' and 'low' culture.My objective is to question the conflicting claims in the writings of histories of Ojapali as 'popular' and it growing marginalization. I argue that by studying the form and a close reading of both

secondary and primary sources, I would be exploring how the form retells a more nuanced history of itself and creates alternate histories which then allows one to write a historiography of the performance, rather than take the linear narratives which exist around forms like Ojapali. I

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[1]Neog Maheshwar, Ed. *Sattriya aru ojapali nachar dhrupad iswkriti, sattriya dance of Assam and their rhythms*, (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Academy, 1985.)

[2] Religious plays performed in Assamese temple. The form was initiated by Sanakrdev to spread his socio religious messages.

[3] Sankardev is the Assamese religious personality advent in 15th century. He was the initiator of Vaishnavaism in Assam.

[4]Neog Maheswar, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam: Śaṅkaradeva and movements in Assam: Sankardev and his time, (*Delhi:Motilal Banarsidass, 1965)Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

argue that unless ethnographic studies of performances historicize its own presence, it falls prey to appropriations and just exists as examples to support the 'categories' they have come to represent in post independent Indian performance writings.

Historical Background

Pre-independence Assam:

Assam**,** a state often romanticized as red rivers and blue hills, situated in the north eastern part of India is also known for its traditional performing art forms. From *Bihu* to *Bagurumba*, from *AnkiyaBhaona* to *Mobile theatre* there are endless performance genres in this valley. Assam has a history of migration with different ethnic groups settling in the state such as *Bodo, Mishing, Ahom, Tiwa, Moran, Matak, Kochari, Rabha, Karbi,* etc. These communities identify the specific valley as their own before they identifies with 'greater Assamese' or even an Indian identity. We can get the picture of Assam (before being separated into eight states) in *Asam Buranji* written by Gunabhiram Barua in 1972. He writes "The eastern boundary of Assam can be identified with the mountains, where *Misimi* and *Singfow* people live. The western boundary spreads up to *Manah* River and *Haboraghat Pargana* of Goalpara district. The north can be identified with the mountains inhabited by the people of *Bhot, Aka, Dafola and Abor* community. Finally the mountains, where *Naga, Khachiya and Garo* communities live can be identified as the southern part of the state."[5] The above statement demonstrates the level of geographical and ethnic diversity in this part of India which has manifested itself though various performing art forms as well. On the other hand, kings and royal families have traditionally patronized ritual and religious dances as forms of worship of their patron gods.

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[5]Barua Gunabhiram, *Asom Buranji*, (Guwahati:Published by Asom Prakashan Porishad, 1972)

Dr. Maheshwar Neog says that 'The cultural field of ancient *Kamrupa* (today's Assam) came into being before Christ. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*there is mention of *Pragjyotishpur* (earlier Assam was known by this name) and *Kamrupa*.'[6] Dr. Neog also refers to*Bharatmuni*'s *Natyasashtra* which was written around 2nd century BC and argues that among the four '*Pavrriti*' of *Bharata*[7]*, 'Audra Magadhi'* includes our state. *Kumar Bhaskar Barma* was the king of *Kamrupa* in 7th century when Chinese traveler *Huwen Tsang* visited this valley. Dr. Neog in his book says that 'during *Tsang*'s stay, king *Bhaskar Barma* entertained him with music and dance.'[8]. Before *Sankardev*'s movement in Assam the performances basically belonged to the realm of idol worshipping and at the same time different communities were performing their own traditional forms such as *Bagurumba* by *Bodo*, *Mishing* people's *Mishing dance* and most importantly the *Bihu* dance patronized by *Ahom* kings in upper Assam. On the other hand Lower Assam was ruled by *Koch* kings. The cultural diversity of lower regions was quite different because the *Koch*kings were believers of Hindu gods and goddesses such as *Shiva, Durga, Kali, Manasha*, etc. Among the popular and early performances of lower Assam, forms like*Ojapali, Deodhwani, Mohoho, Kamrupia Dhulia, Thiyanaam, Kushangaan* etc can be identified.

It is then clearly evident that in works like that of Neog, there is an attempt to link the larger Assamese culture to a 'classical' past overlooking the many indigenous performance forms. Hence in the writing of history, the hierarchies of culture are spelt out within a kind of grand narrative that needs to be challenged.

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[6]Neog Maheshwar, *Sattriya Nritya* (New Delhi: published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1985)
[7] Bharata, who wrote Natyasashtra, mentioned these in his writing.
[8] Neog Maheshwar, *Sattriya Nritya* (New Delhi: published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1985)

The culture of lower Assam was also influenced by contemporary culture of the nearby state of West Bengal. There are historical evidences of an age of literature patronized by the royal court of Lower Assam known as *Panchali* literature period[9]. This age is believed to be *Sankadev's* counterpart in lower Assam. The uniqueness of *Panchali* literature was the performance based on the literature and its popularity at that particular time. The popularity of that form during that period can easily be judged in Dr. Goswami's writing, 'The songs and poems under *Panchali* literature were well accepted by the common people. These songs were basically performed amongst the people. Songs and poems of that period were sung, recited and enjoyed together in public places. Apart from literary value, these songs and poems also carried a lyrical tone and rhythmic sense in it.'[10]There are evidences that the performance of Ojapali was coming through a popular phase in the period of *Panchali* Literature. Dr. Goswami has differentiated this period into three categories:

1. Epic *Panchali* literature

2. *Mansha or Bishahari* related *Panchali* literature.

3. *Panchali* literature related to other subjects.

One can see that in the second phase there is a unique distinction of literature around the serpent goddess *Manasha*. Therefore we can assume that this is probably the most flourishing performance period around *Manasha* cult of which Ojapali would be a subculture. Because of the popularity of performance around *Manasha, Sankardev'*s *Bhakti* movement was not able to enter lower Assam for a long period.

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[9] Panchali literature period is believed to be contemporary of Sankardev. During this period most of the Manasha poetries have been written. In was practiced in parts of Assam. Bengal, Bihar and today's Bangladesh.
[10]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014)

Sankardev's *Bhakti* movement started in the 15th century and introduced *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma* (Believe only one god) with the ideological connotation of '*Ekdeo/ EkSeo/ Eko bine naikeo*' which means that 'there is only one god in this universe'. Dr. Maheshwar Neog defines *Bhakti* in the following ways, '*Bhakti*-that is personal, sensuous, intense and sublime, directed to personal deity' [11]. During his movement *Sankardev* took disciples from other non-Hindu communities including *Chandsai* (Chandkhai) from Muslim community to spread his socio religious messages among them. Most importantly *Madhavdev* the next spiritual saint after *Sankardev* was an idol worshipper before he entered to *Sankardev's* camp. He had a long debate with *Sankardev* before he came under *Sankardev*. In the reconstruction of Assam state with his *Vaishnavic* elements *Sankardev* along with his disciples took a tour all over the country and after that he initiated some kind of performance form which later became the identity of Assamese culture. The first attempt made by him was '*Chihnayatrabhaona'*. Here I quote researcher Archana Battcharyee Thus *Sankardev* organized a dramatic performance styled as *Cihna-Yatra*, which literally stands for a 'pageant on painted scenes.' [12] From the detailed description available in the biographies, it appears that *Cihna-Yatra* was probably a pantomimic show with a scenic background to emphasize the effect. The use of painted scenery as early as in the fifteenth century is a fact of definite significance for it is like a signpost for the question to what extent drama was developed. This pageant show was developed later into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue styled as *Ankiya Nat*." [13] Many scholars argue that *Sankardev* had taken the idea of *AnkiyaBhaona* or *Nat* from other parts of India. But the new generation writers like

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[11]Neog Maheswar, *The contribution of the Sankardev movement to the culture and civilization of India*, Sangeet Natak, vol.XL, No.2 (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akdemy, 2006)

[12] Bhattacharya, Archana. *Srimanta Sankardev's Ankiya-Nat* (A New Dramatic Genre in Assamese Literature), *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, ISSN (0976-8165)

[13]Bhattacharya Archana, *Srimanta Sankardev's Ankiya-Nat (A New Dramatic Genre in Assamese Literature),The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, ISSN (0976-8165).

Sanjib Kumar Borkakoty and Archana Bahttacharyee finds it problematic and argue that Ojapali is the basis of his *Ankiya Nat*. Maheshwar Neog also says the same thing in one of his books as he writes that 'The Ojapali chorus is imagined to be precursor of the orchestral band or *gayana-bayana* (drummer-singer) of the later dramatic performances, while *Sankardev's Sutradhara*, who persists all through the representation, has his photo types in the Oja of Ojapali.'[14]Yet one cannot overlook *Sankardev's* contribution to the society with new performances like *Sattriya dance, Borgeet, SattriyaOjapali* which still has its popularity in the Assamese society.

Colonial Era:

As a result of the '*Iyandaboo treaty*'[15]in the year 1826 the British finally entered Assam. Sanjib Barua describes "towards the end of 18th century the expanding Burmese empire had begun to intervene in the affairs of *Ahom*, *Manipuri*, and other small kingdoms of northeast India. Internal dissension in the *Ahom* court had led to dissident factions cultivating ties with the Burmese court, and in 1817 there were a number of Burmese military invasions of Assam. In 1822 the *Ahom* kingdom came to be ruled by Burmese commander. The aristocracy escaped to British territories and sought British help against the Burmese invaders. As the East India Company's territories came to borders the Burmese empire, the latter's military excursions began to alarm the British, making for a convergence of interests between the Assamese and the East India Company against the Burmese. When *Ahom* kingdom passed into British hands, it was the first time in

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[14]Neog Maheshwar, Pranavsvarup Neog, *Aesthetic Continuum Essays on Assamese Music, Drama, Dance and Paintings* (New Delhi: Published by Omsons publication, 2008),P-120.

[15]The Treaty of Iyandaboo was signed by Gen. Campbell from the British side and Governor of Legaing Maha Min HlaKyawHtin from the Burmese side on 24 February 1826.The British demanded and the Burmese agreed to cede to the British Assam, Manipur, Rakhine (Arakan), and Taninthayi (Tenasserim) coast south of Salween river, cease all interference in Cachar and Jaintia, pay an indemnity of one million pounds sterling in four installments, allow for an exchange of diplomatic representatives between Ava and Calcutta, and sign a commercial treaty in due course.

history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation."[16] With the aggression of colonialism, various changes came to this valley. In 1846, first Assamese newspaper '*Arunudoy*'[17] was published from *Sivasagar* district. *Arunudoy* was not only a newspaper but for the first time it used the word '*Assamese*', which later became the identity of this land. Dr. Devabrata Sharma argues that "there is no proof that anybody had used the word *Asomiya* (Assamese) before *Arunudoy*. It was never used before to identify this community. This implies that pre-*Arunudoy* time there was no sense of language unity and Assamese language identity among the community."[18] We have already discussed that before colonialism there was not one Assam. Both lower Assam and Upper Assam enjoyed different sorts of influences under two different kingships. It is said the language developed in *Kamata* Kingdom of Lower Assam then spread through different written traditions such as *Madhav Kandali's Ramayana, Sankardev's Borgeet*, other religious books and finally *Ahom* patronization, which made it more acceptable to local people. Before those, different communities speaking their own ethnic languages, perhaps *Kamrupa* (today's Guwhati) is a place where people used to speak Assamese. The word Assamese doesn't sound as early because the very concept of 'Assamese' or 'Assam' was not frequently used during the rule of *Ahom* and *Koch*. The concept of greater Assam emerged when colonial rulers got both *Koch* and *Ahom* lands united.

This was a significant period in cultural manifestation, for instance in 1857, the first ever Assamese modern drama '*Ram Navami*' was written by Gunabhiram Barua. In 1888, three

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[16]Baruah Sanjib, India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, (Pennsylvania: Published by University of Pennsylvania, 1999)

[17]Arunudoy, first Assamese news paper published from Sivasagar in 1846. Its first editor was Dr. Nathan Brown.

[18]Sharma Devabrat, *Asomiya bhasha aru Sahityar Bikash,Asomiya Jaatigathan Prokriya aru jatiya janagusthigata anusthan somuh* (Jorhat: Published by Akaabya Prakashan, 2006)

Assamese students namely Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Laxminath Bezbarua and Hemchandra Goswami (known as '*Trimurty*'- Three statue of Assamese literature) all of whom studied at Calcutta start an organization called '*Asomiya Bhasharunnati Sadhini Sabha*' (Organization for development of Assamese Language) and started writing poetries, short stories and articles in Assamese. Later establishment of '*Asom Sahitya Sabha*' (Organization of Assamese literature) in 1917 became a face for Assamese cultural identity.

Here one can say cultural changes came along with arrival of colonialism. One such was modern theatre productions and on the other end of the spectrum was *Jhumur* dance practiced among tea garden workers. Mention may be made here that the tea garden workers were transported by British from *Chota Nagpur* plateau of today's Jharkhand and made them work as bonded laborers. The *Jhumur* songs and dance basically expressed their hardships. On the other hand modern dramatic productions were also inspired by contemporary Bengal mainly performed during the *Durga puja* celebrations. There is no evidence of patronization of any kind of performances during the colonial era. Most interestingly in the later part of this era performances played a major role in carrying the nationalist movement forward to some extent. The most popular performances like Ojapali and *Bihu* carried the messages among common masses against colonial rulers. On the other hand *Jhumur* songs of tea garden workers always expressed the hardships under British *babus* (officers) and built a culture of resistance within its own space and community.

Like any other performance histories there are available documents on the socio- political changes during colonial era Assam, but not much on cultural changes. Here oral histories are rich resources and help us to understand the scenario of that period. Kinaram Nathan Ojapali practitioner who is in his 90's but clearly remembers how Ojapali songs in independent

movement carried the struggle to the rural places. He himself composed songs to perform Ojapali with Gandhiji's non-violence messages. Well known academician and scholar Dr. Leela Gogoi's '*Bihu geetaru bonghusha*' is a well documented book for years which shows that changes came to *Bihu* songs with the coming of British and later the Indian nationalist movement.On the other hand the story of the IPTA in Assam goes back to 1945, when Hemango Biswas went on a tour all over Assam with the 'Surma Valley Cultural Troupe'. In the course of this tour, the troupe also went to Tezpur, where Biswas met Jyotiprasad Agarwala *and* Bishnuprasad Rabha, who were already busy with their cultural practices from 1930's. It was a golden age of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika who had given a new dimension to the cultural phase of Assam. It was this meeting that led to the establishment of the Assam State Committee of the Indian People's Theatre Association in 1948, with *Agarwala* as the President and Bishnuprasad Rabha as the Vice-President. When Hemango Biswas went to Tezpur, the stage was already set for the establishment of the IPTA.

Post independent Assam:

Post independence Assam has witnessed many more struggle of its own. The division of Assam into eight states, the 1961 language movement and the 1979 Assam movement were two major struggles to assert Assamese identity after independence. In 1963 the Naga Hills district separated from Assam and became a new state as Nagaland. In 1972, as a result of the demands of the tribal peoples of the Meghalaya it became a separate state. In 1972, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were also separated from the greater landscape of Assam. Language movement was started against Bengali language domination over Assamese in 1961. It was soon after that the proposal was raised at the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to declare Assamese as the one and only official language of the state. 1979 to 1985 was the period which gave a different

dimension to the history of Assam. It was a movement against undocumented immigrants in the state led by All Assam Students Union which later came into power as *Assam Gana Parishad* in 1985. It also changed the cultural snapshots of the state. People of that period remember how popular performances like *Bihu,* Ojapali, *Thiyanaam, Kushangaan* etc. were used by the leaders to spread the messages of movement to the far interior.

The establishment of Guwahati University in 1948 and its Assamese language department began work with Assamese language and culture. As a result scholars like Banikanta Kakoty, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Birinci Kumar Barua, Leela Gogoi, and Maheswar Neog contributed a lot with their research works. Under the initiative of independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the first drama seminar and dance seminar in 1956 and 1958 respectively invited papers from Assam and discussed extensively about Assamese Drama and Dances. (The drama seminar paper is quite debatable as it does not mention Bishnuprasad Rabha and Jyotiprasad Agarwala at all.) But the dance seminar paper opened up the ways for the practitioners and many of them were awarded by the government. After 47 years of long struggle for *Sattriya*'s classical recognition, it was Bhupen Hazarika, when he became the chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademy in 2000 *Sattriya* was included as the 8th classical dance of the country. Other performance forms also popularized to some extent and became representatives in national events such as Independence Day, Republic day, National and Commonwealth games etc. It is debatable why the cultural picture of Assam is always represented by upper Assam. Today *Bihu and Sattriya* is the identity of Assam but it doesn't really reflect the culture of enitre Assam. For example, a person from Barrack valley or lower Assam doesn't identify herself\himself with these performances.

Darang district and Construction of 'Darangi culture' and 'Identity':

Darang is presently a district of Assam situated in the northern part of Guwahati. It has a long history of *Koch* and *Darangi* kingdom ruling over it. Among the three cultural divisions of Assam (Upper, Lower and Barrack valley) Darang falls into lower part of Assam. Today's *Odalguri* district, which is now under *Bodoland*, was once a part of Darang. Technically it consists of heterogeneous population of *Bodo,* Muslim and upper-lower caste Hindus. Darang is popular for its culture. Earlier *Tezpur* was also a part of it and then three cultural stalwarts of Assamese culture JyotiprasadAgarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha and Phani Sharma also represented Darang district. During post colonial era greater Darangdistrict was divided into Sonitpurand Darang. Dr. Kanak Chandra Sahariyah says "As a result of the *Iyandabo* treaty of 1826, it went under the British as part of Assam. That was first time Darang became a part of India. In the year 1833 British administration had reset Darang district's boundary and declared *Mangaldoi* and *Tezpur* as *Mouza*. At first its administrative works regulated from *Mangaldoi* but later it shifted to *Tezpur*. The boundary of then Darangdistrict comprised of the Himalaya and Bhutan hill in the northern part, *Biswanath*in the east, Brahmaputra River in the south and *Barnadi* in the west. It remained as Darang district until 1983. In 1983 Assam government's district reformation commission divided Darang into two districts- including *Mangaldoi* it became Darang and *Tezpur mouza* became *Sonitpur* district'[19]

Before we go on to the discussion of *Darangi* culture, we need to explore the epistemological meaning of the word '*Darang*'. Many people trace it to the Sanskrit word '*Dwaram*' is the

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[19]Sahariyah Kanak Chandra, *Darangi Loksahityar Rooprekha*(Guwahati:Published by Assam publication Board, 2007)

source of Darang. According to belief '*Dou-rang*' means 'where Gods (Devta) used to observe fairs and festivals'. Renowned linguist Dr. Banikanta Kakoty argues that it was a word of 'Austric languge', but Atul Chandra Barua argues it has an 'Aryan' origin. Earlier it was *Darang desh* (country), then *Darang Rajya* (state), today it is a district under Assam. On the other hand the word '*Darangi*' has been used for a long time to identify '*Darang*'. 'Darangi' was also used by historians and writers like Surjakumar Bhuyan, Dr. Maheswar Neog, Nabin Chandra Sharma. In their works whenever they talk about the King and the culture of *Darang*, they use the word '*Darangi*' to identify it. So, later *Darang*'s culture also got its identity as '*Darangi* Culture'. The '*Darangi* Culture' is a term that is carried out in the field of folk lore research. During 1980's, the Folklore Research Department of Guwahati University, Assam carried out an enormous amount of research work on *Darang*. From then the term '*Darangi Culture*' was shaped, subsequently Ojapali started identifying with the *Darangi* culture.

In the meantime most of the theatre practitioners of Assam started using Ojapali in their plays and identified it as using '*Darang* culture'. Academic writings and research work of this period also started categorize Ojapali as the chief performing form of *'Darangi* Culture'. To trace the history of 'Darangi' as a cultural identity it is imperative to refer to the year 2000, when *Sattriya dance* of Assam was classicized and state (Indian) machinery started representing it as the regional dance of the state. The process of classicization of *Sattriya* was first raised by Dr. Maheshwar Neog in 1958 at the first Dance Seminar organized by Sangeet Natak Akademy. Neog in his paper presented at the seminar not only mentioned the *Sattriya* but also mentioned *Ojapali and Devnati or Devdasi* dance which were performed in Lower Assam and mainly in *Darang* district. Later in one of his Book *'Sattriya Nritya'* he describes "… It is true that *Sattriya, Ojapali and Devnati*, these dances of Assam carry classical elements in it. But we need

proper analysis and regular practice in it to find out these elements'.[20] In the same seminar SuknaniOja, Lalit Chandra Nath demonstrated Ojapali and received compliments from other scholars. After the intellectual circles became obsessed with *Sattriya*'s classical recognition nobody mentioned Ojapalianymore. Many argue it might be because '*Sattriya*' is rooted inthe institutional structure of the *Sattras* hence gaining more importance than Ojapali and *Devnati*.

Apart from this the state machinery has always projected upper Assam, basically the *Sivsagar* district as the cultural capital. It may be because of the political legacy that upper Assam and *Sivsagar* district can claim a cultural superiority, in the process createing a cultural gap between Lower - Upper parts of Assam. Hence our discussion implies that '*Darangi culture*' opens up the possibilities of becoming a cultural identity for lower Assam.

Understanding Ojapali

Notion of a popular culture and its history writing:

One of the reasons o the historical popularity of the form has been cited is because of its close relationship to the aesthetics of *Ankianat* and the reformation it underwent under the impact of *Sankardev*. The dance and the singing became more codified and intricate during this time. The problem becomes more complex when we realize that while the aesthetic characteristics attributed to the Ojapalidates to its dialogue with the *Ankianat*, the peak of its popularity can be located in alternate time, practice and aesthetics.

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[20]Neog Maheshwar, *Asomot Dhrupadi Nrityar Oitirjya, Sattriya Dance*, (New Delhi: Published by Sangeet Natak Akademy)

The real popularity and its widespread practice was a pre-*Sankardev* phenomenon as cited by most local accounts and histories of the form[21]. After the end of agricultural season people used to organize '*Manasha puja*', as a peasant ritual.[22]Its real popularity lies in its organic connection and syncretic nature, though it was patronized by the *Darangi* kings, with selection of the performance scenarios made by *Sukabi Narayana Deva* from the *Padmapurana.*Local historical accounts like Nabin Chandra Sharma in one of his books on the history of Darang has cited that during the reign of *Dharmanarayana,* the *Darang desh* became integrated with *Koch state*[23]. Thus interpreted would imply that demographically this would be its largest spread covering the landscape of today's *Sonitpur* district to *Koch* Bihar in West Bengal. Historically this was seen as the peak of the forms popularity. The *Manasha* story, with the grotesque aesthetics of the central figure of *Manasha*, enactment however cannot and makes no pretense of any aesthetic fulfillment. In that sense its popularity is because of its very non aesthetic categories.

Sankardev initiated a new type of Ojapali called *Sattriya* or *Ramayani Ojapali. Daitari Thakur* a well known biographer of Assam in 17th century A.D. writes in his *Guru Carita* that *Sankardev* preached his new doctrine with the help of the Ojapali art form.[24] This history of upper Assam and its adaptation of Ojapali is a sharp contrast to what is seen as its 'popular' character. The Ahom kings of upper Assam in their long consolidated rule of 600 years see Ojapali, not as an

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[21]Goswami Prafulla Dutta,Sharma Nabin Chandra, *Asomiya Lokasanskritir Abhash*, (Guwahati:Folklore Dept. Guwahati University)
Sahariyah Kanak Chandra, *Darangi Loksahityar Rooprekha*(Guwahati:Published by Assam publication Board, 2007)
[22]Manasa puja is celebrated for the welfare of society and also prevent death from snakebites. The episodes are spread over 10-15 days.
[23]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)
[24]Goswami Bhrigu Mohan, *A study of the ojapali art form of Assam* (Guwahati:Charu prakashan.1996)The *Katha Guru Carita* cites that illiterate persons like Laxman oja could recite the entire Assamese version of the Dasama(Book X of the Sanskrit Bhagawta-purana) and the Ekadasha Skandha (book XI of bhagawata-purana) and then he was recognized as oja.

'entertainment' medium but a 'religious performance' in temple. In that sense, this genre of Ojapali not only reflects power structures of kingship and religious institutions, but because of its non popular intent, it is adaptable to aesthetic politics which is then cited as the identity of the Assamese people and their culture. The evolution of the 'popular genre' of Ojapali, prevalent in lower Assam, amongst the *Darangi* community is my area of interest. Studies of forms like these also emphasize on how or why we should not look at regional representative forms in any generalized ways. The focus on Ojapali for all purposes make the study of *Sattriya* or *Ankianat* (which represents mostly upper Assam) as genres which have a historical connection to Ojapali but are by no means part of some sort of local cultural practices.

Storytelling:

The format of storytelling, supposedly from the epics and the Puranas, through improvised songs, dialogues and performative interludes itself and weaves in the notion of enacting one's identity with the notion of narrating and commenting on the enactment itself. The term *Oja* means the leader of the troupe and *Pali* is his assistant(s). Generally groups of five and six people perform Ojapali in public places, *Namghor* (Assamese prayer halls) and *Maroi puja* (Manasha puja) ground. The dialogue and performance text developed on the spot by the *Oja* and *Pali* takes into account the audience and the space. Audience can get the sense of the subject matter of the epics through humor and satire. The intent is to use the epic stories to address social, economic and political issues. The story telling is directly addressed to the audience, adding to the inclusive and shifting space. Here Michael Wilson's notions of storytelling is a key idea and refers to the story tellers as insider-outsider who mediates a historical review of the

performance itself[25]. Bringing in a methodological perspective from theatre and performance studies around story telling strategies will allow me to ground the performance practice at multiple levels of its performance.

Changing scenario:

The idea of Ojapali being a popular form rooted in its community is in contrast to its increasing marginalization and geographical confinement. I read this as a problem in terms of understanding so called popular forms and its struggle for survival. If it is indeed a 'popular form', the increasing marginalization is a far more complex idea rather than the overarching arguments of growing commercialization of leisure activities in contemporary India. Similarly just to see it as a reflection of the shrinking agrarian activities of the community makes it more complex. The Ojapali performers as a community are joining the industrial labor force and today represent the working class rather than the agrarian community. These are more complex ways to interpret social changes and its implications for forms like Ojapali. I am trying to foreground the recent performances and read through the performative texts and changes to understand the complex changing scenario of India. Ultimately, there is a need to map the Ojapali against other forms which have come under the radar of national and regional cultural attention. It would be interesting to see the debates around *Sattriya* receiving the legitimate sanction as the eighth classical form of India. The official cultural policy and regional politics around performance genres are important in this work to understand the problem.

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[25]Wilson Michael, *Storytelling and theatre, contemporary storytellers and their art*(New York:Published by Palgrave Macmillan,2006)

Review of Literature

Written tradition of Assamese literature begins with Madhava Kandali(14th century A.D.) In his Assamese version of Ramayana we find terms like *Nata* (dancer) and *Bhata*(singer). In a part of his writing he mentions '*gandharvasakalesulalitagita gave*' (the *gandhravas* sing songs sweetly). It is said that Ojapali is a *gandharvabidya.* So we can find the presence of Ojapali or *gandharvabidya* in Madhava kandali's writings. If Madhava Kandali dates back to the 14th century A.D. then it proves the presence of performances like Ojapali during that period also.The Ojapali art form at the time of *Sankardev*(1449-1568) can be traced by the *Guru Carita* of Rama Carana Thakuria. He relates that *Sankardev* introduced the*ChotoBalorama*, a *Dainapali* (chief of the assistants of Ojapali troupe) through*NarayanaThakura Ata*:

Anilantanarayanebhaktaanupama/
Biyasarpalitentechatobaloram//[26]

Narayana, has brought an excellent disciple/
He is the Pali named Choto Balorama//[27]

Daitari Thakur a well known biographer of Assam in 17th century A.D. writes in his *Guru Carita* that *Sankardev*preached his new doctrine with the help of the Ojapali art form. The *Katha Guru Carita* inform us that illiterate people like *LaxmanOja* could memorize the entire Assamese version of the *Dasama*(Book X of the Sanskrit *Bhagawta-Purana*) and the *EkadashaSkandha* (book XI of Bhagawata-Purana) and then they were recognized as *Oja*. It is found in the copper

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[26]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)
[27] Translated by the researcher.

plate of 1738 A.D. entrusting different duties of *Dharesvara* Siva temple to different functionaries. Here we find references of the Ojapali. The plate assigned one *Oja* and six *palies* to perform their daily duties in the temple. During the rule of *Ahom* in Assam, kings like *Siva Simha* patronized Ojapali. In the year 1739 A.D. he issued a copper inscription in connection to the management of the *Pingalesvara* Siva temple. In this plate the king refers to Ojapali.*Laxmisimha* [28] granted a copper plate in 1774 A.D. in which he mentioned one *SagaraBiyahOja* of *Kamrup*. Similarly,another *Ahom* king issued another copper inscription in the year 1775 A.D. and refers to one *ChantaidasBiyaharOja* of Madhava temple in Hazo.

Dr. Bhrigu Mohan Goswami says that the medieval chronicles of Assam especially the *'Tripura Buranji'* indicates that one who possesses proficiency in *Gita, Nritya* and *Vadya*is called a *Gunin*. The term *Gunin* seems to be a synonym of Ojapali. According to M. Neog, *Gunin* should rightly be called the *Biyahar*Ojapali. He observes that the *Gunin* used to sing *Vyahagita*(songs of *BiyaharOjapali*) from one village to another, particularly in the month of *magha.* (January – February). We can see something significant regarding *Sankardev*'s use of Ojapali in Dr. Sanjib Kr. Borkakoti's writings. Many people say that *Sankardev*has learned *Sattriya* dance and *Ankiyabhaona* during his tour to all over India. But Borkakoti denies this fact. He says "*SrimantaSankardev's* dance form, known both as *Sankari* dance and *Sattriya*dance, evolved from these indigenous traditions. He did not learn his art during his all-India tour, which he started in 1481 AD. It may be mentioned that the saint travelled all over India for twelve years along with seventeen disciples and fellow *Bhuyan*s."[29]

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[28] He was an Ahom king.

[29]Borakakoty Sanjib Kumar, *Originality of Srimanta Sankardev's contributions*(Nagoan: Society of Srimanta Sankardeva, 2013)

Methodology

The four local histories which are going to form the basis of my historical critique are Nabin Chandra Sharma's '*Paribeshyo Kola Ojapali*' (1996)[30],Bhrigu Mohan Goswami's 'A Study on the Ojapali Art Form of Assam[31]and Maheswar Neog's 'An Early History of *Vaishnava* faith and tradition' and 'Classical Dances of Assam'[32]. The four key readings are representative examples of how local forms like the Ojapali are documented, analyzed and historicized. While all three captures similar approaches emphasizing either its traditional and classical qualities,the significant aspect is how to read critically such micro histories which looks at ethnography as history and historicizes ethnography.These histories bordering on ethnography written in the 1990s should also be read in the light of the process of classicization of the *Sattriya*and the 'marginalization' of Ojapali. This in turn needs to re-read the cultural policy papersof Indian institutions like the SangeetNatakAkademi and the seminar papers presented both in the 1956 Drama and 1958 Dance seminar by Chandra Kant Phukan and MaheswarNeog[33]. From 2000 onwards there has also been a spurt of writings, ranging from journalistic lobbying for '*Sattriya*', such as Sunil Kothari's book[34] to varied research projects.[35].

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[30]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

[31]Goswami Bhrigu Mohan, *A study of the ojapali art form of Assam* (Guwahati: Charu Prakashan. 1996)

[32]Neog Maheswar, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam:Śaṅkaradeva and movements in Assam: Sankardev and his time, (*New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965)

[33]Neog, Maheshwar.Ed.*Sattriya aru ojapali nachar dhrupadi swkriti*, *sattriya dance of Assam and their rhythms (*Delhi: Published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1985) Chandra Kanta Phookan, *Assamese Theatre* (seminar Paper)*Sangeet Natak Akademy Drama Seminar Report* (Delhi:Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1956)

[34]Kothari Sunil.Ed. *Sattriya- A classical dance of Assam*, (New Delhi: Marg Publication*,* 2013)

[35]Arshiya Sethi's PhD on Sattriya.

It is important for me to read critically how from these sources and their description and analysis of the performances, the micro histories bring in an ethnographic-historical account which almost seems a different narrative, often countering the grand narrative of state cultural policies, where the regional and the national supplement rather than oppose each other. Here I would like to refer to Nabin Chandra Sharma where he brings out the close relation between Ojapaliand its audience and how it captures and reflects the real picture of the community itself. He even brings in the political protests where Ojapali took up themes from the Assam movement and how revolutionary slogans allowed the performances to travel from religious spaces to public spaces. His use of a framework, which looks at key events and contexts, and Ojapali's position at different times,is an important methodological lead for me.

This would be my entry point to problematize performance studies, which ultimately looks at forms through its descriptive aspects and analyze it as a form where changes are minor and non-reflective of any historical or political 'event'. This is only possible if the researcher is an outsider who looks at the form as an object of art (here the performance) which can only allow a description of what the form is and what it has been. My intent is to weave it with a more complex idea of historiography and what ethnographical study of a performance like Ojapali can do for a larger socio-cultural history of a specific region which then becomes a critique of larger national and even global politics. Here Jeremy Cover's critique[36] of Goffman is significant and

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[36]Cover Jeremy, *My Performed Identity, Journal of the sociology of self knowledge,* Vol. III, Nos. 1&2,(Macalester College. Human architecture: Fall 2004/Spring 2005)

also his methodology which emphasizes 'self interaction in everyday life andthe role playing in our everyday life' where performances are important.[37]

Method and Field Work

The first and foremost objective of this researchis to reconstruct some of the key performances which reflect the markers of historical change from the local sources and oral histories of both the community and the performers. The unwritten texts will be retrieved and then the performances accordingly reconstructed. Since the performances are structured and follow a set of codes, the variations and departures are critical for me. The perspective of the practitioners of *Darangi* community will be documented[38].

Since I am also looking at the notion of policies and also reconstructing the landmark performances (e.g. Ojapali performed on the arrival of Jawaharlal Nehru in Shillong), which illustrates the impact of governmental intervention, I would access the central and regional archives[39]. Similarly the Folklore Department of Guwahati University through ethnographic research projects has documented both the forms and is hence a potential archive. For me as a part of the community and conditioned to the performance, but also as a researcher I am interested in seeing how ethnography becomes a tool of writing contemporary histories and how issues of identity (*Darangi* community) are woven in the performance and reception itself. My objective is to apply tools of performance analysis to the performances, which I reconstruct as

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[37]ibid

[38]Assmese scholars like Dr.Birendranath Dutta, Prof.Pradipjyoti Mahanta, Prof Anil Bodo. Sattriya performers and Gurus like Jadindranath Goswami, Ghanakanta Bora Borbayan, Indira P.P. Bora. Etc.

[39]SNA and IGNCA, SankardevKalakshetra, Assam, Sattriya Academy Assam, Darang JanakistiBikash Kendra.

representative of my community's experience with performances in the past and present. For example, I will try and read the applicable performance categories of text, space, performance, and audience to read the performance of Ojapali as representing the *Darangi* community.

Here the role of the story-teller is crucial as he is the creator of the performance text and also the interpreter who narrates the text to the audience. Here the tools from performance analysis of empathy and distanciation are crucial to understand his role both as a representation of the community who has the flexible position of being the audience, community as well as identifying with the performers. The direction of this exploration will make it imperative for me to look at 'audience response' which I would like to approach through oral histories and oral history methods. Detailed interview of various community members will be taken but not to come to any conclusive assessment but to problematize notions of representative performance reading and issues of identity which are rooted in socio-cultural and political changes of contemporary times.

Chapters

Chapter-I: Ojapali: Oral Narrative to Performance Text

Continuing from the problem of the historical narrative captured by the performance itself against its historical milieu, in this chapter I have tried to see how performance content, context and form, convey the changing scenario of society and community. Looking at its content which is predominantly mythological has allowed me to approach the notion of myths as a large comprehensive idea which absorbs a large range of social, political and economic aspects in its

basic structures. I have tried to analyse how in such performance genres, myths and epic stories are reformulated and contextualized to what Hauser and others call 'invention of epics'[40]. This chapter also describes and analyzes how the texts are supposed to be performed and the coded idioms which exist in all such forms.

Chapter – II: The Performance of *Ojapali*; *Oja pun pali hala / Tar maje Rasar nijara*

The chapter two looks at the storytelling and performance techniques of Ojapali. Analysis of different Ojapali performance which I have used as a part of the research is given in details. This chapter not only describes performance techniques but also see the variation of this performance with the course of time through different historical marks. Detailed study of the acting, song, sceneography, space, audience and costumes is also a part of this chapter. For me, analysis and discussion of the songs are very important because in Ojapali, songs have a life of its own. I look at both traditional and improvised songs and performance texts to push my analysis a little ahead. Likewise acting, sceneography, costume are equallyimportant in the performance. By analyzing acting, I have tried to see the *Oja* and the *Pali*'s body as an agrarian, traditional body, which carries the traditional aesthetic sensibilities as well as the beliefs related to serpent goddess *Manasha.* I think this has allowed me to touch the debate of the '*Darangi'* identity. I have concluded this chapter by starting the debate between theOjapali performer's identities attached to the *Darangi* culture.

Chapter III: Politics of performance; advent of Darangi identity

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[40] Hauser Arnold, *Social History of Art*, London 1951

This chapter takes on the performance analysis of some of the key performances of Indian independence movement and Assam movement. For me, the *Oja* and the *Palies* are significant mediators which allowed me to look at the audience and the community. This chapter emphasizes on departures and changing scenario in practicing Ojapali after *Sattriya* got its classical status. The politics of upper Assam and lower Assam has been my key concern. Language is also a key element to trace the long history of Assamese assertion of identity through the language. This in turn provoked me to ask the question as to how does the community who feels their representative performance genre is being marginalized and neglected respond to it culturally? A new sort of investment and engagement can be observed though in actual terms there is a drastic fall in the number of performances and audiences. The chapter has also tried to draw a picture of the current status of the performance form.

In the conclusion I have proposed to make an assessment of the current efforts being made to resurrect the performance form and try to discuss whether modern experiments with Ojapaliis really helping it to popularize or not. I hope that out of this research I will be able to suggest some possible ideas towards the development of the form.

Chapter I

Ojapali: Oral Narrative to Performance Text

Ojapali as a popular culture can be interpreted as people's expression like most other such forms. Myths, oral and religious insights could be found in the performance texts as much as it tells the story of its origin. The stories of its origin and its relevance are in that respect a depiction of the socio-cultural scenario. Along with the canonical texts which are performed and the performance text which is improvised in the course of being performed it provides the much required historical source of studying these kinds of popular forms. Usually in such forms the relevance and the significance of the texts are underscored on the basis of its popular character but for me this is the vital entry point. Research on popular culture from the academia significantly warrants this approach along with text-performance based understanding. This chapter therefore maps out the performance texts—written and unwritten with detailed analysis.

At this initial stage it is imperative to look at the stories of its origin, and how these stories itself reflect the text-repertoire which are still present in the belief system among *Darangi* people and the performers of Ojapali. Nabin Chandra Sharma, who has done extensive research on Ojapalias an art form, has documented three stories:

> 1.*Arjuna* as *Brihannala*[41] and origin of music and dance that emerged when he was disguised as a transgender person: According to this story King of *Amaravati*, *Devraj Indra* celebrated his triumph over the *Ashura* (Demons) with the help of *Arjuna*. *Urvashi*'s dance performance was the attraction in that ceremony. During the course of

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[41] Fifth Pandav of Mahabharata Arjuna, was in disguise of Brihannala (an eunuch) for few years during his exile (agyat bash).

her dancing *Urvashi* fell in love with *Arjuna* and expressed it to King *Indra*. *Indra* requested *Arjuna* to marry her, but *Arjuna* denied. As a result *Urvashi* expressed her anger with a curse that the third *Pandava* will remain a eunuch for one year. When *Arjuna* returned to earth, he was bound to be a eunuch under the disguise of *Brihannala* and taught dance (*Gandharva Vidya*) to king *Viraat*'s daughter *Uttara*. The dance *Arjuna* taught believed to be a combination of dance, music and acting, regarded as '*Gandharva Vidya*', that he saw in *Amaravati*. It is believed that *Brihannala* brought necessary musical instruments and costumes from heaven. People believe that the *Gandharva Vidya* is Ojapali and *Arjuna* brought it for the first time to earth.[42]

1. Story of *Parijatee*: Many of '*Vyah-gowaOjapali*' performers believe that this performance was first seen by a woman called *Parijatee* in her dream. She heard the rhythm and melodious music while she was weaving. She stood up and started singing and dancing with the rhythms and music. It is believed that the music was coming from heaven towards earth and *Parijatee* received the musical instruments and costume in her dream. Later she taught the same to her *shisyas* (students) and the *shisyas* became known as '*Vyas*' and the performance they learned form *Parijatee*was '*Vyah-gowa Ojapali*', '*Vyahar Ojapali*' or '*Vyah-sangeet*'[43]. Mention may be made here that *Vyah-gowa Ojapali* was named after poet '*Vyasdeva*'.

2. Story of *Vyasakolai* and *Kendukolai*: According to this myth, *Vyasakolai* and *Kendukolai* were brothers. *Vyasakolai* learnt the skills of *Vyah-gowa Ojapali*from *Parijatee*.

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[42]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996). Kinaram Nath oja, Medina Mohan Nath also put insights on this during our fieldwork.
[43]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

Vyaskolai was the one who spread this form widely. When *Vyasakolai* was the expert of *Vyah-gowaOjapali*, his brother *Kendukolai* was a practitioner of *Sunkanani Ojapali* related to *Manasha* myths. It is believed that both *Vyasa Sangeet* and *Manasha Sangeet* were popularized by *Vyasakolai* and *Kendukolai* respectively. Although many people see it different ways, Dineshwar Sharma argues that the *Vyasakolai* is none other than the performers himself. He interprets that the expert musicians and dancers were regarded as *Vyasakolai*. He found many of *Vyasakolai*'s relatives in the '*Vyaspara goan*' of Darang district.[44] Nabin Chandra Sharma did a detailed analysis of this story and said that perhaps '*Vyasdeva*' who had started the tradition of music with the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* is the *Vyasakolai*. In *Daitari Thakur's* '*Carit Puthis*'(biography) we find :

Vyasakolai name jonek asoy//

Tangkohomo guni nai jatit brahmana/[45]

There was someone known as *Vyasakolai*//

He was the most knowledgeable *Brahmin*/ [46]

The three stories, particularly *Arjuna*'s story of bringing the *Gandharva Vidya* to earth is very popular among the performers. The mythical origin is a sharp contrast to its popular character and the materiality of the local culture but has its own reasons to create this sort of mythical origin story devoid of all existing reality. The reality gets intertwined in performing the genre while acknowledging its mythical origin. How does a popular *Oja* capture the story of *Arjuna* and *Brihannala*? How does he (the *Oja*) identify through the performance with *Arjuna,* the larger than life hero who gets de-masculinized in the process? *Parijatee*'s story is also in dreams and escapism. Texts such as these therefore allow in the performance text a large deal of imagination

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[44] ibid
[45] ibid
[46] Translation done by the researcher

to be brought in and negotiated with. As we have pointed out, this exists in the belief system of the performers, although the new generation raises question about it.

We can also think that these religious myths associated with Ojapali is mainly because Ojapali is a religious\ritualistic performance and it was developed form the '*Kathakata*' tradition as Sharma and others argues. Lower Assam, which was under *Koch* kings were patrons of Hindu temples as well as idol worshippers. Narratives of *Kathakata* tradition therefore through an intermixing of storytelling and performance could push the limits of imagination both through the narrative tradition where the performer or the *Oja* not only needs to perform the mythic but also (since the performance which is rooted in imagination) have to impersonate the mythical characters. Here however *Arjuna'*s story is significant as it allows one to not go overboard with the larger than life character of the epic and *Brihannala* stature as a transgender delivers constant blow to the masculinity of these epic heroes. Again, we could connect the *Arjuna* story with the costume of *Oja*. In *Oja's* costume his upper part is like a male, as he wears a '*Kurta'* and the lower part of the body looks like a female, as he wears ornaments in his legs called '*Nepur*' (anklet). Therefore he looks like an eunuch, but in my interpretation, this is a symbolical representation of both male and female and it is adequately used by *Sankardev* in *Ankiya Bhaona* (one act play) for *Sutradhar* (Narrator or Anchor). Feminizing one part of the body while rendering the other part to live up to the popular myth of *Arjuna* can be considered an important intervention. The transgendered expressions rooted in the myth itself finds its way into various episodes and it is not relevant whether the origin story borrowed from the performance text or the performance borrowed from the mythical text.

An important question in this respect is why the *Arjuna's* story is more popular than that of *Parijatee's* or the third version which combines both the mythical stories of an epic with popular

traditions like the *Manasha Mangal* texts. It is important to note that the *Manasha Mangal* story is the one which is performed and narrated and therefore makes one wonder if it is because, part of what is performed reference to the higher epic culture myths are the ones, which are used to supplement its popular origin. We must also remember that in forms like Ojapaliit is almost impossible to trace any historical timeline as to when and why these stories became popular or surpassed each other. The idea is not to bypass history but to create a historiography where myths and origin stories find their ways into performance texts or where local historians try to weave in the popular myths of origin into writing its history and also try to trace if the performance performs its origin stories or just bypasses it.

Texts and the Histories of Ojapali

Panchali period and the texts of Manasha:

As a folk performance Ojapali tells its history of development sometimes within its texts itself. Ojapali is a performance which captures the historical events of a region as well as the form's history. The period when Ojapali performance was very popular and most of its texts were written, is known as '*Panchali* literature period'. Though the name '*Panchali*' refers both to the serpent goddess '*Manasha*' and *Draupadi* of the *Mahabharata*, but one cannot find any clear connection to *Draupadi*.Almost all *Manasha* associated myths were written during this period not only to document but also to perform. Dr. Dipanjali Das Goswami write that the "*Panchali* literature is a unique chapter in the history of Assamese literature. *Mankor, Durgabor, Pitambar*

dwij and Narayandeva all belong to this period." [47] Among the various versions, *Sukabi Narayanadeva* has written his '*Padmapurana*', which is regarded as one of the major literary piece of that period. The songs and narratives of *Padmapurana* are basically performed rather than read/sung. Even today the only source of performance text of *SuknaniOjapali* is *Padmapurana*. Here we can quote three *Pada* (stanza) from the texts to know about Ojapali*:*

    1. *Padmar Saran Kori smoron*
       Sukabi Narayana deve gai// [48]

Touching the feet of *Padma (Manasha)*

Sukabi Narayanadeva sings// [49]

    2. *Narayanadeve koi sarasa panchali/*
       Je huni padmaragit barhe thakurali// [50]

Narayanadeva sings about Panchali *(Manasha)*/
Those who listen to songs of *Padma* become knowledgeable// [51]

    3. *Sukabi Narayandevar Saras Panchali/*
       Binotar koruna buli ek lachari// [52]

Sukabi Narayanadeva sings about *Panchali* /
A line of songs could be an expression of emotion// [53]

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[47]Goswami Dipanjali Das*, Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon*(Guwahati: Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014)

[48]Sharma Nabin Chandra, *Padmapuran* (Guwahati:Dept.of Folklore Research, Guwahati University,1997)

[49] Translated by the researcher

[50]Sharma Nabin Chandra, *Padmapuran* (Guwahati:Dept.of Folklore Research, Guwahati University,1997)

[51] Translated by the researcher

[52]Sharma Nabin Chandra, *Padmapuran* (Guwahati:Dept.of Folklore Research, Guwahati University,1997)

[53] Translated by the researcher, the above stanzas probably written during 15th -16th century.

The above stanzas do not directly refer to Ojapali, but describes *Narayandeva* as a poet, singer and narrator. These three are elements of an Ojapaliperformer. In *Padmapurana* and the other texts related to *Manasha* myths do not directly mentioned the word 'Ojapali', but describes similar kinds of performance. Therefore it provokes us to look at the other performance genres of that period. Interestingly many scholars including Dipanjali Das Goswami and Nabin Chandra Sharma, who have done extensive research on *Padmapurana* and Ojapali, are unable to find any other performance genre during that period. The three elements they find in the performances of that period are *geeta, nritya and nata* (singing dancing and dramatizing).[54] Therefore we can conclude that the description in the above stanza is of none other than Ojapali. Moreover almost all *Darangi* people and Ojapali performers believe that the *Padmapurana* was re-inscribed under the patron of *Darangi* king *Dharmanarayana.* According to historian Dr. Satyendranath Sharma, *Dharmanarayana* dates back to the16[th] century. During 1615 A.D. to 1637 A.D. he was the king of *Darang*. Sharma argues during that period *Narayanadeva* was a very popular poet in entire Assam[55]. This means *Dharmanarayana* was the king of Darang district during *Panchali* literature period.

Nartakiye Nritya Kore Gayane gawe geet/

Anondit hoiya puray monor banchit//[56]

Dancer dances and Singers sings/

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[54]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon*(Guwahati: Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014)Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

[55]Sharma Satyendra nath, *Asomiya sahityar samikshatmak itibritta* (Guwahati:Published by Jyoti prakshan, 1990)

[56]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon*(Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014)

Thus they their joy//[57]

Again the above line expresses that particular dance (*Nritya*) and songs (*Geet*) were performed during that period when *Padmapurana* was written. Many scholars argue that '*Panchali*' refers to the five skills of performance- singing, costume, duet singing practice, composing songs and dancing.[58]Again we can relate this to the skills of Ojapali, as Ojapalitexts describe the same elements thus:

Hate mudra mukhe pada pawe dhore taal/

Mayura hadrish nache sei oja bhal//[59]

Gestures in hand, rhythms in the legs/

Dances like a peacock, he is an expert *Oja*//[60]

Other than *Mankor, Durgabor and Pitambar dwij, Narayanadeva* has created his own aura through *Padmapurana*. Works of *Mankor* and *Durgabor* are known as '*Manasha Kavya Mankori*' and '*Manasha Kavya Durgabori'*. On the other hand *Pitambor Dwij* wrote '*Usha Porinoy*'. Very few facts point to the use of the*Manasha* poems and songs in Ojapali but *Biyagowa Ojapali* sometimes used *Durgabori Ramayan* as their performance text[61]. Looking at the *Manasha* poems of *Mankor, Durgabor and Narayanadeva*, Dr. Goswami finds some basic differences-- "*Mankor's Mansha Kavya* doesn't give detailed description of the story of *Beula and Lakshindar*[62], just mentions it. Contrarily, *Lakshindar and Beula's* story is the source of

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[57] Translated by the researcher.

[58]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),p-11

[59]Nath Lalit Chandra, *Suknani sangeetor rengoni*, (Mangaldoi: published by Darangi Janasanaskriti Vikash Kendra)

[60] Translated by the researcher.

[61] Medini Mohan Nath, a cultural activist, associated to Ojapali, gave us the above information during our field work.

[62] Beula and Lakshindar are the chief character of Manasha story basically Padmapurana.

Naryanadeva's Padmapurana. Whereas*Durgabor* describes the same with the help of different subplots."[63] In spite of these reasons, *Padmapurana and Durgabor's Manasha Kavya* are widely popular. The popularity of Ojapalipractice emerging out of *Manasha puja* and Ojapali describe the power of *Manasha* as a serpent goddess. Through the story of *Beula-Lakshindar*, poets express the anger of the serpent goddess and what can she do to anyone who doesn't respect the goddess. The society of 15th and 16th century were firm believers of gods and goddesses but before that it was an age of unspiritual and violence. Therefore when people like *Sankardev* in upper Assam threw light on spirituality, then *Narayanadeva* and *Durgabor* made the same effort in lower Assam.

Analysis of the three texts:

Manasha Story: The three versions of *Manasha* poetry written during *Panchali* literature period, is based on different myths surrounding serpent goddess *Manasha*. Amongst all of these Ojapali is performed around the story of *Sati-Beula* or *Beula –Lakshindar*. According to this story, *Usha* and *Aniruddha* were cursed by Gods as per the plan of Goddess *Manasha* and sent to earth as *Beula* and *Lakshindar*. *Beula* as the only daughter of *Say bene* and *Lakshindar* as the seventh son of *Chand Sadagar*. *Chand Sadagar* was a great devotee of *Shiva* and hence he refused to be a devotee of *Manasha.Manasha* however was determined to get "*Anjali*" by *Chand Sadagar*'s right hand to obtain the status of Goddess in the heaven. However, *Chand Sadagar* promised to himself that he will never give *anjali* to *Manasha* by the same hand he uses to give *anjali* to Lord *Shiva*. To get an *anjali* from *Chand, Manasha* took away his six sons. They died from poisonous snake bites and *Manasha* had absolute power over all snakes. These deaths infuriated *Chand sadagar*

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[63]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),p-18

even more and he vowed to save his last son, *Lakshindar*, in any way possible. *Chand* found a girl, *Beula*, whose destiny spoke that she will never be a widow. *Chand* got his seventh son, *Lakshindar* married to *Beula*. *Chand* also had an iron-palace built without any hole so that not a single snake could enter the house (*merghar*). *Biswakarma* made it for the wedding night of *Beula-Lakshindar*. But due to the request of *Manasha, Biswakarma* kept a hole in the palace. The night came and *Manasha* sent her *Kalnaginiini*, the most poisonous snake, to the iron palace. *Beula* fell asleep due to a spell *Manasha* cast on her. When *Kalnaginiini* was going to bite *Lakshindar*, she saw that *Beula* had committed no sin for which she might be given such a harsh punishment. So *Kalnaginiini*, with the help of the lower end of her body smeared the parting of *Beula'*s hair with the oil of the lamp, which was a sin according to the Hindu mythology. After she bit *Lakshindar*, *Lakshindar* shouted. *Beula* woke up and saw *Kalnaginiini* going out of the room. In anger, she threw the *jaanti*towards *Kalnaginiini* and her lower part was cut off. It was *Manasha*'s bidding that forced *Kalnaginiini* to sting *Lakhindar*. To get back her husband's life from the Gods in the heavens, *Beula* sailed with her dead husband in a raft towards heaven. She faced many dangers during her incredibly long and arduous journey in the rivers. After reaching heaven, she pleased all the Gods with her beautiful and enchanting dancing and got the gods to promise to give back her husband's life on the condition that *Chand* would give *anjali* to *Manasha*. Desperate to save his son's life, finally *Chand* gave the *anjali,* but with his left hand. Consequently *Manasha* got the position of goddess in heaven and gave back the life of all the six sons of *Chand*.

This is the story of *Beula-Lakshindar* used to perform in Ojapali performance. Although it may take different variation during the course of a performanceOjapali performers always had the

liberty to perform the stories with the own ways. This is why Ojapali always carry the unique nature of 'secular performance in it'.

Manasha Kavya Mankori: We can divide *Mankor*'s *Manasha Kavya* into three parts. 1. *Sristi khanda* (Creation of the universe) 2. *Hara Parvatir Bibah* (the wedding of god *Shiva and Parvati*). 3. *Manashar janmakhanda* (birth of *Manasha*). There are 13 songs belonging to the first part '*Sristi khanda*'. First part includes preliminaries of doing *Manasha puja, Saraswati vandana, Guru vandana, Jagoron geet, Sristi patan* (creation of the Universe), *Devdeveer Jonmo*(birth of god and goddesses) and description of gods' needs for *Manasha* Puja. Later two sections including *Hemanta Hrishir Toposhya* (Prayer of saint Hemanta), *Durgar Utpotti* (emergence of goddess Durga), *Hara-Parvatir Vivah* (Wedding of god *Shiva and Parvati*), *Padmar Jonmo* (Birth of *Padma or Manasha*), *Puspobonoloi Shivar Yatra* (Shiva's journey to *Puspaban*), *Shivar Birjya Skhalan* (the act of Shiva), *Seibirjyar Pora Padma r Jonmo* (how Padma came to earth),*Padma Aru Pitrri Shivar Porichoy* (*Shiva and Padma's* introduction), *Makhi Rupe Korondit Humai Shivar Koilash Yatra* (Shiva's journey to *Kailasha* in the disguise of a fly) , *Ganga Aru Durga r Dwara Shivar Karandi Poriksha* (*Shiva's* test in front of *Durga and Ganga*).[64]

From the above divisions of *Manasha kavya* written by poet *Mankor,* one can see it is not dealing with the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar* which is the main episode in a *SuknaniOjapali*performance. While looking at *Padmapurana* and *Durgabor, Mankor'*s works look incomplete, because the main part of*Mankor's Manasha kavya* deals with only the wedding of *Shiva and Parvati* (*Manasha* or *Padma*'s parents) and then how *Shiva* gave birth to *Manasha*.

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[64]Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),p-19

Manasha Kavya Durgabori: This particular piece of *Manasha* poetry starts with prayers to god and goddesses including the *Guru* (teacher). Other parts of this *Kavya* includes- *Vandana* (prayer), *Champawalinagarar Vranana* (description of Champawali township), *Putrohina Sonekar Putralabhar Upay prarthona* (Desire of *Soneka* to have a child), *Gangar Usorot Sonekar Dwara Manasha Puja* (*Soneka's* prayer to *Manasha* near Ganga river), *Chandor Sonekar proti Kop* (*Chand's* disrespect to *Soneka*), *Manashar Dwara Chandor Choy Putro Binash* (the killing of*Chand's* six sonsby *Manasha*), *Chandor Banijya Yatra Aru Nouka Nimagna* (*Chand's* voyage to business), *Lakshindaror Bibah* (Wedding of *Lakshindar*), *Sarparupe Lakshindarak Dangshan Koriboloi Padmadevir Swamik Anurudh* (Padma's request to her husband to bite and kill Lakshindar), *Lakshindaror Roop Dekhi Ajagoror Bishad Aru Sarbasekhat Dangshan* (Python's bite to *Lakshinadar*), *Padmar Chakrantat Shangkhaojar Mrityu* (Death of *Sangkha Oja*), *Beular Swami Grihar Pora Biday Aru Morashor Logot Beular Yatra* (*Beula's* departure from her husband's home and her journey with the body of *Lakshindar*), *Yatrat Huwa Badha Bighini* (obstacles during the journey), *Netar Haharjyat Padma Devir Logot Sakhyat* (*Beula's* meeting with *Padma*), *Beular Geet Nritya Saru Swamir Punorjonmo* (Dance performance of *Beula* and rebirth of *Lakshindar*), *Beutar Hoite Swamir Champawali Nagarat Probesh* (return of *Beula and Lakshindar* to Champwali).[65]

We can see *Durgabor's Manasha Kavya* covers the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*, which *Mankor* did not. As Dr. Goswami and others argues that '*Beula Lakshindar*' story is the one which can show the strength and power of serpent goddess *Manasha or Padma*. In comparison to *Mankor*, this piece is a larger version of the *Manasha* myths and poetry, and *Durgabor* describes

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[65] Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),p-18

it broadly. The songs and poetry of *Durgabori Manasha kavya* is also popular among the Ojapaliperformers. At the same time most of the Ojapali performers find it too broad in scope and long to perform.

Padmapurana of Narayanadeva: Among all other *Manasha Kavya*s, '*Padmapurana*' has the uniqueness of a performance text. This text is based only on the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*. Like other *Manasha Kavyas* this also starts with prayers to god and goddesses and then moving towards the epic narrative. It includes- *Pujar Pada* (Prayer of festival), *Vandana Pada Baeet* (prayers and songs), *Sristikhanda* (creation of the universe), *Pokshi Charitra* (Character of bird), *Samudra Manthan* (the churning of the sea), *Daksha Yagya* (sacrifice of *Daksha*), *Puspadhari Khanda* (the chapter of flower wearing), *Chandradharar Kahini* (story of *Chandradhar*), *Dhanantari Badh* (Death of *Dhanantari*), *Bor Banij* (the business chapter), *Bhatiyali Khanda* (The return) *Swarga Gaman Khanda* (voyage to heaven).[66]

Among all the above episodes *Bhatiyali Kanda* deals with the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*. Therefore, performers generally take this part for their performance. Unlike *Durgabori Manasha Kavya*, *Narayanadeva* basically focuses on the story which shows *Manasha* as a goddess of power. There may be different interventions of projecting *Manasha* as the goddess of powers by patronizing authority, but our study of the form makes the point clear that it was popular. The literary sources we have mentioned almost all of them cities its popular nature.Ojapali performers agree to the fact that *Naryanadeva*'s *Padmapurana* constructed the norms of a

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[66] ibid, p-19-25

performance text because it was more focused on the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*. *Durgabor's* text covers more sub stories along with the main narrative. *Mankor's* text is not popular because instead of dealing with the main story it concentrates on the birth and other stories of *Manasha*. While looking at the structures of these *Manasha* myths, my interpretation is that these three are not different versions, but are different volumes written one after another. On one hand, if we evaluate three texts with dramatic or performance elements than *Padmapurna* would be the most appropriate, because it has a structure of story with the dramatic elements which need for a semi-dramatical performance. Moreover these kinds of stories allow a performer or actor to execute their performance ability to the fullest. On the other hand *Mankor*'s *Manasha* stories are less dramatic and more descriptive, and *Durgabor* does contain the dramatic elements, but at the same time it has so many sub stories and plots that it is almost impossible to create a performance text out of it. Earlier Ojapaliperformances happened up to 6 -7 hours each day for 11-12 days along with *Manasha* Puja. This might have been the time when *Durgabor's Manasha kavya* was being performed. Later with the limited time frame for performance, performers mainly relied on the *Padmapurna*.It may also be the case that in long performances lasting up to 11-12 days, as we see in other such episodic narratives, the episodes could spread over the long duration of the festival period. The audience and the local people acquainted with the narrative structure and are part of their daily lives could engage with such plurality and complexity. The linear narrative is more appropriate for the recent times and in the face of growing urbanization. In the larger historical context the rise of the individualstories particularly the story of *Chand, Beula and Lakhindar* told at the most simplistic level narrates the lives of the forest people and *Manasha*'s acceptance into the Hindu pantheon through respectable parentage, thus transforming the larger text representing the collective to now representing only a certain class.

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Key episodes of Padmapurna: Before going on to describing the key episodes of *Padmapurana*, we must say that the first episode describes different myths related to the birth of *Manasha* and different pattern of devotion to other gods and goddesses. One similarity we can see in these ancient texts is that almost all texts begin with invocation and offering to gods and goddesses, marking out its relation to a particular god-goddess and hence the people the god\goddess represents. Subsequently when the other protagonists come in and express their entities it is easier then to weave in a dramatic narrative around the human and gods. In Ojapaliperformance, *Bhatiyali Khanda* (The return) is used as key episode to illustrate how gods and goddesses can be brought in within a common space to be enacted and 'performed'. Here distinctions are often merged but also visually and dramatically constructed.

Batiyali Khanda (The return): The Poet describes how *Lakshindar* was the target of*Manasha's* wrath and plans revenge with the help of serpents and how she cries when she is unable to do that. The story goes that-*Manasha* with her secret powers put *Beula- Lakshindar* including the gatekeeper of the *Merghor* into an induced state of unconscious and then tries to kill *Lakshindar*. But *Kalnagini*, who was sent by *Manasha* was surprised to see such a nice human *Lakshindar*. *Naryanadeva* took some time to describe the physical attributes of *Lakshindar*. Finally at the urge of *Mansha*, *Kalnagini* agrees to bite *Lakshindar*. Later the poet describes differently and emphasizes episodes like *Lakshindar*'s pain from the snake bite, *Beula*'s sleep, the death of *Lakshindar*, *Beula* regaining consciousness and seeing the dead body of her husband, *Beula* carving out the tail of *Kalnagini*, description of *Beula*'s sorrow, expression of sorrow of *Lakshindar' mother*, sorrows of *Chand Sadagor*, *Beula*'s effort to win back her husband's life,

the course of *Beula*'s voyage with *Lakshindar'*s dead body, and the obstacles in the journey. *Naraynadeva* describe it thus:

Har voila jhun jhun bhokhuril chal/

Mora pocha swamik jiraibe kotokaal//

Hokol osthik kochai topoli bandhila/

Topolat haat diya krandana juriya//[67]

Even the bones turned to pieces and swelling of the skin/

How long you will make your husband live //

Gathering the bones, packing them together/

Beula is crying over and over//[68]

Later in the chapter, *Naraynadeva* goes into elaborate poetic descriptions when she enters heaven and searches for *Manasha* and her god; the meeting of *Beula* and *Neta*, who guidesher to*Manasha*; introducing herself;*Beula* going through different tests to meet *Manasha*; Lord Shiva spreading the news of*Beula's* arrival; preparation of *Beula*'s dance performance, adorning of dance costume, the dance of *Beula;* the gods to see *Beula*'s dance; anger of *Chandrika*; insult of Shiva by *Chandi*; *Beula*'s complain to *Chandi*; sending people to get *Padma*; requests of *Padma*, complains of *Padma*(*Manasha*); Shiva's order to *Padma*;*Padma*'s request to bring the dead body; anger of *Padma; Neta*'s advice to *Beula*; bringing *Lakshindar*'s bones; crying of *Beula*; revelation of truth by *Beula* are the other small scenes. As we can see, in this chapter *Narayanadeva* solely describes *Beula*'s effort to bring back her husband's life. Here we can also interpret the struggle of two women figure '*Beula*' and '*Manasha'*. In this piece *Beula* is the

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[67]Sharma Nabin Chndra, Ed. *Padmapuran,* (Guwahati: Dept. of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, 1990)
[68] Translated by the researcher.

protagonist able to win our sympathy as she is fighting against the powerful goddess *Manasha*. The lines below say how *Beula* is finally able to win over *Manasha* and bring her husband back to life:

Mula mantra porhi Padma maril chapar/

Uthiya bohil Lokshai Chandoro Kumara//[69]

When Padma finished her chant/

Lakshai (Lakshindar) opened eyes and sat in front//[70]

It also describes how *Beula* decides to go to the heaven in search of *Manasha*. The same part includes other stories like description of *Lakshindar*'s pain after being bitten by *Kalnagini*. On the other hand we find some lines which describe *Beula's* decision to go to heaven:

Dese jaite mon bhoila Beula lokshai/

Devagonor choron bandila thai thai*//*[71]

Beula decided to go to heaven/

She went many places and requested many gods//[72]

According to the *Beula-Lakshindar* story, *Chand Sadagor,* father of *Lakshindar* finally agrees to pray to or pay homage to *Manasha* to bring back his son's life. And here *Narayanadeva* writes these poetic lines like:

Moro oporadho dosh khema bishhari/

Aji honte sorbonge tomake sewa kori//[73]

Mercy my faults, O! Respected Goddess *Bishahari* (*Manasha*)/

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[69]Sharma Nabin Chndra, Ed. *Padmapuran,* (Guwahati: Dept. of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, 1990)
[70] Translated by the researcher.
[71]Sharma Nabin Chndra,Ed. *Padmapuran,* (Guwahati: Dept. of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, 1990)
[72] Translated by the researcher.
[73]Sharma Nabin Chndra, *Padmapuran*, (Guwahati: Dept. of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, 1990)

See, today I pray whole heartedly// [74]

The various tests of *Beula* to win the gods for the sake of her husband have been structured by *Narayanadeva* as small dramatic episodes and scene. One of these is *Chand*'s offering to *Manasha* and *Manasha*'s blessing to *Beula*. *Beula*'s introspection is also a scene as is the water test and *Lakshindar*'s scream of pain. *Beula*'s fire test is also one such episode. These episodic scenes are interesting and allows a fast pace of the narrative while not creating a linear story.

This is the entire story of *Padmapurana* which is primarily taken up by Ojapaliperformers. Dr. Dipnajali Das Goswami argues, that "I feel the main chapter of the text is where *Manasha* shows her power by procuring the support of *Sadagor*. *Narayanadeva* very beautifully and poetically describes different tactics and strategies played by *Manasha* to reveal her power and strength." [75] Rather than looking at this story from religious point of view I would like to address the issue form feminist perspective, how '*Beula*' becomes the protagonist by winning over supreme goddess *Manasha*. Even *Manasha*'s win over *Chand Sodagor* can also read from this perspective as *Manasha* wins her place over male dominated Gods. The episode regarding the voyage to heaven (*Swarga Gomon Khanda*) is always sought as the most difficult and the biggest challenge. Sometime this episode is also relevant in order to show *Beula*'s strength. This episode is the last episode of *Padmapurana*. It describes *Beula* as a symbol of empowerment and her long journey in the face of challenges and dangers. Here she dominates the performance and her bravery and courage are eulogized both in her action and the narrator's story. *Narayanadeva* also pointed out that it is an injustice that the women who saved her husband's life with such a

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[74] Translated by the researcher.
[75] Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati: published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),p-25

journey emerging triumphant in her task had to finally prove her 'chastity' on earth. Finally *Beula* took her voyage to heaven with her husband *Lakshindar* as she proved her chastity. According to *Narayanadeva , Beula* is an example to the people of our nation.[76]

Analysis:

One of the major reasons to take up the aforementioned episode in Ojapali performance is because it has dramatic and a varied visual element in it. One could understand the fact that the *Beula-Lakshindar* story has potentiality of a semi-dramatic performance. Even the audience could identify with them and become part of this story because the *Padmapurana* projects *Beula-Lakshindar* as common human being. It is also interesting to see that the story is not taken as myth by many of the old performers. They believe these were real characters, which once existed in lower Assam. They have geographically identified some places, which they believe are the same places described in the story. For example: the iron house (*Merghor*), believed to be built by *Chand Sodagor* for the wedding night of *Lakshindar and Beula,* is believed to be situated somewhere near '*Saygoan*' a village in southern Guwahati. Even Assamese historians like Dimbeshwar Neog pointed out that the hero of *Padmapurana; 'Lakshindar'* was born at *Pachariya village* near *Saygoan*. Many believe *Sukabi Narayanadeva* was also born at '*Saygoan*'. It can also be read as *Narayanadeva* was creating a geographical location within his own space. In medieval times when travel and communication was weak, this juxtaposition of locations was significant and created spaces of acquaintance which in a way made the characters (dramatic personas) a familiar part of the known scenario.

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[76]Ibid, P-26.

Tradition of Ojapaliperformance perhaps merged with *Manasha* puja during the *Koch* kingdom. Nabin Chandra Sharma writes "It was *Bishwasimha* and other *Darangi* kings who had taken the initiative to collect *Manasha* songs and poetries. *Darangi* kings used to practice *Manasha* Puja and *Durga* Puja. Earlier it was organized for 10 to 15 days, so that the poets could get a chance to get intimate with the *Manasha* literature."[77]*Deodhwani* dance, the female counterpart of Ojapali was also included in the *Manasha* puja celebration. Both of these were performed every day for 6-7 hours just to enlighten people. Moreover, different poetries of the *Padmapurna* were used as '*sloka*' (chant) by priests who read out the *Panchalis* and subsequently these *slokas* came to be presented as dialogue. The transition from the didactic to the performative allows an audience engagement and contains potentials for creating horizontal relationship between gods, rituals, priests and in this case also the *Oja* and also in the larger sense among the audience members. This is what Sumanta Banerjee calls the 'logic in popular culture'. Banerjee analyses the notion of historical changes and its direct impact towards the popular performance practices and texts of 18th and 19th century. He also argues that those changes brought new performance practices as well.[78]

Popular Texts and Canonization

Feudal Monarchs:

The pre-colonial history of Assam tells us of two different states divided by the river *Brahmaputra*- the *Ahoms* and the *Koch* state. When upper Assam was ruled by *Ahom* kings then lower Assam was ruled by *Koch* kings. *Koch* kings were devotees of gods and goddesses like

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[77]Sharma N.C*,Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)
[78]Banerjee Sumanta,*Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Calcutta: published by seagull Books, 2010)

lord *Shiva* and *Manasha*. There are numerous examples of devotional practices of these gods and goddesses by royal families. The age of *Panchali* literature would fall into this historical period and genre. On the other side scholarly interpretations make us think that the tradition of dancing in Assam was not very recent. Scholars like Maheshwar Neog opines that the art of dancing along with accompanied gestures seems to have been in Assam prior to *Shankardev* as is evident from references found in old copper plate grants and sculptural relics. The *Shiva* temples in particular and the *Hayagriva Bishnu* temple of *Hazo* situated in present day *Kamrup* district had the institutional practice of *Nati* or dancing women attached to them till recent times.[79] Gestures of the hands were used in the worship of gods and goddesses, and although different in purpose, the origin of such gestures was no different from that of gestures used in dancing. Dr. N.C. Sharma says that the art form emerges from the *Kathakata* (narration) tradition. He writes that "in Vedas we find two characters, the *Upasthapaka* and *Udgata*. The main function of *Upasthapaka* (presenter) is to explain the mantras. In the same manner, the role of the *Udgata* is to chant hymns of the *Samveda*. We must mention here that from the term *Upadhyaya* emerged the term *Ojha or Oja*. In Assam, the term *Ojha or Oja* suggests the leader of a troupe. In Ojapali, the *Oja* means the leader."[80] From the above statements we can assume that the culture of dancing and storytelling was already there in cultural landscape of Assam prior to *Sankardev*. One could see most of the places mentioned by the scholars are in lower Assam, which was under the *Koch* kingdom. Maheshwar Neog also says that the *Panchali* literature period was *Vaishnavism*'s counterpart in lower Assam. According to him the lyrical form (appropriate to choral singing) of the poetic works of *Durgabor, Mankor and Pitambor*, were contemporaries of the poet performer *Sankardev,* considered to be free from neo- *Vaishnava* influence. During the

[79]Neog Maheswar, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam: Śaṅkaradeva and movements in Assam: Shankardeva and his time*(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965)
[80]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

era of *Sankardev, Mathura Dasa Budha-ata* before his conversion by *Madhavdev* used to sing *Ramayana* songs with his company of eighteen other followers. His style of singing has been dubbed in the *Caritas* (biographies) as *Vangadesimata*.[81] Prior to *Sankardev,* it was an age of idol worship. *Sankardev* was completely against the tradition and through his neo-*Vaishnavic* movement he tried to convince people that '*Ek seo ek deo/eko bine nai keo'* (there is only one god in this world and we should not build his statue to offer our devotion rather we should keep him in our minds). *Sankardev*'s movement of neo-*Vaishnavism* which started in upper Assam was not able to influence lower Assam because it had a much stronger influence of lord *Shiva* and *Manasha* myths.

Broad View of Rewriting Texts in Assam:

While Lower Assam or the *Koch* kings patronized *'Sakta'* idol worshipping and the idea of sacrifice"; *Sankardev*'s advent in upper Assam, which had fallen under the *Ahom* kingdom witnessed a major historical transformation. While most of the religious texts were re-written under different royal authorities, *Sankardev* independently engaged himself in writing religious texts. Moreover he not only re-wrote the texts but adopted the texts into performance texts as *Ankiya Bhaona* (one act play) and a form of devotional songs known as *Borgeet* (great songs). He had adapted many episodes of *Bhagavata, Purana, Mahabharata and Ramayana* into plays not only to perform but to spread his ideology of *neo-Vaishnavism*. His literary works consisted of *Bhagavata* tales- *Bali Chalana, Anadi Patan and Kirtan Ghosa*. Later he was patronized by both *Ahom* and *Koch* kings. In the later part of his life he wrote '*Gunamala*', a handbook of *Bhagavata Purana* in one night at the request of *Koch* king *Nara Narayana* in 1552. His

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[81]Neog Maheshwar, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam: Śaṅkaradeva and movements in Assam: Shankardeva and his time* (Delhi: published by NarendraPrakash Jain for MotilalBanarsidass, 1965)

followers like *Madhavdev* also moved his way and wrote *Naam Ghosa*, (the book of the Lord's name) *Bhakti Ratnavali*, 191 *Borgeet* and 9 one act plays known as *Jhumura*. After *Sankardev*, a saint name *Bhattadeva* did some work independently. "A saint named *Bhattadeva,* who came after *Sankardev*, translated *Gita* and *Bhagavat* into elegant and lucid Assamese prose"[82]

While *Sankardev's* work was popular in the *Ahom* dominated upper Assam, after *Naranarayana,* the *Koch* kingdom separated into different small states ruled by the *Koch* dynasty. It is interesting to know the facts that while upper Assam was growing inspired by the period of *Vaishanvaism,* lower Assam basically '*Darang'* maintained the legacy of *Manasha*. We should also mention that lower Assam is the economically weaker part in comparison to upper Assam, the agricultural work in upper Assam is comparatively better than lower Assam and also the *Ahom* kings ruled for there for 600 yrs ensuring stability, whereas lower Assam was separated into different states later.

Manasha Texts Re-written:

As we already mentioned that the *Manasha* myths existed in the belief system of lower Assam. While *Vaishnavite* texts of *Mahabharata and Ramayana* were re written as a form of performance texts such as *Ankiya Bhaona* under the patron of *Ahoms,* the lower Assam's *Koch* kings patronized *Manasha* myths to be re-written as performance texts by the three poets *Mankor, Durgabor and Narayanadeva*. We find evidences that *Panchali* literature were being re-written as performance texts here: "…included in these newly re written texts singing and

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[82] Bhuyan Surya Kumar, *Studies in the literature of Assam, Assamese literature: ancient period* (Guwahati: Published by Lawyers book Stall,1962)p-11

dancing became important features which are now positioned as performance texts."[83] Arnold Hauser argues that "one thing is certain: every work of art shows clear traces of its own time, and contains the unique, unrepeatable, and unmistakable character of a historical constellation. It represents a stage in the development of style which is precisely definable, in technical accomplishments and in sensual-intellectual sensibility. It depicts people and relationships in situations which arise once and only once and addresses itself to individuals who judge the depictions from a specific historical standpoint and a particular social position."[84] The poetic works of the *Panchali* period also gives us the sense of popularity among the people as it was traditionally being performed. The whole *Panchali* culture was a performance culture. Therefore the poets of this period didn't really write the poetries, they had actually documented it from popular performance culture. The same assessment we find here as well: "oral stories related to *Manasha* performed in Ojapali has a long history. The devotion towards serpent goddess *Manasha* was widely practiced by the people of Bihar, Bengal and Assam. Later it has been documented. *Narayanadeva* took the core of the stories from the popular practice and wrote *Padmapurana* with his interpretations, so that it could applicable to his society." [85] Here popularity can be interpreted in two ways—1. The popularity lies in the story, and 2. The popularity spread by the superior class like the *Koch* kings. Arnold Hauser says the "'folk epic' of romantic literary history originally had no connection at all with the common people. The songs and heroic lays which are considered as the source for the epics were the purest class poetry ever produced by a master class. They were neither created nor sung nor spread abroad by the 'folk', nor were they intended for or attuned to the character of the folk. They were absolute

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[83]Goswami Dipanjali Das, Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon, (Guwahati: Published by Aroonodai Publication, Panbazar, 2014), P-11.
[84]Hauser Arnold, *The social history of Art* (New York:published by the Taylor & Francis, 1951)
[85] Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati:Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014),15

art-poetry and an aristocratic art. They were concerned with the deeds and experiences of a warrior upper class, they glorified its lust for fame and glory, mirrored its heroic *amour-propre,* its tragic-heroic moral outlook, and did not merely address the only conceivable public but also borrowed their poets from it, at least at the outset."[86] This makes us think about the role of the kings and royal families as patron. Assam has history of kings as patron of culture and literature. Likewise there are historical evidences of *Koch* and *Ahom* kings of Assam patronizing different cultural and religious practices in Assam. As the royal authority of lower Assam they once patronized dances in *Hayagrib Madhav Mandir* in *Hazo*. It is said by Dr. Maheshwar Neog that *Kumar Bhaskar Barma*, the king of *Kamrup* patronized songs and dances--"In 7th century, when Chinese traveler *Hiuen Tsang* visited this valley king *Bhaskar Barma* entertained him with music and dance."[87]

Narayanadeva and his patronization:

There are historical evidences of *Panchali* literature being patronized by *Koch* kings but there are evidences of *Narayanadeva* being patronized by *Darangi* king *Dharmanarayana*, who was a part of the *Koch* dynasty. If the *Panchali* literature period is *Sankardev*'s counterpart in lower Assam, then at that time *Koch* kings were ruling the region of lower Assam. We have already discussed that the *Koch* kings were idol worshippers and they founded many Shiva and Vishnu temples in their state. Historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan writes "*Hema Saraswati and Haribar Vipra* enjoyed the patronage of the *Kamata* ruler *Durlabha Narayan*, who has been immortalized in the

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[86]Hauser Arnold, *The social history of Art* (New York:published by the Taylor & Francis, 1951)

[87] Neog Maheshwar, Ed. *Sattriyaaruojapalinachardhrupadiswkriti, sattriya dance of Assam and their rhythms*, (New Delhi,published by SangeetNatak Academy, 1985)

colophons of their poems like *Prahlad - Carit* (Biography of Prahlad), *Vavruvahanar Yuddha* (War of *Babrubahon,* based on the Mahabharata) and *Lava-Kushar Yuddha* (war of *Lava and Kusha*, based on the *Ramayana*). The third poet *Kaviratna Saraswati* wrote *Jayadrath-badh* (killing of *Jayadrath*) under the patronage of the same enlightened sovereign *Durlabh Narayan*."[88]All these discussions make the point clear that the *Manasha* texts of *Panchali* period were written under the initiative of *Koch* kingdom.

From Hauser's point of view, a question arises on the role of *Koch* kings; did these myths and poetry exist before the formation of the *Koch* kingdom or was it canonized by them as Hauser said "purest class poetry."? No doubt at the time when these texts were written, they were taken from the popular traditional oral sources. The popularity of the texts and the corresponding performance could easily be traced here; "The songs and poems under *Panchali* literature were well accepted by the common people. These songs were basically performed amongst the people. Songs and poetries of that period were sang, recited and enjoyed together in public places. Apart from literary value, these songs and poetry also carried a lyrical tone and rhythmic sense in it."[89]

Feudal Lords and the Notion of Connoisseurship and Patronage of these Texts:

Arnold Hauser raises the question on the politics of the upper class feudal lords who being represented in this performance genre in a way appropriated the subaltern cultures. This would also be applicable in the case of Ojapali and we could assume the fact that by re writing these texts, the royal families wanted to put their royal mark on it. From the whole discussion one also

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[88] Bhuyan Surya Kumar,*Studies in the literature of Assam, Assamese literature:ancient period*, (Guwahati:Published by Lawyers book Stall, 1962),p-9

[89] Goswami Dipanjali Das, *Sukabi naraynadeva Biracita Padmapuranar Bhashtattwik Bishlekhon* (Guwahati: Published by Aroonodai Publication, 2014)

interprets 'the politics with popular culture'. If *Manasha* poetry and its performance were already very popular then this was a larger platform for Kings to get intimate with their masses by patronizing the popular culture. There are evidences of *Manasha* Puja or *Maroi* puja being organized for 11-12 days under royal patronage, so the very idea of organizing *Maroi* puja was not just a method of devotion but to get political benefits by exercising supreme authority. Dr. Dipanjali Das Goswami says that *Narayanadeva* got his popularity after completing the writing of *Padmapurana*. Due to his popularity he got the title of '*Sukabi*', which means 'respected poet'. This means the *Manasha* poems gained more popularity when it was documented through the *Padmapurana*. So in a way it fulfilled the expectation of king *Dharamanarayana* and therefore *Narayanadeva* got a special place in the court of the *Darangi* king. Here another question rises—how could this popular poetry be 'purest class poetry' if the trend was of a popular one? Here we should look at Kunal Chakravarty, "The *Puranas* were . . . an instrument for the propagation of Brahmanical ideals of social reconstruction and sectarian interests, a medium for the absorption of local cults and associated practices, and a vehicle for popular instruction on norms governing everyday existence. They combined scripture and the social codes of the *Smrtis* in a manner acceptable to most people. In short the *Puranas* performed the delicate task of operating simultaneously at several levels, widening their scope to accommodate local elements as much as possible and involve as many people as permissible without compromising their principal objective of establishing the Brahmanical social order. The technique of accomplishing this task may be described as the Puranic process.[90]" Now if we see *Padmapuarana*, then it will appear to us as a tool for establishing the Brahmanical social order, as Chakravarty suggest; it resembles the 'purest class poetry', because evidence says that

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[90]Chakrabarti Kunal, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*(Publisher: OUP India,2001)

Narayanadeva was a Brahmin. The tendency of royal patronage towards a Brahmin was the common practice during the period; therefore the debate regarding the 'politics of popular culture' becomes relevant again. One can assume that it was easy for *Narayanadeva* and other *Manasha* poets to spread the popular *Manasha* myths with special stories like *Beula-Lakshindar*, with the help of popular performance form like Ojapali.

Reinventing the Myth

The Contemporary Historical Forces—Sankaradev and his Modes of Performance:

We have already discussed that the counter part of *Manasha* Culture in upper Assam was *Sankardev*. Rather than a religious figure, as a creative person *Sankardev* showed how tradition and myths could be 'reinvented' to be applicable to contemporary society. Erminie W Voegelin interprets myths as, "A story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits**,**religious belief etc."[91] On the other hand Marxist scholars like Eric Hobesbawm argues that "tradition actually invented, constructed and formally instituted those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period- a matter of a few years perhaps- and establishing themselves with great rapidity."[92] A comparative analysis of the *Vaishnavite* and *Manasha* tradition reveals that when *Sankardev* tried to modify the mythologies to make relevance to the society *Manasha* myths were already grounded in the society. For example, in the *Manasha* folk narrative characters of *Beula, Lakshindar, Chand Sodagor* are characters one

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[91]Voegelin E.W, Maria Leach,Ed. *'Myth' in the standard dictionary of folklore, Mythology and Legends*(New York:1972)

[92] Hobesbawm Eric, Ranger Terence. *The invention of tradition*(Cambridge: Published by Cambridge University Press, 1983)

could find in the society. *Sankardev* adopted stories having 'supernatural' elements (stories of *Bhagawat, Purana, Mahabharata, and Ramayana*), therefore he had to accept the challenge of modifying them into a more familiar picture. Here we should look at the strategy of *Sankardev* telling the stories. *Sankardev'*s invention of *Ankiya Bhaona* and *Borgeet* were completely new to the society, while *Manasha* tradition was living alongside the performance tradition of Ojapali. Many writers including Sanjib Kumar Borkakoty argue that *Srimanta Sankaradev* reinvented his performance forms from indigenous traditions of Assam like *Ojapali*. He did not learn his art during his all-India tour, which he started in 1481 AD like many others opined.[93] Therefore we could categorize *Sankardev'*s process of assemblage as 'reinvention'. As a contemporary historical force of 15th century, *Sankardev'*s performance form was highly popular in *Ahom* and upper Assam. We should give him the credit that it was his individual effort in the beginning and later he was given patronage. The above discussion also throws light on the two arguments made by Voegelin and Hobesbawm; Hobesbawm's idea of reinvention contradicts the pre existing notions of 'myth' saying that 'myths can also be reinvented'. Reinvention can be seen different ways, since *Sankardev'*s process of reinvention proved to be ideal for the society.

Bihu and Ojapali:

Upper Assam is always known for its colorful performance of *Bihu* dance. It is said that '*Bihu* is as old as the river Brahmaputra is'. It happens to be a performance of pre-*Sankardev* era and flourished under *Ahom* kings. The concept of dancing *Bihu* in the Assamese New Year (*Bohag Bihu*) was set by the *Ahoms* itself. We can say that *Bihu* and Ojapaliworked similarly in upper Assam and lower Assam respectively. While *Koch* kings were patronizing *Manasha* myths,

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[93]Borkakoti, Sanjib Kumar. *Originality of Srimanta shankaradeva's contribution* (Nagaon: Published by Society for Srimanta Shankardeva, 2013)

Ahom kings were patronizing *Bihu*. Songs of *Bihu* were composed by common people, primarily the farmers. Nature, love, agriculture have been the subject matters. Eric Hobesbawm's concept of invented tradition can also be applied in the case of *Bihu*, but the 're-invention' is different from Ojapali. Arnold Hauser says "The bias of art comes from its completely social nature. It is always talking for someone to someone, and reflects reality seen from a social station and in order that it can be seen from such a station."[94] This assumption could be used while analyzing *Bihu* songs, because *Bihu* songs not only change its content, it captures social changes too. While under the *Ahoms* it was just to entertain kings, under the influence of *Vaishnavism* it was devotional. Again the songs change with the arrival of colonialism; it also sang the songs of the independence movement. It is true that *Bihu* was influenced of *Ahom* kings, but the question is whether we consider it as 'the natural bias of art' or 'reinventing tradition'? Ojapali, originated as a religious voice with the myths of *Manasha*, but *Bihu* originated as a secular medium. 'Patronization' can also be interpreted as 'difference of identity' in the case of Assam today. The reason being *Sankardev* and upper Assam culture was not able to enter lower Assam or the then *Koch* kingdom, because it had the strong '*Sakta*' (idol worshipers and who believe in sacrifice) beliefs and *Sankardev*'s idea was against it. Although later *Sankardev* enjoyed the patronization of *Koch* king *Naranarayana*, but *Bihu* hardly entered lower Assam in the truest sense. In fact '*Bihu*' was once considered as '*itor*' (uncultured) by upper class people in lower Assam.

Darang and Lower Assam:

While the culture of lower Assam was dominated by *Manasha* cults and *Ojapali* was a popular performance during *Koch* kingdom, after the demise of King *Naranarayana*, the *Koch* state

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[94]Hauser Arnold, *The social history of Art* (New York:published by the Taylor & Francis, 1951)

disintegrated into several small places ruled by the fellow *Koch* rulers. Thus *Dharamanarayana or Balinarayana* became the king of '*Darang*', but he had conflict with *Koch* king *Raghudeva*on religious ground. *Dharamanarayana* also maintained a relationship with the *Ahom*. When the *Koch* state was attacked by the *Mughal*s, he had to take help from *Ahom* kings to save *Darang*. *Ahom* won the battle against *Mughals* and finally *Darang* became *Ahom*'s wealth. Later *Dharmanarayana* married an *Ahom* princess and as a dowry to *Dharamanarayana*, the *Ahom* king gifted him '*Darang'*. Thus *Dharmanarayana* became the king of *Darang*. As an independent king of *Darang*, *Dharamanarayna* had the liberty to execute his ideas and cultural expressions. As he was a devotee of *Shiva and Manasha*, he decided to re-write *Padmapurana* by *Narayanadeva*. Eric Hobesbawm identifies political forces, authority and groups as the powerful gatekeepers in this transformation process.[95] Here we can identify the conflict between *Raghudeva* and *Dharmanarayana* as an 'ideological and religious conflict'. As *Naranarayana* was the patron to *Sankardev* he believed in one god '*Vishnu*'. *Raghudeva* king of *Koch Hazo* was the son of *Chilaray* and nephew of *Naranarayana*, and he was a believer of Vishnu, but *Dharamanarayana* was a believer of *Shiva*. Hence the work of re-writing *Manasha* myths as *Padmapurana* could also be seen as counter to *Raghudeva*. On the other side, it was in the period of *Naranarayana,* that *Viashnavism* entered in lower Assam, but it was not popular as it was in upper Assam. After *Naranarayana* his successor *Raghudeva* also engaged himself in the service of *Vaishnavism.* The only person who wanted to save the *Manasha* and Shiva culture was *Darangi* king *Dharmanarayana*. Therefore we can conclude that 'writing *Padmapurana*' was also an effort to counter contemporary *Vaishnavite* forces. By patronizing *Narayanadeva*, *Dharmanarayana* re-invented the tradition of *Manasha* cult including Ojapali. I think thus

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[95]Hobesbawm Eric, Ranger Terence, *The invention of tradition,* (Cambridge:published by Cambridge University Press,1983)

Darang became the hub of Ojapali performance. During *Dharamanarayana* the traditional *Maroi* puja or *Manasha* puja became highlighted and performances like Ojapali and *Deodhwani* was added as a part of the 11-12 days celebration. In a way he had redesigned the structure of *Manasha* puja, and it was not certainly a 'natural bias' as Hauser suggests but rather this could be termed as 'reinventing' using Eric Hobesbawm's concept.

Role of Narayanadeva:

Here we should discuss the role of *Sukabi Narayanadeva* in details, because he was the immediate mediator of the 'reinvention'. If *Narayanadeva* is the contemporary of *Sankardev,* it is 14-15th century, but historian Dr. Satyendranath Sharma says that king *Dharmanarayana* dates to the 16th century, pointing to chronological confusion. On the other hand there are debates around *Naryandeva*'s existence. Also the 14th to 16th century is a time period, which Arnold Hauser within European history categorizes as the age of 'renaissance'. Hauser argues that in this age most of the artists became aware of self and his subjectivity. They were keener to bring their original significant value. In that age art became a humanist movement and upheld human values above religious or transcendental.[96] It brings relevance to the works of *Narayanadeva and Sankardev*. The *Manasha* texts of *Narayanadeva,* emerging as a performance text engaged with the people and received its popularity. The popularity is based on its existing belief. Yet during 15th century the influence of *neo-Vaishnavism* was all over the region and therefore proved to be tough for *Narayanadeva* and hence his need to prepare and popularize the adaptation.

While talking about adaptation we can't ignore Romila Thapar's argument, 'adaptations and translations assume a cultural divergence and are means of communication between these

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[96]Hauser Arnold, *The social history of Art* (New York:published by the Taylor & Francis, 1951)

divergences' [97]. The 'cultural divergence' of the above statement can also be read as 're-invention'. The influences of contemporary culture and situations are important elements for a writer. *Narayanadeva's Padmapurana* too captures these historical reconstructions. On one hand if we read it as performance text, then the *Bhatiyali Kanda* (The episode of return) is full of minute descriptions like how the snack comes, how he bites, how *Lakshindar* reacts. I think these can be read as stage instructions given to performer as well as for the understanding of the audience and its popular perception. If we interpret the three *Manasha* texts written during '*Panchali* period' as volumes one after another then we can trace the transitions from the orthodox to the secular. *Mankor's Manasha Kavya* was filled with descriptions of gods and the methods of devotion, then *Durgabor*'s was a collection of some stories, which gave little space to the performance and then *Narayanadeva's Padmapurana* placed *Beula-Lakshindar* convincingly so that people could identify with them. The secular nature of Ojapali also developed because I feel performers had the liberty to present the stories in their own way. Till date we see in an Ojapali performance sometimes the *Oja* exemplifies societal phenomena and connects the mythical story into it to make it more clearly to the audience. Therefore we could say that these performances carries 'natural biases' and 'cultural divergence' as Hauser and Thapar argues.

Again Hobesbawm says "How far new traditions can thus use old materials, how far they may be forced to invent new languages or devices, or extend the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits, cannot be discussed here."[98] It is the nature of culture. Myths and beliefs keep

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[97]Thapar Romila, *Shakuntala, Texts, readings and histories*(New York: Published by Columbia university press, 2011)

[98]Hobesbawm Eric, Ranger Terence*, The invention of tradition,* (Cambridge:published by Cambridge University Press,1983)

changing all the time. With the changing flow of time new idioms, symbols come to being. Today Ojapali is confined to the few localities of *Darang*. But the influence of *Manasha* has spread over Bengal, Bihar and Bangladesh too. The basic structure of the *Manasha* story including the *Behula and Lakshindar* central narrative is almost the same with local and cultural variations. Once the *Manasha* myths were part of the belief system of common people, now they are debatable on the ground of 'acceptability'.

Today Assam state authority is projecting *Sivsagar* as the cultural capital because *Bihu* has wide popularity. Now chances are people of lower Assam will find it difficult to identify with them and the popular forms of upper Assam especially when they have their own cultural expressions. The process of 'inventing traditions' still continues. I want to conclude this chapter borrowing from Hobesbawm when he argues that, "a large store of such materials is accumulated in the past of any society, and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available. Sometimes new traditions could be readily grafted on old ones, sometimes they could be devised by borrowing from the well supplied warehouse of official rituals, symbolism and moral exhortation'.[99]

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[99] ibid

Chapter II

The performance of Ojapali: *Oja pun pali hala / Tar maje Rasar nijara*

A performance of Ojapali in Manasha Puja

The performance of Ojapali as a part of *Manashapuja* in a village of *Mangaldoi* district is about

to commence. It was someone's *Chotal* (backyard or front yard of a house) and therefore, one

can assume that the space would accommodate *Manasha puja* (a space under the tent of *Manasha Puja*). A tent, typical of Assam (Assamese have a characteristic style of housing, evolved out of their geo-physical elements such as heavy rain and prone to earthquake, popularly known as Assam type)is pegged there, specially to organize the *Puja*. On the east side of the tent, a *thapona* (meant to be an idol of Goddess *Manasha*) had been installed. It is evening time when the Ojapali group prepares for their presentation after completion of the other rituals of *Manasha*puja like sacrifice of Pigeon, prayer to *Manasha* by deities and distributing *Prasad* to everyone. The sudden increase of the audience before the performance, also, in a way, gave us evidence about the popularity of Ojapali. Most of the audiences are villagers and well known to each other, including the performers. It is also an intimate space in the sense that performers were wearing the costumes and make-up at the same place, where they were supposed to perform in front of audience. Some performers and audience were busy in exchanging familiar words with each other like: "Brother, you should perform well". Often, a helping hand is offered for make-up or a difficult costume.

The ambience does not widen the difference between the performers and the audiences. The participatory nature of the audience was evident in their talking and helping the performers before and after the performance.

Before the performers start to take their respective positions, they form circles, talking to each other. Then suddenly, the *Oja* comes forward and sits on the ground in front of the *thapona*. I notice a sudden change of readiness among the audiences while many of them sit down wherever they find a place available. Most of them sit on the ground itself. There are no apparent systematic seat plans for the audience. Since it is a small tent carved out of domestic dwellings, space is limited and natural clusters do not happen.

Once the performance starts, more people start pouring in crossing almost the number 70.Earlier, it did not seem that it would cross 20. I attribute the increase to the scarcity of performance of Ojapali. In this locality, this was significantly the first *Manasha puja* with Ojapali that year.

The invocations of the gods start off the performance. This invocation is dedicated to the goddess, *Manasha*. In this performance, first *Oja* is set on the ground in front of the *thapona,*and then the chanting of an *Alaap* from Padmapurana is begun by playing an instrument called '*Nepur*' (Nepur can be called as a smaller version of an anklet and it also sounds like an anklet). The style of playing the *Nepur* by Oja is similar to a priest playing bells in a Hindu temple, but it does not evoke the same memory of playing a bell. Chanting of the *Oja* follows thus:

Diha: Huna gourai kohar taal biranchila//
Pada: Brahmaneek pujite mariyar bhoila man/
Taal nepur nai puja nokore subhan//[100]

Diha: Listen O' my god, playing 'Kohar taal'(typical rhythm of music)

Pada: Devotees are fulfilled if they pray toBrahmanee (another name of Manasha)/

But there should be *Taal* and *Nepur* (Taal is cymbal and Nepur is Anklet[101]

Oja starts the *Alaap* by playing *Nepur* and then ending the *Alaap* same way by playing the *Nepur*. During the chant, the *Palies* were just sitting together behind the *Oja* and followed the chant, keeping their hands together (*Namaskaar*). Once the chant finishes, *Oja* gets up and wears the *Nepur* he is playing before. This leads to the next level of the performance, which is the main component of Ojapali performance. Generally, four or five *Palies* take their position in a way, that there is a 'U' formation. The initial stage of performance starts with *Malitas* (poetry) of Padmapurana and other texts. One *Malita* follows thus:

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[100]Sharma N.C, *Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali* (Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

[101] Translated by the researcher.

O' devataro sabhat gandharva ase bohi/

Pusilanta indre kotha monoto harishi//

-ta-na- na-ri-ri-he-rite-nath-eeee//

Konbela kon raag dibak juway/

Kohiyo gandharvaraj amak bujhai//

Devotar kotha huni gandharva kumar/

Hehi bela gandharveo dakila gandhar//

-ta-na-na-ri-ri-he-rite-nath-eeee//[102]

Gandharva (dancer) is sitting in the God's court/

Taking the name of God Indra//

-ta-na- na-ri-ri-he-rite-nath-eeee//

Which *raga* should be sang which time/

Gandharvaraj (God Indra) explained it to us//

Gandharva prince also listend to the God/

And Gandharva also started singing//

-ta-na- na-ri-ri-he-rite-nath-eeee//[103]

While singing *Malita*, *Oja* too starts dancing and acting. In between *Malita*, he explains the meanings of the lines to the audiences, sometimes repeating the same line twice. *Oja* starts the *Malita,* showing a typical gesture of a *Mudra* of *Pranam* (Namaskaar) to the audience and then he goes three steps right and then three steps left. Behind the *Oja*, the *Palies* beat the rhythm with the singing of *Oja*, with the sound of cymbal. Mention may be made here that there is a typical style of beating the rhythm while playing the cymbal. There are different styles of playing

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[102]ibid

[103] Translated by the researcher.

cymbals in different genres. In *Suknani* Ojapali of Darang, small cymbals are used, commonly known as *khutitaal*. But in *Biyagoa* Ojapali, slightly bigger cymbals are used. In *Suknani*, *Palies* have to play their cymbals by fingers of the right hand. In this performance, four *Palies* follow the same traditional method. The most interesting thing one can find in an Ojapali performance is the co-ordination of the *Palies*. It is synchronized and well designed, which is not planned, but gradually happens within the performance.

The body language of the *Oja* is grotesque, while rhythmic. Most of the time, during the performance, he bends his body towards the audience, singing the lines by showing different gestures. I noticed that the *Oja* exhibited various gestures while emphasizing the key words of the song like god*, Indra.* He was demonstrating different gestures for key words, but his body remained in the same shape. Here, the role of *Daila Pali* (the *Pali* who stands on the right hand side of the *Oja)* has to be mentioned. When *Oja* finishes singing the first line of *Malita*, then *Daina Pali* takes the lead of the chorus.

In the chorus, the *Daina Pali* at first takes the line and then he is supported by the remaining *Palies*. Subsequently, the performance goes through different stages like *Saraswati Vandana*. The singing process of the *Oja* and *Pali* is more like modulation. First *Oja* starts with his medium voice, then *Daina pali* takes it to a higher pitch, and the last section is sung in chorus by the remaining *Palies*. The same style of singing continues for the entire performance. The process of singing can be very slow, particularly if we compare it to the singing technique of other *puranic* or Epic traditions like Assam's *Ankiya Bhaona*. In general, singing techniques of Assam are slow and lyrical. The same style of singing has been found in the *geets* (songs) of *Bhaona*. The reason for singing slow could be because of the epic narration tradition, so that every audience can understand the subject and the story.

After singing and performing *Malita*, they start the *Swarswati Vandana*. The improvisation process of the performance starts from here. In *Saraswati Vandana*, the first stage is a method of demonstrating devotion to goddess *Saraswati*, since she is believed to be the goddess of creativity and education. *Oja* and *Pali* start the performance by a *Pranam* in front of the stage towards audience and then *Oja* raises his hands and makes a circle round the stage to come back to the centre stage. This is followed by performing specific gestures, keeping the rhythms with his feet. The different gestures represent devotion and homage to *Saraswati*, and therefore one of subservience and humility. Yet the energy and the closeness to its audience do not make it seem like a prayer or subservient act. Here I want to quote a sequence of *Saraswati Vandana* and try to show how it is transforms into improvisation:

<div align="center">

Sarasoiti (sarswati) Vandana

He aai buli Matilung

Aai o aai//

Mor aaihe goshani ehe//

Aaito sarasoiti matang

Aai ou aai-e//[104]

(Heee….calling you dear mother

Mother o' Mother //

You are our respected goddess//

You aremother *saraswati*

O' Mother o' mother//)

</div>

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[104]ibid

After finishing with the part of *Saraswati Vandana*, the *Oja* initiates a discussion with his *Palies* and tries to bring in the audience into the conversation. The audience is allowed to throw comments and intervene into this piece. While he conducts the discussion, the performer relaxes his body into one of a normal human being.

He also revives himself with sips of water and starts a conversation with audiences familiar to him.

I would like to raise a pertinent question here as to if we can regard this interlude as part of the performance? The entire process can also be seen as 'transformation of performance energy'.

Then they start the improvisation part of it and this becomes the break from the serious and the formal to the improvisation and the comic. In this performance, they have taken up the issue of '*Rabha*'. The song goes like this:

Timu timu kori langa dholkhini bay/
Uttar kulor burha langa babuhe dakhinkule jay//
Aai honu honu, ee-he-he, e he-he-he//
Uttar kulor burha langa babuhe dakhinkule jay//
Dakhin kulak jay babu
Kakara kuchiya eku khabak nepay//
Age asilung kuch r sawa/
Rabha gelong Jaati/
Etiya heto holung moi rabhar giyati//
Doronge doronge fure bapu ee hee//[105]

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[105]ibid

(Thus they starts playing the drum/

People of north now goes to south//

O' dear mother//

People of North now goes to south/

Goes to south

You can't have chicken, *kuchiya* (a fish like)//

Once we were under Koch/

We are Rabha/

Now I am a kinsman of Rabha//

Can go here and there/)[106]

The performance of the song does not consist of too many gestures, but rather the *Oja* slightly bending his body towards the audience around him and singing and describing the song, pointing his finger towards the audience. Gradually the audience starts clapping with the rhythm of the song which changes the entire ambience of the performance place. I saw some audiences commenting on the song addressed to the *Oja*, "Yes, brother people going towards south". Then *Oja* replied "wait, wait my dear brother, I will tell the whole story. Listen…." Thus he again starts singing and then jumping according to the rhythm by pointing his finger in the same manner.

I find the historical background to this humorous song, probably indicating toward an ever increasing and conversion to *Vaishnavism* of the local community. The lines,"Thus they start playing the drum/ People of North are now going to south" indirectly shows the *Rabha* community people becoming followers of *Vaishnavism* (*Sankardev*'s school) leaving their traditional and ethnic practice. The song further describes that *Rabha* community, which is

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[106] Translated by the researcher

known for its non-vegetarian food habits and converting to new food preferences in light of them adopting new practice.

The song further describes about the transformation of *Rabha*'s ethnic values and community sentiments under *Koch* to *Viashnavism*. During the era of *Sankardev* (1449–1568), there were several communities like *Bodo, Nagas, Mishing*, etc were came under the influence of *Sankardev*. The *Rabhas* were too come under the influence of it. The impact of *Vaishnavism* remained for years after that. The advent of *Srimanta Sankardev Sangha*[107] in 1930 to spread *Sankardev's* ideology also included all the major communities of Assam. The song may be a satirical take on the communities who are inspired by *Sangha*'s practice. As the dates and times are not known of this song, we cannot really point to which period it is referring or originated from. Though it is the text which acts as the foundation of the improvisations, in performances such as these, it is not possible to see them as literal translations of the lyrics and complicates the attempt to date them or historicize according to period. For example, the *Oja* acts like the wind (comically) while he talks about 'People of North now going to south'. From this part of performance which is highly grotesque, one can get the sense that when the *Oja* demonstrates unusual behavior; it is to make the audience laugh.

From this point, they enter the story of '*Beula* and *Lakshindar*'. They start with *Chand Sadagor*'s refusal to pray to *Manasha* and then end up with the story of '*Beula's Swarga gaman*' (Voyage to heaven). This part is related to the story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*, which is the main part of a *Sukanani* Ojapali performance (as I mentioned in the earlier chapter). Often the earlier

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[107] Srimanta Sankardev Sangha, established in 1930 to spread the socio religious and secular practice of Sankardeva with modern approach. It is one of the biggest religious-cultural organization in entire north east India.

episodes are just explained through the conversation of the *Oja* and *Pali*. In the conversation, they explain *Chand Sodagor'*s refusal to give *anjali* (offering prayer) to *Manasha* thus:

Oja: etiya ami jam Manasha Devi r usorole.

Daina Pali: o, koloi

Oja: Mansha Devir usorole.

Daina Pali: Tekhtor usoroloi gole ki hoynu

Oja: are ki hoy ako, devik puja korle amar kushol hoy, Raijor Mangal hoy.

Daina Pali: o, heikarone eiya Mansha Puja.

Oja: o, etiya huna, Chando name asil ejon sodagor,

Kiba kethat uthil khong , nedau buli thik korli devi Manshak puja.

Oja: Now, we will go near goddess Manasha.

Daina Pali: where?

Oja: Near Manasha Devi.

Pali: What does happen when we go near her?

Oja: If one prays to the Goddess then we get blessed by her blessings.

Pali: That is why we are offering Puja (Prayer) here?

Oja: Yes, yes, now listen. There was a Merchant called Chando.

For certain reasons he got anger on Manasha Devi and refuse to offer prayer….[108]

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[108] Translated by the researcher

Thus, *Oja* described the entire story of *Beula* and *Lakshindar*, how serpent goddess *Manasha* with the help of *Kalnagini* bite *Chand Sodagor*'s son, *Lakshindar* on his wedding night with *Beula*. How *Beula* cried after seeing her husband screaming in pain and gradually, loses his senses in front of her. The story further describes *Beula*'s voyage to heaven to seek her husband's life from *Manasha*. How she crossed different barriers during the journey and how she dances beautifully in front of gods, only to seek her husband's life. The story ended with the offering of prayer by *Chand Sodagor* to save his son's life and *Lakshindar* opening his eyes.

The performance of the *Oja* while describing the story is quite interesting, sometimes he acted like *Chand sodagor*, sometime *Manasha* by opening his eyes wide to show anger on *Chand*, He also plays the role of *Kalnagini*. While playing this role, he converts his body language like a snake. On the other hand the episode after the snake bite is a combined performance of *Oja* and *Dainapali*. While the *Oja* plays the role of *Beula*, *Daina pali* plays the role *Lakshindar*. The *Oja* acts like *Beula* with a typical demonstration of traditional Assamese women. It interesting at this stage to point out that the whole episode is full of tragic elements, but I have not seen any audience take it as tragic. They were smiling and laughing loudly as if they were enjoying some comedy shows. It is also because of the melodramatic performance of the *Oja*. Like when he became *Beula* than his movements were like a typical Assamese women and the male impersonation was met with screams of laughter.

It was increasingly dark outside and the darkness also entered into the tent where the Ojapali group was performing. After the episode, all performers assemble together and pray towards the *thapona* and thus the performance ended. After the performance, *Oja* and *Pali* started removing their costumes at the performance place itself by conversing with the audiences, while some of them helped others to remove their costumes.

A performance Ojapali in Sriram centre

The second performance I am going to analyze is performed on a proscenium stage at '*Sriram Centre*'[109] in New Delhi. It was included as a part of 'All India folk Dance Festival, 2013'. The stage of *Sriram Centre* is one of the known proscenium stages in the country for dramatic performances. But it was quite thought provoking how organizing authorities decided that this space would showcase folk performance (as it is a folk dance festival), because my study says that many of the folk performances in the country don't flourish fully on the stage.

Nevertheless, it was a September evening and the *Sriram Centre* was beautifully decorated from the outside, with huge hoardings announcing the Folk Festival. Although, there were very few audiences inside the hall compared to the capacity of the auditorium, I could identify that most of them were Assamese, as they were talking to each other in Assamese and there were only 5/6 non Assamese coming to enjoy the performance. Many people were already leaving the place before the performance started. At the end, only 25 people were present for the performance. Much of the audience appeared sophisticated and from the well educated class, who had come out of curiosity or official obligation.

The stage was well-designed with beautiful lighting. The whole ambience of the stage was designed with blue rays of light. I didn't see any idol of *Manasha*, which is the main property/scenography of an Ojapali performance symbolizing the presence of the goddess *Manasha*. On the other hand, due to the proscenium arch of the stage, the whole scenography was different than the earlier performance I saw in the village. Instead of having audience around

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[109]Sriram Centre of performing arts situated in Delhi, It is one of the common venue for theatre and performance programme in Delhi.

the performance space; they stood in front of the performers. It was a one hour performance and written down as part of the festival schedule.

Before the performance, an official of the festival committee came on the stage and made an announcement about the performance. She also provided a small description about the art form but it was not enough for a new audience to understand fully about the art form. For example, she has not mentioned about which category of Ojapali it was (*Suknani, Biyagoa, Ramayani/ Sattriya*) and there was no mention of *Darang* or *Darangi* in her description. She just mentioned that this is a performance by a cultural group '*Dapoon the Mirror*' and they are coming from Assam. Most surprising thing is that there was no mention about the myths related to goddess *Manasha*.

Performers appeared on the stage very systematically (one after another) with their full traditional costumes of Ojapali. Because of the blue lights on the stage, I noticed the white portions of Performer's costume reflected morethan the other parts.*Oja*'s costume was proper *Suknani* costume, consisting of *Chapkan chola, Payjama, turban* and other ornaments. *Palies* were also in traditional Assamese attires. The *Khutitaal* (cymbals) were also used as musicalinstruments by *Palies*.

The performance started with an *Alaap* and then *Vandana* to goddess *Manasha*. Since there was no idol of *Manasha* or *Thapona,*therefore while singing the *Alaap* and Performing the *Vandana* then instead of offering prayer to *Manasha* idol or *Thapona* gestured a '*pranam'* towards the audience, as if audience is the *Thapona*. I also didn't see the *Oja* playing the *nepur* while singing *Alaap*, he just set on the stage along with the *Palies* and sang. It is also interesting to see that they were signing the *Alaap* for hardly five or six minutes, while in the earlier performance it

was for half an hour. The starting portion of the *Alaap* and *Vandana* are supposed to be in a calm tone with anote of spirituality. Since it is a religious performance, it needs to offer prayer to god or goddess traditionally. Since there was no idol or *Thapona*, the audiences were not really getting the actual ambience of an Ojapali performance. It was difficult to find the spiritual elements in the *Alaap* and *Vandana* which is evident in the opening ambiance of the village performance.

Thus, gradually the *Oja* started singing *Diha*. And in between the *Diha* and *Pada,* suddenly the *Oja* started improvisation by describing their own experience of coming to Delhi. Some lines of the performance texts can be cited here:

<blockquote>

Oja: Oooo' ore monai oi/

Pali: Ene sobha agote koitu dekha nai ye/

koitu dekha nai ye//

(Start conversation)

Oja: ei bule aamije aaji dehli ahisu.

Pada: Dehli nhy he dilli

Oja: O' jiyei nohuk de ye bappa/

Iyale je ahisu/

Pali: hoy

Oja: iyat je gandharva vidya bhagi prodorshon krisu

Pali: hoy

Oja: eiyki kom houvagyar kotha/

Pali: hoi diyok he deu/

Oja: ami iyale motar babe

Pali: motar babe

</blockquote>

Oja: Udjapon samitik dhonyabaad disu

Pali: disu.[110]

(Oja: O dear God

Pali: We have never seen this kind of Place.

(Conversation starts)

Oja: The matter that we are coming to Dehli.

Pali: it is not Dehli, it is Dilli

Oja: Whatever it is, finally we are here

Pali: yes

Oja: We have performed the *Gandharvavidya* (Ojapali)here.

Pali: yes

Oja: This is because we are lucky

Pali: yes, I agree with you

Oja: Those who invited us here

Pali: yes

Oja: Showing our gratitude towards the organizing committee.

Pali: yes, we should.[111]

In the above set of performance sequence, performers sharing their experience of coming to Delhi to participate in the festival. Mention may be made here that in our post performance conversation with the performance, I got to know that most of them were coming to Delhi for the first time. Therefore, I feel they find the kind of new experience which emerged as a piece of

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[110] The above performance sequence seen by the researcher directly during Bharatiya Lokanatya Mohotshav,2013 in Sriram centre of performing arts, New Delhi. It was performed by Ojapali group of Udalguri district, Assam.

[111] Translated by the researcher

improvisation for them. During his improvisation, the *Oja* pointing his finger and bending his body towards the audience said the above lines. In the same way, the *Palies* kept the rhythm by playing cymbals. Like most of Ojapali performances here, *Daina pali* plays a very active role while performing. I find the *Daina Pali* more active than the *Oja*. While the *Oja* talks about coming to Delhi and seeing this wondrous place, the *Dainapali* acting like a 'train coming to Delhi' expresses the journey and travel, beautifully with his body language particularly how he felt after seeing the city. This is the part where audiences also laughed loudly because the performance of the *Daina Pali* was veryexpressive. On the other hand, I heard some clapping during the performance, but it was not rhythmic like the earlier performance. I feel audiences' familiarity with the performance matters a lot. In the earlier performance, audiences were highly participatory during the performance because they knew the form well. Even they had knowledge of which rhythm would come after what sequence. Here, however, one can't expect that particularly since we didn't know whether they were familiar with the performance or not. On the other hand since it was a proscenium space, there was no scope for any conversation with the audience. Even if performers wanted to create any conversation, they were also aware that it was not possible to cross the stage-audience dividing boundaries at many levels. The performance area, i.e. the stage was a flooded with a pool of light amidst general darkness, which was alienating and created an insurmountable division between the performance and the audience.

As it was performed within a limited one hour assigned time frame, it was truncated and edited on the performer's part. It was quite a feat to even attempt to perform the entire *Beula-Lakshindar* narrative. The edited version had to rely more on narration and telling the story in third person, rather than performance in character. The entire character of it changed and it

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seemed more of a story telling session, rather than the complexities of being in character and the constant change from narration to performance and moving forth from one to the other. The performers felt they had to explain to the audience the truncated version in a post-performance conversation, particularly when they found out I was researching on the subject. That had shifted more towards telling the *Manasha* story, rather than the more secular narrative of *Beula and Lakshindar* and the long journey to heaven. This has some implications as the journey to heaven is more about common people and folk narratives which are almost subversive. As we all know the notion of heaven and hell as a religious concept does not trace its path, particularly through such popular – folk imagination. I bring up this point to emphasis that it is not only the change in the location or the background scenography of the landscape, but other critical factors like what remains in the narrative and what gets missed out. In a sense, the entire genre category gets modified.

The most important shift to me was in the audiences' presence and their responses which was such an integral part of the performance that the contrast was too obvious. The humor of *Ojapali* which is not only the *Oja's* doing, but a laughter which binds the audience and the performer into one performance, was conspicuously missing. The continuous need to create humorous situations and evoke audience response creates a tempo in the performance and an atmosphere which engulfs the performative impulse, without which the Ojapali is almost unrecognizable.

This is laughter and joy which comes from performance humor rooted in the day-to-day and the local experiences. You have to know your audience very closely to be able to make such continuous humor to keep the laughter going even at the most serious narratives which have connections to religious retribution and contain the didactic solemnity of any such performance. Even when they were trying to create humorous situations in regards to their trip and travel to

Delhi, the audiences were unsure of whether to laugh or not. The politics of such travel is difficult to transform into a humorous situation. The easy laughter which follows the local performance could not be replicated in Delhi. Instead, there was uneasy, uncomfortable laughter at some of the acting and movement sequences of the *Daina Pali*.

The story of coming and travelling to Delhi seemed ambiguous to the audience and they were not sure if they should respond with laughter. In its locale, there is never any ambiguity or embarrassment in the laughter for either the audience or the performer. Audience has the full liberty to laugh when they want to and it is the *Oja* who responds to the laughter with more jokes, adding to the general joviality. "Were they finding the jokes to insane or they thought it was against propriety to laugh?"

To create humor out of improvisation and spur of the moment impulses to start the laughter requires a different understanding. It raises the question as to who sets the first impulse of creating the humorous tone and how does it sustain itself throughout such performances. Does it require homogeneity and an understanding of each other's sensibility? There was obviously a wide gap between the performers and audience in this case. Hence the close communication which is created and sustained throughoutthe course of the performance breaks down in the shift in locale and participant audience. These are not constant factors and cannot be taken for granted.

Texts and Narratives; variations and departures

What is evident in the contrasting examples I have used in the previous sections that though forms like the Ojapali allows variation in texts and modifications are rampant, particularly as dictated by the humor and responses, the modifications seem forced and artificial, if there is no

demand from the audience. In other words, it seems that the need of the audience is responsible for the variations. Small variations happen from performance to performance, but larger narrative modifications and interpretations happen with time and are difficult to historicize.

Within its chronicled history, however, we can discern three major breaks in its narrative structures. In the first instance,the texts were attributed to *Mankor*, second when it was adopted and re-written by *Durgabor*, and thirdly, *Narayanadeva*. Although the easy reference is by authorship it is a far more complex reflection of changing historical phases. For example, in the third phase, in the *Darang* district, it takes shape in the hands of *Narayanadeva*, under the initiative of *Dharmanarayana*, which later became very popular. The popularity of this variation can be traced from the present practice of this art form itself, where most of the songs of *Padmapurana* were incorporated and received a life of its own.

As far as historical landmarks are concerned, we can identify changes and modifications in terms of the influence of *Vaishnavism*, end of colonialism and emergence of the State and re-organization of Assam. These are events which also changed the structure of traditional performances like Ojapali to some extent. Rather than taking it as historical changes, I would like to refer to it as Arnold Hauser, described as 'Natural biases'. According to Hauser, the changes come to an art form from its complete social nature, art unknowingly absorb the gradual changing of the social picture as well which Hauser termed as 'Natural biases of art.[112]

On the other hand, a continuous flow of *Vaishnavism* engulfed *Darang* and *Mangaldoi* in late 15th and 16th century. Gradually, a number of communities in *Darang* became followers of *Vaishnavism* and the main patronizers of this art form gradually influenced by *Sankardev* (as

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[112]Hauser Arnold, *The social history of Art* (New York:published by the Taylor & Francis, 1951)

Naranayana patronized Sankardev later). Only *Dharamnarayana* was the one, who strongly supported *Manasha puja*. But later *Sankardev's* performance became more popular in the other parts of lower Assam as well. This effect also brings a departure in the performance. On the other hand, *Sankardev's* introductions of *Sattriya* Ojapali in *Sattra* are also another variation from the typical nature of Ojapali. Thus, I find the contemporary religious flow also give a variation to the performance.

In my view, there are two powerful elements at play, role-'popularity' and 'performer's liberty'. Performer's liberty could also be seen as a reason of popularity. Once it was performed by the whole community and carries a strong collective and inclusive approach where everyone can come and join. Therefore, we see the kinds of 'comic elements' and 'nuance examples' cited by the performers during a performance. Instant comic elements and nuanced examples also bring the 'popularity' to the audience and the community. Sometimes, comic instances could be a burning social issue and sometime it could be a small one, but these elements could also be seen as the reasons for the variation of the texts and performance as well. Sometimes,the flexibility attributed to the performer distances a performance from its texts. Examples can be found in the songs performed during the Indian independence movement and Assam movement. During that period, most of the performances were done without any religious elements like *Manasha* or any other epic stories. The contents was fully improvised by the performers and intended to influence general public towards the movements. According to Kinaram Nath Oja, it was the highpoint when Ojapali took a completely secular turn, moving away from religious implications[113].

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[113]The above statement made by Kinaram Nath Oja during our field work.

On the other hand, Lalit Chandra Nath Oja said, in his interview to All India Radio, Guwahati, that the then Freedom fighter of Darang Paniram Nath had taken them to Shillong (The capital of Assam that time) for a performance when Jawaharlal Nehru came to join a meeting. [114] According to him, this was first instance when they performed Ojapali on the stage.

The 1958 dance seminar organized by Nehru[115]was another land mark for this art form, which offered them a chance to perform it on the national platform, received encouraging remarks from the prime minister himself. After this, lots of Ojapali groups in Assam started practicing this art form with different gurus and on different platforms. It can also be seen in the context as a variation as they were not same in nature. In *Nalbari* and *Barpeta* also, a resurrection in the form of Ojapali like *Bhaira Ojapali* appeared and thus, it took many variations.

On the other hand, during the Assam movement, this performance along with other traditional performances like *Bihu* and others used it in protest rallies. Here too, it had to free itself from any religious content. Thus, it takes another variation which loses its religious function and adopts itself as part of a nationalist culture and subsequently regional identities.

During the1990's, lots of theatre practitioners in Assam started improvising Ojapali performance with their theatre works. A number of directors adopted various aspects of Ojapali as part of the 'theatre of roots' project and accepted funding under the various schemes which allowed such experiments. It can be read as another variation and possibility of modification to suit the cultural projects. Theatre directors, well versed in the form, were now using parts of it to express more contemporary sensibility. Although the critique often leveled against the Theatre of roots project

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[114]Das Surja,Ed.Nath Ranjit Kumar,Saikia Naba, *Jiwanar Digh Baani: Interview with Lalit Chandra Nath oja,* All India radio, Guwahati, *Rasher Nagar,* (Darang:published by Nath Yogi Unnayan Parishad, 2013)

[115] The first dance seminar of India was organized by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with the vision to map the dances of the country.

which made taking up of popular forms like Ojapali compulsory were also relevant in some cases. What is important is that the form was now in the middle of the contemporary debates of theatre practitioners and helped in bringing it back into the public domain. Whether this played any relevant role in reviving the Ojapali cannot be assured or assessed.

The experiments in this area continue to a certain extent today and I have encountered productions which have taken parts of the narrative and sequences from Ojapali to create a theatrical rendition. To bringing the *Oja* on to the stage to act as the *Sutradhar*[116] of the play. In recent times there have been attempts to do theatre using songs from Ojapali and other such aspects, which then takes up a life of its own. These become important aspects of the debate around authenticity and hybridity.

Analysis of the Songs/ Performance Texts

Songs of Ojapali comprise the performance texts and is the lifeline of the genre. The poetry of *Padmapurana* issued here is lyrics of the songs which take on an opera style rendition. This is mainly the episodes dealing with the story of *'Beula-Lakshindar'*. As I have mentioned in the earlier chapter, in Padmapurana, the *Bhatiyali kanda* (episode of return) *and Swarga gaman* (journey to heaven) deals with the story of '*Beula and Lakshindar*'. The language of the performance of present *Suknani* Ojapali is Assamese language, but it has got the flavor of lower Assam and *Darangi*as it developed there. The present day language of *Sukanani* ojapali adopted the *Darang* and *Mangaldoi* in its colloquial form. This is quite a different dialect than the mainstream Assamese language. One of the main reasons Ojapali appears very comic for an audience of upper Assam is because of the dialect. The typical lower Assam tone and accent

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[116]Sutradhar means an Anchor or storyteller of a play. Sutradhar is the main character of a Bhaona. This traces similarity with the Oja of Ojapali.

appears funny to the mainstream Assamese people, but a crucial expression of local identity in language. The use of dialects which change words and meanings are played out in terms of inclusion and exclusion of the audience Ojapali demands and assembles.

The songs of Ojapali are a combination of words, dialect and local tunes which appeal to its target audience through memories of tunes and rhythms, though like dialects, it is not possible to understand its readings. I would like to concentrateon the Ojapali songs and its categories.

Nabin Chandra Sharma classified the traditional and typical sequence of songs of Ojapali into five different stages: 1. *Alaap,* 2.*Vandana*, 3.*Diha/ Dhura/Disha*, 4.*Pada*, 5. *Upohonghar.*[117]

Alaap(introduction)**:**The first step of music is *Alaap*, which literally means introduction. The aim of singing Alaap is to tune the voice or prayer to the goddess *Manasha*. The rhythm of *Alaap* goes like this: 'Ha-ta-na-rhi-rhiiita'. An *Alaap* can be cited here like this:

"Ha warne tu ganadhkshya/

Ta warne tu sadshiva/

Na warne tu mahamaya/

Ri warne tu kansha boiri Krishna /

Rhita warne tu Gandharva/[118]

The above lines in the *Alaap* prays to the almighty and says that he is the one who is *almighty*, *Shiva*, *Mahamaya*, *Krishna*, the enemy of *Kangsha* and a *Gandhrva.* Thus, Ojapali pays respect

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[117]Sharma N.C, *Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali* (Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

[118]ibid

to the almighty in the first place and then starts other segments. The significance of an *Alaap* can be found in Nabin Chandra Sharma's writing, where he comments

Alaap is the beginning to the other Ragas in Ojapali music. That is why Ojapali performers don't take help of any musical instruments. It is performed for at least 15 minutes. The idea of *Alaap* is to make the other organs like lung and nose ready for the other high scale songs. Here one starts with the high scale and then goes onto a lowerscale. Therefore, we can say that it is the kind of process of modulation and voicetuning.[119]

Vandana: *Vandana* also means prayer. After *Alaap,* generally *Darangi* Ojapali sings *Saraswati Vandana*, because it is believed that *Saraswati* is the goddess of creativity, but *Vandana* could be addressed to any other god and goddess related to *Manasha*. To see the example of *Saraswati vandana,* we can take the example mentioned in the analysis of the 'performance in *Manasha puja'*. Here I want to quote some lines of a *guru vandana.*

<div align="center">

Diha: O' he gobin ki dibo yadava ray/

O' he Brahamandar bhitore jata bastu ache

Hamaste tomake pay//

Pada: kiba moi ashan   Dibo narayan

Gorure jar bahan/

Kiba alangkare   Ranjibo tomare

Koustave jar bhushan//

Oishaya bibhuti   ki diob samprati

Apuni lakshmir pati /

</div>

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[119]ibid

Kiba stuti nati   koribo bhokoti

Jar bhrya saraswati//

Heno jani hori   saran poshilo

Tejibako nujuwai/

Krishnara choron   hridoye dhoriya

Din madhav dase gay//[120]

The *vandana* addresses the God, *Vishnu*. The summary of the lines are: "we don't have to offer anything to you because you are the almighty. We can feel your presence in all other things whatever is in the universe. We don't have anything to offer you because you are *Narayana* (another name of god), *Garur* is your vehicle. We don't have any ornaments to offer, you are already full to the brim with it. We can't satisfy you with money and wealth because you are the husband of *Lakshmi* (Lakshmi who believed to be goddess of wealth). Therefore, we are praying to you without any offerings, do accept it God."

The musical tone in *vandana* is a rhythmic one. After *Alaap*, this is the part where *Pali* starts playing cymbal to get into the rhythm. Henceforth, the *Oja* and *Pali* stand up and *Pali*starts playing the cymbal and then the *Oja* performs it at the same place showing different gestures. The tone here takes pace towards the main parts of the performance. It is also known as *patoni geet* (Patoni means beginning) because this is the main beginning of Ojapali performance. Sometimes, there may be several segments inside the *Vandana* or *Patonee geet*; there is no limitation of it.

Then again they sing another *Alaap*.The next *Alaap*is sung the same way as we mentioned earlier. Then gradually, it comes to the main part of the performance –*Diha* or *Dhura*. *Oja* start

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[120]ibid

singing a *Diha* related tothe *Alaap*which he infuses with rhythmsand then the *Palies* come forward and sing the line after the *Oja* finishes. A *diha*:

"Mayur Gaamane kala-re-Jai/

Hoy –are jai are jai/"[121]

Gradually *Oja* starts singing *Pada,* in ojapali *pada,* means a chapter of *Padmapurana*. The main part of this is- the story of *Beula–Lakshindar*. The entire story is being described here with the existing songs in *Padmapurana*. So relatively, it is a longer version of music than others. This is the main part of the Ojapali performance too. Here I quote a song from *Beula –Lakshindar* story:

Pada: Prana pati Lakshindar tyajil jeevon/

Heriya behula sati koroye krondono //

Pashana bidirna hoy behula krondone /

Brikshero nabapollobo khohoy haghane //

Taharo krondono huni poshu-pokshigono/

Hoiya moha dukhito juroye krondono//

Koto je binaye kande behula kamini/

Nayana nirite hoda bhijoye awani//

Kadiya kadiya ei koheno bharoti/

Ki hukhe nishaya daga dileno jogoti//

Ei dukh boro momo monote rohilo/

Poti honge hukhe nisha probhato na holo//

Nari hoiye poti mormo na hoilam gyato/

Britha momo nari jonmo emono borate//

---

[121]ibid

Momo homo bhagya hina aru nahi nari/

Bibaho nishayo ami hoilam bari//

Manasha songote bad cirodino dhore/

Sebado khondilo devi tore bari kore//

Hay hay ki koribo kothayo jayibo/

Kothay gele prano poti punoh paing//[122]

Pada: Herbeloved husband left his life/

Now Beula is crying//

Even stone hearts will break seeing her cry/

New leaves fall one by one//

The wail makes the animals/

Also get tears in their eyes//

Beula is crying so loudly/

That tears covered her eyes gradually//

It is a sad night for her/

The first night with her husband, has not even seen the morning//

She is feeling the pain of husband/

It's all useless without her husband//

She became a widow on the day of her marriage/

Now where will she go, whom should she ask/

How will she get back her husband's life//[123]

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[122]ibid

[123] Translated by the researcher

Thus, the song describes the pain of *Beula* after losing her husband. The song carries different descriptions of how she reacts, how the leaves have fallen from the trees and how the animals heard the cry of *Beula*. Thus, *Oja* and *Pali* sing these lines with their own acting improvisation. Generally in this process, *Oja* plays the role of *Beula* and *DainaPali* performed as *Lakshindar* (mentioned in the first analysis). Sometimes, they even create instant conversation or dramatic movements depending on the situation and environment. Interestingly, if one reads the whole content, they realize that it is a very sad story. But sometimes, *Oja* and *Pali* make it even funny with their melodramatic movements to impress the audience. It breaks the pathos of the scene and brings back the idea of melodrama as a popular form. It blends with the story and plays freely with pathos and pathos exaggerated as melodramatic moments. This breaks through the melodramatic moment as something which created a feeling of alienation amongst the Delhi audience who generally thought the melodrama was unnecessary and 'not good performance'.

Upahonghar (The ending): The last part of the performance belongs to *Upohonghar (the ending)*, as the name suggests, this is the conclusive part of the performance. Here *Oja* and *Pali* sing towards the idol of God or *Manasha* and seek mercy if they have made any mistakes during the performance. In *Manasha puja*, the priest of the main *puja* also joins the performers in the process. This part consists of *Diha and Pada*. Here is an example:

> *Diha: o' Brahmani maai   o' Brahmani maai*
> *Aporadha khema kora bahure podumaai//*
> *Pada: Aporadho khema kori choli jawa Bishahari/*
> *Sarbadusha poritrana kora podumai/*[124]

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[124]ibid

<div align="center">

Diha: O' dear mother   O' dear Mother

Mercy on us whole heartedly//

Pada: Mercy on us and take your way out

Mercy on us, if we have made any mistake [125]

</div>

The idea is to sing *Upohonghar* to ask for mercy in front of *Manasha* if there is any mistake made by the performers during performance. This is a typical nature of a religious performance. The lyrics of the song also express the same sorts of meaning. The word 'mother' is directly used to address the serpent goddess, *Manasha*.

Moreover, Ojapali performers sometimes take help of existing popular traditional songs not for the whole performance, but to express a significant message. There are examples of use of *Bihu songs*sometimes, *Ful knoworor songs, Mani konwor r songs* as such. Therefore, we can say that Ojapali performerhas the flexibility to innovate in music as well.

Improvisation of songs

The most interesting part of the songs of this performance is improvisation. *Oja* and *Pali* keep improvising the performance texts according to place, time and audience. Hence, one could find different versions of Ojapali in all Assam. One of the reasons being Ojapali's performance texts keep changing all the time, as the performers have a kind of 'Performance liberty'. While we see the performance texts or the *Padmapurana* as a canonical text, it may appear as a very orthodox text, full of Hindu mythology, to make it interesting and relevant. *Oja* and *Pali* include their own insights on social issues, comic instances related to the myth and society, etc. The modern tendency of performing Ojapali is now only to rely upon the improvisation to hold onto its audience. Instead of *Beula–Lakshindar* story, now the part of improvisation becomes vital for

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[125] Translated by the researcher

performance. Here, we can take an example of the present structure of performance texts in Ojapali:

Oja: o, Edineko poti jawoto chndrawali tawto kathiya.

Bidhatar likhan najay chariya//

Pali: jetiya ji hoba laga ase age asehoi/

Bidhatar hosa misa kodasit nohoy.

Oja: Aair ghorot jam bole duhate kham/

Pali: Bidhatai nohoy bule pise pise jam /

Jiyekir ghorot nijeti jai kidang kidang kore

Tetelir patot bhat barhi di ukalikanda kore//

Oja: Adsha

Pali: Dukhiyar kotu nai sukh/

Ghate ghate pani khai hukai jai mukh //

Eke pai jak sotake pai tak/

Dukhiyar dukhe pala nangal holake fal nilak//

Oja: hoy,hoy,aru?

Pali:atalu nilak singa boitha nilak/

potharor nilak mor tola kathiya//

Oja: Banat moril tinita bhai/

Tinita kukur mori gel pithaguri khai//

Bule kar agot kom,kone potiyabo/

Kar murot dhorim kune batiyabo//

Oja: Aru?

Pali: Hepar kala kaan muja/

Bhangi kou teu kiya nubuja//

Age asilu bhatou ita holu tiyan/

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Imakone bhangi koun teu nubuja kiya//

Oja: hobo,hobo, etiya ki hol jana?

Pali: ki hol?

Oja: he probhu ramchandray rambhodraya bodhsi/

Roghu nathay nathay sitaya potoye nomoh//

(a prayer to God Rama)

Pali: hoy, hoy

Oja: jetiya tratayugot rama-ravanar yudha lagil tetiya papistha ravane Rama- laxmanak sor kori patalpur nagark….

Pali: (continue from oja's mouth) oloiii gol…

Oja:tetiya Ramak bisari Bandar bilake habathuri khale/

Pali: tarpisot

Oja: hokolu bandare jukti kroi Hanumanok maat logale

Pali: matok diya.

Oja: o Hanuman, o Hanuman

Pali: (act like Honuman) huu..kuu, huu..kuu

Oja: eifale ahasun/ etiya probhu Ramak bisari jabo lagibo

Pali: koloi?

Oja: patalpur nagarloi

Pali: kunu kotha nai

Oja: Jodi anibo para bor hukhor kotha

Pali: Jodi anibo nuwaru?

Oja:tetiyahole ki korim jana?

Pali: ki

Oja: ji Hrishyamukh parbotot ami ji juik sakhsi kori probhu ramchandrar lagat mitrata sthapon korisilu hei agnilunda ami hojai loun/ loi ki korim jana?

Pali: ki?

Oja: baru kou huna: (song) 'Anibo nuwaru jodi shrirama –laxmana/

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Agnikunda sajai sawe tejibo jiwana//

O honu bhai!'

Jambuwante bole huna veer hanuman/

Ramak bisari juwa patala bhuwana//

Briddha jambowantak honui prename hadori/

Ramaka bisari honu goila doradori//

And stated his mission to recover Ramachandra.

Oja: Jambuwante lahekoi Hanumanak maat logale

Pali: o' maatok diya

Oja: Hanuman

Pali: ku…uuu (sound like hanuman)

Oja: tumar bahire kunu jabo nuwaribo he/

Pali: moi jam/

Oja: etiya tumi jabo lagibo patal pur nagarak//

Oja: jambuwantar charanat hanumane hewa jonaise/

Sewa korar logote bhagawanaku…..

Pali: bhagawanar naam smaran korise

Oja: januvyang ch: tatha panivyang ch:/(a sanaskrita sloka)

Pali: eibuli hanumane sewa-lewa-tewa tiniuta korise

Oja: kihor hewa,lewa,tewa oi?

Pali: o ihot tiniu bhayek

Oja: tarmane?

Pali: sewa hol bordeka,elder brother/

Oja: aru?

Pali: lewa maju deka,middle brother

Oja: tewa?

Pali: hour deka, little brother/

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Oja: tarmane ihot tiniuku sewa karile bhagawan santosta hoy?

Pali: hoy

Oja: Jodi ejonok sewa kora hoy?

Pali: o'ihot duyu beya pabo/

Oja: moi okol Sewakhe janu

Pali:adsha; tumi kenekoi sewa kora?

Oja: prothomote moi janu duta matit pelai diu/

Pali: moiu diu

Oja: golot ekhon bostro diu//

Pali: hoi neki? Aru?

Oja: haat jur kori sewa koru

Pali: ai hol

Oja: ai hol bhgawanar usorot amara sewa

(Then they act like an unknown)

Pali: o oja neki ha?

Oja: o

Pali: oi baapre baap(smile) bohut din dekhai nai?

Oja: o apunako bohut din dekha nai/

Pali: hothate log pai bhal lagil

Oja: moi bohudur goisilu

Pali: apunar ghoror kha khabar bhal?

Oja: ekrokom bhal/ apnar kenekuwa?

Pali: muru beya nohoy diyok/ kintu pohpal diyato ekrokom taan hoisi he/

Oja: kenai?

Pali: gotei gera kheniya.gera kheaniya.

potharat nai dhan/

Dukhiyar dukh bujibo kone/

Sorkareu nasai amar pine/

O bandhoi//[126]

Oja: Almighty's (bidhata) predictions are never erased.

Pali: It's not all about the Almighty's prediction,

Whatever will happen is already set.

Oja: Will go to mother's home and have food with both hands

Pali: wherever you go. Almighty will follow you.

(Rhythmic)Gone to the daughter's home asking for something

Had food in the tamarind leaf and saying something else.

Oja: Ok (Oja supports)

Pali: Poor people would never be happy.

Their mouth gets dry

They talk to those which they find the same status.

Unhappiness and poverty never be separated.

Oja: Alright, what else?

Pali: This time, farming is not going well.

Flood has come and taken away all the seeds.

Pali: Three of my brothers passed away during flood

In that pain, three pets also died

Now whom shall I speak to, who will listen to us?

oja: And…What else?

Pali: How simply I have to explain my pain to you

Why don't you understand?

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[126] Collected by Nabin ch. Sharma from the performance of Shri pratap Bezbarua bhaira and his group and included to his book "Poribeshya Kola: Oja Pali". They performed it in different parts of Darang and Mangaldoi district of Assam. Performance Year and date is not mentioned.

Oja: Ok.Ok, now listen to me.

Pali: What happened?

(Then they sing a prayer to Rama)

Oja: he probhu ramchandray rambhodraya bodhsi/

Roghu nathay nathay sitaya potoye nomoh//

Pali: Yes..Yes..(bhaira supports)

Oja: During the war of Rama and Ravana, Ravana kidnapped Rama Laxamana …

Pali: (continue from oja's mouth) oloiii gol…

Oja: Monkeys got surprised when they were not able to find them.

Pali: After that...

Oja: After a discussion among monkeys, they called Hanuman.

Pali: (supports oja) they should do that.

Oja: (Act with the voice of monkey) hu..kuu..

Oja: Come here Hanuman.

Now you have to go to find God Rama.

Pali: Where should I go?

Oja:(act like Jambuwanta) To the underworld.

Pali: Ok. I will go.

Oja: If you can discover him, we will be very happy.

Pali: If I cannot, then?

Oja: Then we will go to the fireplace Hrishyamukha hill,

Where we took oath to maintain friendship with Ramachandra and then?

Pali: Then what?

Oja: Let's hear then..(Song) 'If we are unable to recover ShriRama and Laxamana,

We will sacrifice our life at the fireplace.

O' brother hanuman!'

Jambuwanta said, listen Hanuman.

Go to the underworld to find Rama.

Hanuman showed respect to old Jambuwanta

And stated his mission to recover Ramachandra.

Oja: Jambuwanta softly called Hanuman

Pali:(supports oja) Ok. He should do this.

Oja: (like Jambuwanta) Hanuman

Pali: ku…uuu (act like hanuman)

Oja: No one can go except you.

Pali: (like Hanuman)I will go.

Oja: Now you have to go to the underworld.

Hanuman showed respect to Jambuwanta and God too.

Pali:(supports oja) He took God's name ?

Oja: januvyang ch: tatha panivyang ch:/(a sanaskrita sloka)

Pali: And hanuman is doing Sewa(prayer), lewa, tewa

Oja: What is Sewa, lewa, tewa?

Pali: They are all brothers

Oja: What?

Pali: Sewa(respect or Prayer) is elder brother

Oja: What else?

Pali: Lewa is middle brother

Oja: Then what is tewa?

Pali: The little brother

Oja: Will God satisfy us if we show sewa, lewa and tewa to him?

Pali: Yes, of course.

Oja: If we do one of them, then?

Pali: Others feel bad..

Oja: But I know sewa(respect) only.

Pali: Ok, how do you show respect to God?

Oja: First we put our knee on the ground.

Pali: I also do that.

Oja: Then we wear a cloth (gamusa) in the neck

Pali: Ok. What else?

Oja: Then we put hands together.

Pali: What is this?

Oja: This is how we do to show respect to our God.

(Then they act like an unknown)

Pali: Are you oja?

Oja: Yes

Pali: Oh my God. We are meeting after a long time.

Oja: Oh..I haven't seen you so long.

Pali: So pleasure to meet you.

Oja: I went too far.

Pali: How are you?

Oja: I am good. How are you?

Pali: I am also good. But crisis prevails all over my family

Oja: How?

Pali: Everywhere erosion and erosion

No paddy in the field

Who will understand the poor?

Government is not helping us.O' my dear friend.[127]

This particular performance sequence, based on the story of *Ramayana*, depicts how *Jambuwanta* (a character of Ramayana) approached *Hanuman* to recover *Rama and Laxmana* after being kidnapped b*y Ravana* in disguise. Through the story, Oja and Pali express their

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[127] Translated by the researcher

contemporary social conditions. To make it more interesting, they have put some comic instances and created small dramatic sequences like the English words *'middle brother', 'elder brother'*; they are pronouncing it with typical Assamese accent, therefore, in the performance process, it is like *'midul brother','alder brother'*, which also creates a comic moment for the audience. On the other hand, the use of the words like *'Sewa, lewa, tewa'* also put comic elements. The word *'sewa'* means respect, but the remaining words don't carry any meaning. *Oja* just created it as a comic instance. While going through the piece, we should realize the fact that the sequences which we called 'comic' may not appear same to all. Mention may be made here that these interventions are created by uneducated *Oja* and *Pali* who live in villages, which are far away from governmental schemes. Hence, their subject matter also expresses the anxiety over socio-economic conditions. Interestingly, the musical tone of the performance remains same and the songs which literally take the mythological narrative forward, however also change the content by its very lyrical- singing version. They are like interludes, which break the narrative as well as take it forward.

It is also mentionable that most of these performance texts are improvised on the spot and are developed aurally. Therefore, we can't really match it to any particular situation. For example, the above mentioned performance text is an old one, which can look odd if we compare it to the contemporary situation. But these songs are important material to understand at a particular time and the situations related to village life of Assam.

On the other hand, sometimes, they trace improvisation with special relevance to the *Manasha* story. In this process, generally the *Oja* creates conversation with *Daina pali* in between the lines of *Padmapurana* and interpret and improvise it their own way. One example:

Oja: Tomar uchorole padmai Potheichi/

Pali: tengar logot bati khuwa Padma?

Oja: nohoy ha, o' Bishahari potheichi/

Pali: O' botolot thaka bishahari/

Oja: tumi eku najna ha/Manakhai(Manasha) potheichi/

Pali: Manakha? eee Manakha Kole?[128]

Oja: Padama has sent me to you/

Pali: Which Padma? The one who had the bowl with lemon?

Oja: No...No, the Bishahari (Manasha's another name)

Pali: Oh Bishahari, that inside the bottle/

Oja: you know nothing/ Manakha (Oja sounds differently) sent me/

Pali: Manakha? You said Manakha?[129]

This particular sequence presents the conversation between *Dhemai naag* (a serpent under Manasha) and *Hanuman*. *Oja* plays the role of *Dhemai naag* and *Pali* is *Hanuman.* In between the songsof *Padma Purana*, they have improvised it their own way by putting some comic instances and presenting it dramatically. Here we can see some comic elements intercepted by *Dainapali*. For example: "which *Padma*? The one who had the bowl with lemon." This line doesn't carry the same meaning for all, what I can find here is that the name *'Padma'* is a familiar Assamese name, so *Pali* is acting like there are many *Padma*s. Which one is this?On the other hand, later *Dainapali* relates the word *Bishhari* (where Bish means poison) to the poison inside a bottle. In the last two lines, he plays with the words 'goddess'. There maybe several

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[128]Sharma N.C*,Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996)

[129] Translated by the researcher.

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interpretations coming out of the above mentioned texts, one of which can be to inform different names of goddess *Manasha* such as *Bishahari, Padma* to the masses. I think the question pattern of *Dainapali* represents the common man's understanding of the name *Manasha*.

From the given songs, we can understand and appreciate how varied the text can be and how new meanings can be generated and stretched. Such variations and changes are often taking the religious narrative onto the realm of the secular.

I argue religious performances which originated once to spread religious messages, gradually transforms itself to a secular platform through various such dramatic strategies. This is important for the popularity of the genre. While we talk of diminishing popularity of the Ojapali in performance, however, it is very difficult to discern any lack of popular response and reception.

Dance and Acting of the Performer

'Oja pun pali hala

Tar maje Rasar nijara'

The above lines express the acting and dancing part of *Oja* and *Pali*. It says that an *Oja* has to be candid while *Pali* (*daina Pali*) has to be little opposite of him. So that, their combine acting/dancing can makes the performance interesting for all.

If we assess Ojapali from its aesthetic perspective, it would fall within the category of the 'grotesque'. The grotesque would be an integral part of the popular performances and the folk laughter which Bakhtin elaborates on. I would however not like to try and fit in Ojapali within Bakhtinian 'carnival' performances, but try and use observations and descriptions from the form to comment on the notion of the 'grotesque'. It is an attempt to see how the performance creates the 'grotesque' though different gestures and body languages. The use of gestures for each word

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creates an expansion in sense of the time and space and emerges as unnatural and larger than life. Each word generates a new gesture which however is not codified in the sense traditional performances are, though now they are being more and more classicized and canonized. Yet in a popular Ojapali performance, it is possible to see how these gestures refuse any codification or beautification. This raises the vital question that 'can grotesque gestures be codified, or only what looks 'beautiful' is subjected to codification'.

I can find much similarity of Ojapali gestures and movements with *Sattriya Dance*[130] and *Ankiya Bhaona*[131]. In *Ankiya Bhaona,* the *Sutradhar*[132] can be seen as the *Oja* and in *Sattriya*, the *Sattriya* Dancer. The movements of the two forms, in contrast to Ojapali are regarded a standard classical movement by dance scholars and practitioners, but similar Ojapali's movements are not analyzed or codified and hence, raises pertinent questions.

Nabin Chandra Sharma categorizes these gestures as *Mudra, Hastha, Haat*. In general sense, the acting follows the performance texts. Sometimes, *Oja* convert them to different characters within the performance and I distinguish them as 'gestures' and not '*mudras*'. For example,in the above performance text, *Oja* and *Pali* play different roles like *Hanuman,* villagers*, Jambuwanta*, etc. Sometimes they play the role of the self as well. The role play and self play are very evident and works out within set gestures and familiar characteristics displayed on stage, but never as codified grammar which only the conditioned can read. Its audience, well familiar with the

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[130]Sattriya is classical dance of India. Introduce by Sankardev in Assam during his Vishnava movement in 14th 15th century.

[131]Ankiya Bhaona is a form of traditional spiritual theatre of Assam introduces by Sankardev during his spiritual movement.

[132]Sutradhar is the narrator or the anchor of a bhaona.

nuances, however, is not the same as reading codes and this makes the audience reception outside the space of connoisseur-ship. I say this not as a criticism, but an integralpart of a live performance played in front of a live audience.

According to Kinaram Nath Oja, in recent times, the new performers do not really memorize *Padmapuarana* and other texts related to this performance. Earlier, they claimed the text was on their fingertips. The first assignment during the training process was to memorize the texts. It was the essential criteria to be an Ojapali performance. If one can't memorize the texts, then it will be difficult for them to perform or sing the songs. The knowledge of the text which was regarded as a holy text gave the *Oja* extra prestige and status. He was seen as embodying a corpus of knowledge related to life. Often the *Oja* doubles up as a life saver or *kaviraj* (village doctor) who can administer local herbal medicines, which are still the more popular recourse for health in these regions.

The inherent belief is that whoever read this *sashtras* (scriptures), they become *gyanee* (knowledgeable). Even Lalit Chandra Nath Oja shares an anecdote in one of his interviews that he had memorized the *slokas* and poetries of Padmapurana while he was working in the paddy fields.

The embodied performer and his art

The *Oja* is a dominant persona in the genre and can be said to embody the performance. I would like to explore what this would imply in terms of Ojapali and its *Oja*, whose importance is defined in the generic nomenclature.

In the beginning of the *Alaap*, all of them, *Oja* and *Pali* sit together on the ground and then *Oja* starts playing *Nepur* and then they show lots of gestures while he performs for *guru vandana*. In *guru vandana*, *Oja* and *Pali* stand up. While *Oja* starts singing the *Vandana*, then *Pali* starts playing cymbals to add rhythm on the singing. As I have mentioned earlier in Ojapali, different gestures can mean different characters like different Gods and Goddess. Same way, there are several gestures to represent, like flower, chariot, sky, king, elephant, etc. Mainly,the *vandana* part of a performance consists of gestural description. Then, when the improvisation starts, then only *Oja* and *Daina Pali* starts act depending on their sudden improvisation. For example, in the above mentioned sequence of *Lakshindar*'s death and *Beula*'s crying, *Oja* performs the role of *Beula* and *Daina Pali* to act like *Lakshindar*.

According to Helen Spackman, 'the artist's body (can be read) as source material and expressive medium[133]'. I see the body of *Oja* and *Pali* as an expressive medium of belief, social issues and tradition. The art of learning Ojapali is traditional; it is transmitted from one generation to other. Once it was a kind of responsibility of a performer to teach the art form to the next generation. Therefore, we can see the learning process itself as a tradition, while Ojapali performing in *Manasha puja* is also a tradition; therefore I find *Oja* and *Pali* a carrier of tradition and their bodies as expression of tradition.

The body languages they represent seem to be nuanced with local landscape. For example, when they showed a gesture of an elephant, they showed it with the help of their two hands and fingers, so that it looks like an elephant. Same way, flowers are also shown by gestures. These gestures and body languages are also a part of Ojapali tradition.

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[133]Spackman Helen,Ed. Patrick Campbell*, Minding the matter of representation: staging the Body (politics), The body in performance,Contemporary theatre review an theatre journal,* volume 10 part 3 (the Gordon and Breach Publishing Group,2000)

As a social being, *Oja* and *Pali* arealso part of the 'belief system', where *Manasha* myths are inherent and they are performing to maintain the ecological balance. The texts of Ojapali, the long traditions of its songs and the performance can be seen as the mnemonic of the whole belief system. *Manasha*, being a snake goddess, has close ties with the forest landscapes of Assam. The recent trend towards urbanization is offset by a belief system which is oriented towards the rural and forest landscapes. The performance brings back memories of the pre-urban development.

In the last point in this section, I would like to then see how the performer's body adjusted to the changing scenario. "Is he seen as part of a belief system which is of the past?""Does he remain a representative of the people who are changing according to the forces of change or is he seen as a memory of the past?" Here the constant reference to the social through improvisation allows them to traverse a past with the present. In that sense, the body is a social, political and historical body. Since the material is taken from the social and society itself, and even the memory of its past, we can see the performer's body as a social body. Even Piere Bourdieu identifies body as the important locus of social theory.[134]

Scenography

This is an important aspect of any performance. Of course, as a traditional folk performance, Ojapali's scenography is its natural settings and there is no use of artificial lights, stage, settings, etc. There is no use of artificial lights; earlier people used *'bhota'* (kind of fire in a Bamboo, putting oil inside) in the performance place to enjoy the performance at night. To describe its scenography, we can say that the background of it should be a village ambiance. Although when it is attached to Manasha puja, it becomes a space of spirituality. A small space where hundreds

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[134]lisahunter, Wayne Smith, Elke emerald, Ed. *Pierre Bourdieu and Physical Culture*(New York:Routledge, 2015)

of people can stand or sit together in a circle and enjoy the performance is the ideal scenography for this performance. The Manasha puja space is an ideal ephemeral space because it has all the necessary things already in position like the *Thapona* or the idol of *Manasha*, etc. On the other hand, *Manasha puja* space is very intimate for all the performers and the audience as well. It's a space which combines the real and familiar with a sense of eternity and unknown.

The basic difference we came across in the two performances is started with was the 'space'. Basically Ojapali is performed in an intimate space where all sorts of audience sits together and enjoys the performance. In our descriptions the first performance was an intimate space and the second one a proscenium. Because of the Proscenium space, the performers in Sriram centrecouldn't really execute the performance properly. A folk or community performance demands a natural open space especially for performances like Ojapali. The main differences that Ojapali performers were facing were the lights, while the audiences were fully in darkness and some strange blue lights were there on the stage. Because of the darkness on the audience side performers were not able to communicate and it created a barrier between them. Secondly when we see the seating plan of a proscenium space then it is always little bit away from the main stage. While in actual scenography there is no differentiation of the space between performers and the audiences. They sit in a circle and in between the circle Ojapali performers performed. That didn't happen in the Sriram centre performance. Thirdly there was no idol of *Manasha*. Generally the performance demands for an idol because the first part of the performance like *Alaap* and *Vandana* are directly meaning to the god. In Sriram Centre when performers were singing and performing towards audience the whole meaning of the performance was went different.

In a community space (for example a village in Darang) the space belongs to the 'community' and so it encourages an intimacy which cannot be duplicated through any architectural structures or the absence of it. The performers themselves feel comfortable as a member of the same community. The audience does not go to a special performance space but this is a space of their daily lives, transformed into a performance space. When one put the tent for *Manasha puja* by decorating and establishing *Manasha*'s idol the whole place looks different too. I think this is not because of the Ojapali performance but because of the *Manasha Puja* the whole space transforms from ordinary space to a performance space and the process of transformation is also done by the performers and the audience together. This is what Piere Bordieu names as social space: "Social space is an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner."[135]

I think more than comfort and familiarity it has to deal with elements like spirituality, belief and devotion which bind the community together. These three elements also bring 'respect' and 'responsibility' to the performer's consciousness. As we have already discussed Oja and pali enjoys liberty while performing, but the aim of the liberty is to make the performance interesting and engaging for audience. The community bonds through the performance get accentuated as does the belief. The question which I want to raise in this context is if the belief is also devotion or spirituality?

Besides, while audience engages with the performance process, then I think performers feel the comfort which makes them more enthusiastic and to engage audiences with the performance an intimate space mean a lot. The point I want to bring is that the familiar spaces allow a high

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[135]Bourdieu Pierre, *Physical Space, Social Space and Habits*, An public lecture (Oslo: university of oslo,1996)

comfort level which allows audience to interact with the performers and performing spaces more freely. In the Sriram Centre there was no conversation with the audiences and the architectural structure destroyed the potentiality of the opportunity.

Costumes and Ornaments

The question which leads me to the next section is how close the performer needs to be to his audience and how does he also make himself different and also one who is listened to. How does his persona blend with his audience and how does he stand apart. As a community which is impoverished and struck by poverty, here the *Oja* and the *Palies* makeover are important.

The leader of Ojapali troupe, the *Oja*, wear a *chapkanchola* (a shirt like Kurta), *payjama,* he also adorns a girdle around his waist and hangs an ornate *Pachara* (a kind of cloth made form *muga* cocoon) on his either shoulders. He also wears a special type of white turban (*Paguri*), which resembles an egg. On the turban generally he puts a small *mala (*garland)of flowers. He wears anklets and *muthikharu* (traditional Assamese bracelet), necklace and rings on his fingers and mark of sandal wood on his forehead. The traditional process is like when the *Oja* enters the performance place he wears the bracelets and then when he leaves, he removes it. This change may not seem much to the outsider but is crucial when he is in midst of his audience group.

The costume pattern of *Oja* can be discerned from the myths he embodies. He identifies himself with *Arjuna*, who is in the guise of *Brihannala* and brings the costumes to teach dance and music to *Uttara* the daughter of *Virat-raja*. He is supposed to have brought all these costumes from *Aamaravati* (heaven). Since *Arjuna* is an eunuch the costumes are gender neutral and resembles drag. Moreover the fact it is a costume for the God like *Arjuna* plays into a number of visual registers. On the other hand the *Parijatee*story related to the origin of Ojapali performance also

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says that *Parijatee* got the costumes and ornaments in her dream. The costumes are not supposed to create an alienating effect for the Ojapali and he remains one of them in 'costumes' whose explanations are inherent in the text.

Palies wear traditional Assamese attire– *dhoti, Chapkan* (a shirt like Kurta*) and Gamosa (Asamese cloth like towel).*The process of wearing cymbals can also count as costumes. Besides, all the *Palies* including *Oja* adorn their heads with*, tilak* of sandalwood.

Nabin Chandra Sharma traces the costume pattern of Ojapali performance to the Natyasashtra's analysis of the costume of male performer. [136]In Natyasashtra we find *Shuddha* (white), *Bichtra* (colorful) and *Malin* (dirty), which differentiate the costume pattern of a male performer. Here the first category of costume *Suddha* (white/Clear) related to Ojapali, because their costume isn't colorful, it is all their costume is white and clear. I however see it as a community marker and differentiation strategies. Cleanliness and whiteness sometimes has a more alienating effect than the drag costumes of typical performance which are gaudy and glittery. It can also symbolize dignity rather than prosperity. A number of such complex signs are played out in the costume and props.

Properties and musical instruments

The only property used in the performance of Ojapali is the *Thapona* or the idol of goddess *Manasha*. The idea of installing this into the performance place is to pray or singing *Vandana* and *Alaap* towards it. Yet the only time attention is drawn to it is in the first episode and soon it becomes an object lying at the margins. *Manasha* is also a grotesque goddess and hence her idol installation adds to the overall popular aura of the stage setting.

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[136]Sarma Nabin Chandra, *Asomor poribesya Kola Ojapali* (Guwahati: Baani Prakash pvt. Ltd.1996)

The only musical instrument used in the performance is *khutitaal*or *Bhor taal*(cymbal). All the four or five *Palies* play these cymbals to keep the rhythm and pace of the performance, so that it helps the *Oja* to sing along. They play it with one hand in a typical style. They tie the cymbals with a rope or long cloths. Then they tieit hard in one finger so that they can play it with the help of fingers. Playing of cymbals start after first phase of the performance (the prayer) and according to the rhythm of the cymbal they have to move their hands, body and legs.

On the other hand the *Oja* plays *Nepur* (an ornament like anklet) in the beginning of the performance. This is also worn on the ankle by the Oja. The mention of cymbal and *Nepur*as essential ornaments and instruments can also be found in some of the songs of Ojapali itself:

<div style="text-align:center">

Brahmanic pujite Mariyar bhoila mon/

Taal nepur nai puja nokore shuvon//[137]

</div>

The above lines are directed as prayer to goddess *Manasha* and emphasis that without cymbals and *Nepur*, the prayer will not be productive. So the use such of musical instruments also have strong connections with the myths associated to *Manasha*.

Traditionally after finishing the learning process of Ojapali, the *Guru* (the teacher) allows his students toadorn the *nepur*.[138]It symbolizes initiation and was a tradition but not followed in contemporary times. These conventions are now more relaxed and as a genre which is in the process of being marginalized such strict rules cannot be adhered to. The weakening of the *guru shishya parampara* (The tradition of teacher and student of ancient time) is also a representative of how social relations even in such locales are changing.

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[137]ibid

[138]ibid

Audience

Audience is regarded as the most integral part of a performance. Without audience there is no meaning of a performance. In traditional performances like Ojapali rather than audience they are participants. In a community performance the definition of audience doesn't fit into the general understanding of theatre audience. Ojapali is a community performance, so as a community member participants are aware of the performance form. They are well versed in the genre and see it numerous times in their lives without expecting much change or modifications. Hence the audience participation is an important character of this performance. I would like to see the audience of Ojapali as a participant rather than audience. The interactive nature of the Ojapali performance also includes audience to a large extent.

When we see the village performance of Ojapali (basically in Manasha puja) we see that audience also helps the *Oja* and *Pali* in the process of wearing costume and ornaments. *Manasha puja* is organized collectively in villagers. Once upon a time, all the arrangements were done collectively by the community,but nowadays it is changing. As a community member it is a collective responsibility and respect for the serpent goddess *Manasha*. Therefore Ojapali performance in a *Manasha Puja* also exhibit audiences' responsibility and respect to the whole structure of *Manasha Puja*. Generally Ojapali is performed in the evening after all the formalities of *Manasha puja* finished. The aim of the performance is to provide some sorts of entertainment within the mythological content. Hence comic elements are found in the performance. Ojapali performance is not only an example of performers' liberty but also it shows audience liberty as well. Within the performance an audience can involve himself, he can shout out a dialogue

related to the content of the performance, he can sing the song along with the *Oja* or *Pali,* so all these factors convert the audience into a performer itself. The performer and audience belongs to same community, same environment and they share same belief system as well. The reason behind sharing the same belief is that they all belong to the agrarian community and it is believed that doing *Manasha Puja* before the agrarian season will give them well weather and crops as well. Therefore the contents and improvisation process of this performance in a village platform is generally related to agrarian and the overall activities of the village. Moreover the enthusiastic audiences' insights also provide another level of performance element in the performance process which is one of the major aesthetic elements I find in the performance. To suddenly join in a conversation with the *Oja* during a performance the audience also need to improvise it and perform with the flow of the whole performance. It is not an easy task for a new audience or the one who doesn't know the performance.

The above points can provide some answers to the questions of contradiction between the two performances that I described in the beginning of this chapter. Audiences who were coming to Sriram centrewere not accustomed to the *Darangi* culture. Most of them are accustomed to a city lifestyle and their sensibilities of enjoying performance are not comprehensible to the Ojapali performers as well.

This raises the controversial question which I am raising not to try to answer but demonstrate the anomaly of the contrasting examples I have used. The solution to make the Delhi performance more vibrant cannot therefore lie only in modifying the proscenium space or to try and create an arena type performance and sitting area. The entire performance culture cannot be replicated just by modifying the structure within a different cultural locus. What could be an option is to frame

the culture of this form not as a strange and alien perform genre but in a more communicative way of its cultural locus and as Bourdieu describes its 'habitat'.

This comment is useful more in terms of performances like *Bihu* than Ojapali as beyond some stray cases Ojapali is not imported into these alien spaces unlike the recent interest in *Bihu* which is seen as the main 'folk form' of Assam. In the neo liberal atmosphere *Bihu* has become the cultural commodity to identify Assam and its people as well as appeal to the Assamese community. Reality shows in the media use *Bihu* as part of the competition culture which uses regional and local identities to market culture as well as other commodities. While these are important trends to critique my intent to use the Sriram centre example is more as a contrast to create a framework which allows me to go deeper into the analysis of the Ojapali in its own cultural locus.

In conclusion therefore I would like to point out that within the two contrasting performances I have described and analyzed, I intended to create a larger picture of the performance, the idioms, the narrative and other details which a performance such as the Ojapali require. It gives me an opportunity to position the performance amongst its performance culture and look at the mise-en-scene of their culture and its wider community identities. The Ojapali in a sense represents the cultural identity of the *Darangi culture* and also helps to build the cultural characteristics. Subsequently I have gone on to taking up the various aspects and what in theatre and performance studies we call the tools of analysis, the text or the narrative, the form and idiom, the scenography which includes costume, props and the audience. In my subsequent chapter, I intend to take sections and examples from this chapter to look deeper into identities and identity

politics of the region within the larger frameworks of nationalism, regionalism and sub-regionalism.

Chapter III

Politics of performance; advent of Darangi cultural identity

Performing Identity

Research on a popular performance like Ojapali can be misinterpreted as a reconstruction project for the purpose of eulogizing or an expression of larger socio-cultural changes. In recent times it has also come under the purview of identity politics or discourses. The basic notion of identity politics, as defined by Jeremy Cover states that 'identity is first lone and then the lone identity creates a social identity when it comes to collective social platform'[139]. This is extremely problematic as cultures like Ojapali does not always follow the expected trajectory of the individual to the collective. If we do still see it as a collective expression of a community the trend has often been to anthropologize

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[139]Cover Jeremy, *My Performed Identity, Journal of the sociology of self knowledge*(Macalester College. Human architecture: Vol. III, Nos. 1&2, Fall 2004/Spring 2005)

the genre and keep it outside the purview of the modern or contemporary expression of culture. In this chapter, I would like to actually understand the association between performance genre and culture like the Ojapali within a more flexible discourse of identity politics and its connections with larger socio-political changes in the cultural milieu. Also in terms of the landmark productions and two way processes, performances form identity markers that expresses sentiments coming with new identity aspirations.

In India, long traditions of performances are attached to communities, which stand as unique – cultural identity for the communities. Therefore performers are an integral part of the collective identity. The same assumption can be applied to Ojapali performances. When we look at Ojapali through the theoretical frame of Cover[140] we find similar kinds of peculiarity that Ojapali performers too contribute towards the identity of the region known as *Darang*. Once this performance was popular in entire lower Assam, but is now confined to *Darang* district and cultural milieu. We have already discussed the history of *Darang* in the earlier part of this thesis, how *Darangi* king *Dharmanarayna* reinvented Ojapali and *Manasha*myths as a counter to the contemporary *Bhakti* movement of *Shankardev*. Although the peculiarity of this performance lies in the simple stories of villages presented with comic instances, but these secular aspects later translated the performance into strong voice against colonial rulers and Bangladeshi immigrants. I see the folk performances as valuable treasure as well as historical documents of socio-political changes.

Generally Ojapali is regarded as a performance of *Manasha* myths but the presentation allows the performers to take the liberty to turn it into secular narrative which is an advantage, if we are to make a cultural genre inclusive. Inclusions of contemporary social problems make this

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[140] Ibid

performance more relevant and socially grounded. Grotesque aesthetics and performers' liberties toward improvisation in an ongoing performance make it purely a social performance. Ojapali has a long history as a public and social performance which is remain untold for many years. Even research works on this performance till date ignore its social and political nature. In this chapter, I will try to unfold the untold story of Ojapali's contribution toward building a new Assam which is intricately linked to both, old and new identities.

Two major events with which Ojapali is associated are Indian Independence and Assam movement. In these events Ojapali performed a role in spreading the messages of the movements. During the two events Ojapali's performance came out of the religious space and was performed in various remote villages which were miles away from any kind of accessibility. Various songs could be found as evidences of these historical landmarks. Though those songs were aurally developed, most of the songs were erased with the flow of time. Hardly few songs are available to understand the performance of that period. Many will argue that these are departures from the traditional structure of the performance but I see this departure as *Rupantar* (an Assamese word which means, 'more than just change' or 'Transformation'). What Great Assamese cultural icon Jyotiprasad Agarwala said in his words. He opined '*Rupantarehe jogot dhuniya kore'*(Transformation makes the world beautiful). I think it is *Rupantar* because in a time when there was lack of communicative means to express the ideas of movements then it was done by a traditional performance which is strongly connected to Hindu myths and beliefs. Independence movement was the first instance when Ojapali performance removes its *Manasha* content and represented the collective Indian voice against the British. Hence there are evidences

that even Muslim people were also inspired by this art form.[141]A documentary film made on *Oja* Lalit Chandra Nath's life also includes an anecdotal presentation, which shows people from Muslim community getting involved in the performance practice. It proves how Ojapali take strong variation and went beyond the parameters of religion associated to the performance.

Performing for the Nation: The Indian independence movement

'Swadhinata' is an Assamese word which stands for 'Swaraj' or 'Independence'. The word *Swadhinata* became the heart and soul of the Indian freedom movement for the Assamese people. *Suknani* Oja Kinaram Nath vividly remembers those moments when he used to perform Ojapali in different corners of lower Assam to convey the message of Independence movement. He is now in his 90's, but when he recalled the past, it felt like he had gained his energy back. He told me how their team improvised different songs to sing in different areas during that time. He started singing to me *"Gose bone kopi uthe Swadhinatar Sur oi….Swadhinatar Sur…"* (Tunes of Independence all around the trees and air). Like Kinaram Nath, many others took this way forward. Nabin Chandra Sharma talks about 'Fatik Chandra Kalita Oja' who belongs to *Pithakhuwa para* of *Darang* district. His performance of Ojapali tried to explain to the audience the reason and strategies of Mahatma Gandhi's non cooperation movement.

Diha: SwarajloubolVandeMataram//

Pada: Koi bole Congress committee thane thane/

Khoi bole khaddar lowaswarajorkarone//

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[141]Directed by Prabin Hazarika Dance with Body and Soul(Darang: Produced By Nath Yogi Unnayan Parishad, *A documentary on the life of Lalit Chandra Nath Oja*, 2012)

Goi bole Gujratat Gandhi Avatar/

Ghoi bole ghoreghorefure volunteer//

Ngoi bole tengakothanokoyvolunteere/

Choi bole cholasobefatokKhatibare//

Soi bole sota era bidekhattoiyari/

Joi bole japilowanijejatnakori//

Jhoi bole jotojonjalnokoriba age/

jnoi bole niyom kora bilatinelage//

Toi bole tupipindhi volunteer ghure/

Thoi bole thatrabidrupdustaloke kore//

Doi bole dangorlokfatekot jai/

Dhoi bole dhakdholereaagborhaithoi//

Noi bole nangolneribasadhujan/

Toi bole tiriye kora non-cooperation//

Thoi bole thanthiteri volunteer fure/

Doi bole dukanbojarhaatbondho kore//

Dhoi bole dhorasobemanoyogkori/

Noibuleengraaj k nidibahaeri//

Poi bole pabaswarajmonotasha kora/

Foi bole fandotporiseengraajbopura//

Boi bole baadbibadholgurutor/

Bhoibulebharatbasiaruengraajor//

Moi bole mil houkisudeibulisunu/

Joibulejihoukeneyenemanu//

Roibule raja hoi amak kore atyachar/

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Loi bole London basikimitraamar//

Woi bole thane thane bank patidilak/

Shoibuleshantohuwabulibhurukatbhoraithole//

Kshoibuleeibishasu age khai/

Hoi bole horbonasheengraajkibarpai//

Hoi bole hortaalnokoribabhoy/

Ksshoi bole kshoma kora nicchoybijoy//

Ahimsharmontroguwa hate kora kaam/

Bharat swadhin hobo buluraamraam//

Swarajloubuluvandamataram//[142]

Diha: Say BandeMataram to get Independence

Pada: *ko*says, congress has established committee in every places

Kho Says, Take Khaddar (type of Indian Cloth) for independence

Go says, someone called Gandhi appeared in Gujarat

Gho Says, Volunteers are loitering here and there

Ngo says, volunteers doesn't say bad words

*Cha*says, let's go everybody towards the prison

Sa says, giveup allforeign goods

Ja says, Make your own and take your own

Jha says, and then there will not be any problems in future

Jna says, make a rule that we should all give up foreign goods

Ta says, see volunteers wearing caps and loitering here and there

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[142]Sharma N.C,*Poribeshya Kola: Ojapali*(Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1996).Sharma collected it form Ojapali performer Fatik Chandra Kalitaoja and it was performed pithakhuwa para of Darang district during non co-operation movement and the writer of the song is anonymous.

Tha says, only unknowledgeable now waste time in insult and cracking jokes

Da says, Great people always go to jail

Dha says, they have accompanied by music and drums

Na says; don't give up your Nangal(plough)

Ta says; let women also come to the movement of Non-cooperation

Tha says, volunteers are loitering everywhere

Da says, they declare Bandhs(close) in the market.

Dha says, let's make everybody think properly

Na says, never leave fight against the British

*Pa*says; expect that we will get independence

Fa says, this time British falling in to the trap

Ba says conflict is serious this time

Bha says between Indians and British

Ma says somepeople suggested for mutual understanding with the British

Ja Says whatever, we will not accept it in any cause.

Ra says they harassed us and they become king

La says there would not be any friendship with this London People.

Wa says they construct Bank everywhere

Sha says but they kept us in a small hole.

Ksha says we have been consuming the poison from earlier.

Ha says who will come to save the British this time?

Ha says don't be afraid of Hartaal

Kssha says this time we will certainly get victory

Sing lines of Nonviolence and work for the movement

India will be independent say Ram Ram

Let's fight for the independence and say Bande Mataram.[143]

(Translated)

Performance:

As Kinaram Nath describes (to the researcher) the performance in villages during Indian independence movement was grotesque in aesthetics. Because, they were removing the conventional structure of Ojapali for spread the messages of independence movement. Besides changing the contents they were also avoiding traditional *Mudras* (gestures). They were also skipping *Alaap, vandnana*s and directly started with the improvised songs. The performance generally last for 4-5 hours and after the performances they were long discussions on the socio-political situation. There was no scenographic backdrop of the *Manasha Puja*. Though seemingly a minor point it signified for most of its conditioned audience departure from the usual and hence noted and discussed. The process of politicization allowed a departure from tradition and was important in terms of the sociology of the performance.

Apart from the songs almost all the other performance components were improvised. In a jovial tone, Nath points out that songs were not part of the traditional texts anyway, and the *Oja* and the *Pali* paused to observe each other while creating more improvised pieces but far removed from the usual narrative which gives directions to the improvisations.

Kinaram Nath also remembers having performed at various remote villages and spaces like paddy fields and *Namghors* (Assamese prayer hall). They used to walk to remote villages and performed while eating and resting in the houses of the local people.

Analysis of the song:

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[143] Translation done by researcher itself.

The song narrated the story of non-cooperation movement in Assam. From the composition one assumes that it was the beginning of the movement in Assam and hence many people were not aware of Gandhi and his ideologies. The lines like 'Someone called Gandhi appeared in Gujarat' introduce Gandhi and his ideologies to those who were unaware of it in the north eastern part of India. Assam was a late comer to the movement of Non-cooperation and hence Congress leaders of that period first used the popular traditional performances to spread the message of the movement and its strategic paths. An anecdote from Lalit Chandra Nath Oja says that they were asked to perform Ojapali in different villages with improvised compositions of songs by the then freedom fighter of *Darang* district late Paniram Nath. He also took their group to different places for performances. Respect for the leaders of the movement (volunteer) can be seen in the song which says, 'Great people always go to jail / they are accompanied by music and drums'. On the other hand, the song constantly emphasizes the issue of not to use foreign goods anymore. More than the issues I find this song a valuable document to understand and interpret the scenario of non-co-operation movement in Assam. Hence the significance of the songs as historical documents is more to be realized.

One can see that the language used in the songs is the colloquial language of Darang which traces similarity with the lower Assam accent. The words like *fatok, Dilak* are evidences of that. The language is very simple so that it can reach to the uneducated classes of the villages. Logic behind the language is that the content created by uneducated *Oja* and *Pali* as well. So in a way these songs also express their understanding about the Indian independence movement. The above improvised songs and performance texts also expression of their language. The 'humorous' elements like "Wa says they construct bank everywhere / Sha says but they kept us in a small hole", shows us the use of simple metaphors which also adds an impact value to the

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overall composition. On the other hand the above song is divided into two parts *Pada* and *diha*. These terms are basically used in the old religious and devotional Assamese songs. These terms can be traced as elements from the original structure of Ojapali songs. The change of content under the influence of independence movement can be seen as performer's ideological context, because the performers were the immediate mediator of the change. It was their improvisation which changed the religious contents. Before being a performer they are also part of the local community and affected by colonialism and hence inspired by movement. Therefore I feel it was their expression of ideology and commitment as citizen as well as performer. This also takes us to the point of performing identity.

Baz Kershaw in his book Politics of Performanceargues that, "Ideology is the source of collective ability of performers and audience to make more or less common sense of the signs used in theatre performance."[144] Ideology can also be read as the reflection of identity. I argue that in the above mentioned performance sequence; Ojapali performs the identity of a future citizenship of a post-colonial nation. During this time Ojapali was a popular performance in the entire lower Assam but it was not confined only to the lower Assamese sentiments but became an important tool for spreading a collective movement.

While we see through the theoretical lens of Jeremy cover, I see the performance as an outcome of collective engagement for the national cause at a local level. Anil Kumar Sharma describes the

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[144]Kershaw Baz, *Chapter1: Performance, Community, culture, The politics of Performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention*(London,published by Rout ledge, 1992)

impact of the movement as, "synchronizing the march of eminent public leaders of Assam like Hem Chandra Barua, Bishnuram Medhi, Siddhinath Sarma, Md. Tayyebullah and Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhury assembled on 12th March 1930, the day on which Gandhiji launched his campaign, at the Judges field at *Guwahati* and expressed their solidarity with the *Satyagrahis*. It is heartening to mention that two volunteers from *Golaghat*district, Keshab Chandra Sonowal and Kanak Das took part in the famous *Dandi* march of Gandhiji with other fellow volunteers."[145]

Oja Lalit Chandra Nath of Darang district once shared some memories about his Ojapali performance during the time of independence struggle in an interview taken by All India Radio. There, he admitted that he and his group came in touch with freedom fighter Paniram Das and they started performing Ojapali, village to village to inform people about the Indian freedom struggle. Although he didn't remember the lyrics exactly, he made it very clear that his group has improvised Ojapali songs related to the struggle for freedom. [146] This conversation also opens up the point that in various parts like *Darang* freedom fighters urged the performers to perform Ojapali in distant and remote villages to spread the massages of the movement. While looking at Shahid Amin's work, where he talks about Gandhi's picture being transformed to *Mahatma*. He termed it as *Gandhian charisma*. [147] Similar picture can be seen in the above song where Gandhi's picture projected as 'Mahatma'.

Performing for the region: The Assam movement

[145] Sarma Anil Kumar, *Quit India Movement in Assam*(New Delhi: Published by Mittal publication, 2007)p-29.

[146]Das Surja, Nath Ranjit Kumar, Saikia Naba, Ed.*JiwanarDighBaani. Interview with Lalit Chandra Nath oja*, All India radio, Guwahati, *Rasher Nagar*(Darang, published by Nath Yogi Unnayan Parishad, 2013)

[147]Amin Shahid, *Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2'*. (London:British Academy, Trinity College)

Assam movement is one of the landmarks in the history of post independent Assam. It was the very first movement which restructured Assamese identity and National allegiance during 1979-1885. Led by a group of students the movement started against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. People across Assam united and most of students had to sacrifice their two academic years (picketing) to participate in the protest.

The movement began in 1978. Hiralal Patuwary the existing Member of Parliament of *Mangaldoi Loksabha* constituency died and subsequently there was a by-election to fill the M.P. position. During the process of election some observers came across the fact that the number of registered voters had grown dramatically. All Assam Students Union demanded to stop the election till withdrawn of the suspected names from the voter's list. It was the first spark of the movement and later on it spread to every corner of the state. Meeta Deka writes, "A conspicuous turning point in the 1979-84 student movement, assuming all characteristic of a social movement, was the forming of the *Asom Gana Sangram Parishad* (AGSP) on 25th August 1979 in *Dibrugarh* at *Kanoi* College by the executive body of AASU. The agitation not only gained momentum and revitalized the agitational programmes but also made it extremely widespread."[148] In some parts of Assam it took a violent turn. Nellie massacre was one where almost 2000 people died due to communal fights on 18 February 1983. The victims were basically Muslims of East Bengal origin. "Though the movement started against the illegal migrants, over time, it became violent and morphed into a communal movement with anti-Muslim bias. This movement also became responsible for an attitude of indifference to the art and craft of Assam's tribal groups thus galvanizing these groups in the last 30 years to demand

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[148]Deka Meeta, Mahendra Naraian Karna, Ed.*Student movement in Assam: A polyglot. Social movement in North east India* (Guwahati, 2000)

autonomously administered areas.''[149] V B Ganeshan writes, that eventually Indian parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT)[150] in October 1983 and began to implement it in Assam. AASU and *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* set the year 1961 to find out about the illegal infiltration. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi forced the leaders to set the year 1966 as the landmark of the identification process of Bangladeshi immigrants and deportations. Temporarily it caused a mere upset among the people who believed in the movement. Finally on 15th August 1985 the historic Assam accord was signed by Rajiv Gandhi in the presence of the activist of the movement like president of AASU,Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Secretary Bhrigu Kumar Phukan and others. As a result the leaders of the movement finally formed a political party known as *Asom Gana Parishad* and in 1985 election they came to power. The leader of the movement Prafulla Mahanta became the youngest chief minister of the country.

Although it is in undocumented form the movement took help of various traditional performing forms to spread the messages. Similar to the independence movement,different forms like *Bihu, Ojapali, Khol Badan* were used to sensitize the issue. Basically it was performed during their meetings at stages and protests. During the movement Medini Mohan Nath, the son of Lalit Chandra Nath Oja was a youth, partly involved in the movement. He told us that his father with his team was then performing Ojapali at different meetings in different places. According to him

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[149]Ganeshan V.B. *Three decades after Assam movement: a study on identity*, (New Delhi: 1999)

[150]IMDT was an act of Parliament of India enacted in 1983 by Govt. of India, when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister. This contains the procedure to detect illegal immigrants and expel them form Assam.

that was the high time when these performances were performed on stages mostly.[151] An Ojapali song can be cited with reference to that period:

Diha: Catrasanthajagiche

Ganasangram caliche

Asomotbideshilokebharipariche/

Pada: Jaga Jagabuliaaiasomidakadila

Asomaracatracatrijagiyauthila//

Kai bole karimamiasomikauddhara

Khai bole bideshikhedimeibara//

Gai bole gabhirakoricintasuwa

Ghai bole gharkhankenebhuliyova//

Nai bole ucasvareangikarakara

Cai bole carakarakebhalkoridhora//

Chai bole chatra-chatrisaktipariksha kora/

Jai bole janamabhumir mana raksakara//

Jhai bole jiyebidesikaprasrayadiye/

Nai bole niyamamatesatarujanibaniscaya//

Tai bole taka loibhot-listatanamasumaya/

Thai bole thaguwalenijarbaap-bhai//

      *   *   *

Pai bole piketinsakaluwekara/

Phai bole phal paba mane asa kora//

      *   *   *

Hai bole haomaiasamira Santana/

Ksai bole khamakaradosayatamana//[152]

Diha: All Assam student union has risen

People's struggle is going on

Because Assam is full with foreign people

Pada: Motherland Assam commanded all to rise

Students have already began

Ka says will recover our motherland Assam

Kha says will send the foreigners out one by one

Ga says think deeply, o my dear brother

Gha says will not forget our homeland never ever.

Nga says let's take the resolution to protect Assam

Cha says put pressure upon government

Sa says all our students show your strength

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[152]Goswami Bhrigu Mohan, *A study on the ojapali art form of Assam* (Guwahati: charu prakashan,1996)

Ja says protect the pride of our land

Jha says if someone protects a foreigner

Nya says he will be regarded as enemy forever

Ta says some people taking money keep foreigners in voter list

Tha says they are the cheaters none other than these

Pa says come and joins the picketing dear all

*Pha*says we will get the best result let's hope after all

Ha says I am son of motherland Assam

Ksa says forgive us mother, if any mistake we have done.[153]

(Translated)

Performance:

As described by Medini Mohan Nath, during the Assam movement too, songs were improvised and the original mythical structure of Ojapali was not present. Since the same group consisting of performers like Lalit Chandra Nath, Kinaram Nath and others, were performing their previous experiences must have played a role, but important in terms of a political memory being recovered and retold. These too were performed at rallies and meetings and other public gatherings. It is interesting however to trace how a nationalist allegiance to a new nation now changes its perspective to a separatist movement. It is in many sense anti national and was part of the antagonistic politics of the 1970s and 80s.

The new political narrative was full of emotional affect and had no religious content and context. Once again the religious beliefs were downplayed to the point of extinction. I read this as a problematic aspect of such performances as Ojapali where individual landmark performances are often neglected to create a more anthropological study of performance genre which expresses no

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[153] Translated by the Researcher itself.

change or departures. There were numerous performances and it caught the impulse of the political trends of the times.

Since it was an expression of anxiety against the ruling government to protect the Bangladeshi immigrants therefore everyone whole heartedly supported the issue. I see the performance also as an expression of their anxiety and an urge to save the region from its own enemies.

Analysis of the song:

The songs significantly address the issues not as a call by the leaders but a call from the motherland of Assam. Unlike the songs of the independence movement there was no presence of a leader like Gandhi. One interesting observation was that the lyrics of the songs were much heavier in words and seemed not like of simple *Oja* and *Pali*. I find some '*slogans*' of similarity in the lyrics which were similar to the actual slogans of the movement created by the leaders. This raises the pertinent question of authorship of the songs and the composition which talks of people fighting for their rights and help in the process of identifying Bangladeshi immigrants. It also treats own people as enemy who are protecting Bangladeshi immigrants for vote bank politics. One can see whom this line is targeted at, the existing government of that time. I don't think this kind of lines can be written by any uneducated Ojapali performer but by the student leaders. In this movement, performances are used strategically by the leaders to arouse a regional nationalism. Many intellectuals in Assam like Homen Borgohain and Hiren Gohain labeled this movement as a movement of emotion. The effectiveness of the traditional performances could reflect a similar impulse and capture the affective registers adequately. The inherent power of the genre showed its power of communication regarding a response to the sentiment of the movements.

In its own way the above song provides basic information about the movement. These songs never realized its potential by being part of the performance and the lyrical structures which dominates the Ojapali. When we asked Kinaram Nath Oja, he could hardly recall lines from the songs of the period, though he had more vivid memories of the rallies and the meetings which were exclusively located in lower Assam. Ojapali performers always use the Assamese letters as somebody's name. Like 'Ka says, Kha says, Ga says'. According to Pali Phularam Nath, "The lyrics of Ojapali are not the expression of performers or the community people only. We always try to set it according to the categories of audience we are addressing, but we keep in mind the basic structure of the performance." [154] This above statement also expresses the view of addressing audience of large numbers so that one can identify them through the lyrics.

Baz Kershaw formulates that, "My central assumption is that performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between a company of performers and the community of their audience."[155] When we see Assam movement we see the 'Assamese' ideology and identity emerging in the hearts of every Assamese and therefore it is ingrained in the performers too.

I find the performances of that time, intentionally used by the leaders of the movement. Many old performers like Krishnakanta Handique remember distributing '*Dhol*' (drum used to play with Bihu) by the leaders of the movement to perform *Bihu* in different areas of upper Assam. Handique also says that those were not appropriate '*dhol*'s, which were generally used. But they

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[154]Phularam Nath is a Pali. He was active with the group of Late Lalit Chndra Nath Oja since his childhood. He is actively working in renovating and reorganizing Ojapali among the youth of Mangaldoi.

[155]Kershaw Baz, *Chapter1 Performance, Community, culture, The politics of Performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention*(London: published by Routledge, 1992)

were distributed just to play it for the sake of the movement.[156] This proves that the leaders were strategically using these folk forms. Whether *Bihu* was executed in upper Assam and Ojapali performed in lower Assam is a matter of speculation. The above songs urged the people to join the movement and at the same time challenge those, who accepted money to include the name of foreigners in the voter's list.

The language and the words used in the songs, indicate a fact, that this was addressed to the common people. If we see this historical movement as a struggle for Assamese identity, then we can attribute to the Ojapali, as shaping the sentiments of the local people into the new identity politics. The question however remains of how or where do we locate that identity politics. Were these regional assertions and therefore required regional or local forms to create an affective register. Therefore I feel popular performances like *Bihu*, Ojapali were used not only to spread the messages of the movement but maintain the Assamese essence, so that common people could identify with it. During this movement Assamese cultural forms were used mostly in stages on public places. This in a way brought some changes to it too. One of the major changes it brought was that Ojapali came to be performed on stages and elevated spaces.

Performing citizenship

The Assamese regional aspirations became historically connected to issues of citizenship as it initiated the new citizenship act of 1955. But I argue that the so called 'Indian citizenship' always overshadow by the regional identity in the North eastern part of India. It has history of its own political and geographical past, why the popular imagination of north eastern doesn't really go with the picture of India. Therefore it is difficult to analyze the citizenship of north eastern

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[156]Krishnakanta Handique is a researcher and cultural activist of Assam. The above statement was made during a public lecture in Sivsagar district Assam in 2014.

without taking the regional identity in account. Before going on to see these events which are directly linked to assert legitimate citizenship, I would like to look at the concept of Citizenship as a part of community. David Wales argues,We can start from the premise that we are essentially individuals who acquire our cultural identity through selection and accretion, and are capable of making autonomous rational choices that determine our actions, or we can start from the premise that we as human beings are components of a cultural matrix, so the language we speak, the religion we practiced as a child and the music that stirs us not as individuals but as a member of the community.[157]

In the geographical structure of 'Nation', a community performance also means to maintain the customs, traditions and culture of the nation. Therefore when we imagined the concept of national community then it itself defines every individual as performing the role of citizen. This assumption not only includes the performers but also includes the audiences as well. As Ojapali is a community practice, so the very concept of community comprises not only performers but audiences too.

When we see Ojapali as identity practice and performers as a citizen, then it also looks like performing the concept of 'citizenship'. Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities reiterates, "All communities are rather than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[158]So in the concept of imagined national community Ojapali is a practice which helps a nation to build its own culture. From regional cultural angle it could be seen through two major events which directly deal with the rebuilding of the nation and

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[157]Wiles David, *Theatre and citizenship: The history of Practice*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

[158]Anderson Benedict, Imagined *Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread the Nationalism (*London: Verso, 1991)

state. While independence movement deals with the process of nation building then Assam movement starts with the purpose of reaffirming Assamese identity. In both these cases Ojapali was medium to reach to the commoners. It is not only just to reach the commoners but also to include them to the movement. The strategy was to make them feel for the identity they are carrying whether it is regional or national. That is why community performances were used in which they were familiar with. Through Ojapali performance performers were spreading the 'ideologies' of these movements among the uneducated people in the far interior. From this angle Ojapali performers assert their role not only as a citizen but also as activist for the nation and state.

Ojapali, from popular to the margines

The two historical events give us the sense of a popular phase of Ojapali performance at the time. Gradually with the flowing of time this performance confined itself. I argue there are political factors in it. During the colonial period lower Assam was always going through upper Assam cultural domination. Even the Assam movement started to reconstruct the Assamese identity, with equal participations from both upper Assam and lower Assam, unable to establish a balanced cultural identity in the state of Assam. Till date there are invisible cultural gaps between upper Assam – lower Assam and Barrack valley. State machinery always projects upper Assam's *Sivasagar* as the cultural capital and this result in a cultural domination over the people of lower Assam. Today most of the lower Assam performances like *Thiyanaam, Kamrupiyadhuliya, Mohoho, Bhira* etc are gradually disappearing from the cultural landscape. I argue this is the outcome of upper Assam cultural domination and cultural politics. The above mention forms hardly gets any government's assistance while upper Assam cultural forms like

Sattriya, Bihu dance, Bhaona getting regular helps form funding agencies to maintain and experiment with the form.

To see the scene of marginalization in the context of Ojapali, we should go back to the year 1958, when the first dance seminar was held under the initiation of then prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Assamese scholar Dr. Maheshwar Neog presented a paper to give an in depth analysis on the major dances of Assam. Perhaps it was the first time when Dances of Assam were being introduced with proper research and demonstration. In this paper (title: Dance traditions in Assam) he mentions that the three major dance forms of Assam Ojapali, *Devnati or Devdasi* and *Sattriya* had classical elements in it. Neog writes, "There are three dance forms in Assam, which carries the classical elements in it. 1. *Sattriya dance*, 2. *Sabha gowa and Rang gowa Ojapali* and 3.*Devgharar Nati (Devdasi) Dance*.'[159]

Since then, the discussion on classical and classicization centered on '*Sattriya*'. He specifically reports that, "In the last day of the seminar dance experts decided to urge Sangeet Natak Akademy to categorize *Odissi, kuchipudi, bhagwat-mela, Yakshagan and Sattriya*as classical dance."[160]I argue, if *Sattriya* had classical elements then Ojapali too could have been subjected to this process of receiving the classical status. There are evidences of elements of Ojapali used in *Ankiya Nat and Sattriya*. We find evidences within the works of Neog itself, "the Ojapali chorus is imagined to be precursor of the orchestral band or *gayana-bayana* (drummer-singer) of the later dramatic performances, while Sankardev's*Sutradhara*, who persists all through the

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[159]Neog Maheshwar, *Asomot dhrupadi nrityar oitirjya, Sattriya Dance*, (New Delhi:published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1997)

[160]Ibid ,P no-42

representation, has his photo types in the Oja of Ojapali.' [161] Here the role of Dr. Neog and Ojapali performers is still a matter of debate. Although in our recent meeting Kinaram Nath, who was a member of the Ojapali team explained that he and his teammates didn't know about the issue. I think there was communication gap between performers and Neog. Kinaram Nath and his teammates went there just to perform. They were not aware of Maheshwar Neog's research paper. Subsequently a discussion held among the experts in Madras on 29th December 1958 decided to felicitate with awards renowned practitioners of classical dances including *Sattriya, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Bhagawatmela and Yakshagana.*[162]Again forms like Ojapali didn't come under its purview. It raised many questions on the role of Maheshwar Neog, who himself proposed Ojapali as a dance having classical elements in it.

This is the only time that Ojapali has been mentioned in the state reconstruction projects. Henceforth, the entire debate around classicization in relation to an Assamese art form pertained to *Sattriya* with Ojapali completely marginalized. In 1959, Sangeet Natak Akademy accepted the proposal of the expert committee and decided to announce annual awards and funding for *Sattriya*. In the year1960, a debate started on the matter of awards and many of the elected awardees were not acceptable to the general members of Sangeet Natak Akademy.The controversy spilled onto the process of classicization and delayed the final declaration of *Sattriya* as a classical form.

In 1963 SangeetNatakAkademy included Ojapali and some other Indian dance forms in the list to give awards and funding. Later that year few dance practitioners including Maniram Dutta

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[161]Neog Maheshwar, Neog, Pranavsvarup,*Aesthetic Continuum Essays on Assamese Music, Drama, Dance and Paintings* (New Delhi, Published by Omsons publication,2008)P-120

[162]Neog Maheshwar, *Asomot dhrupadi nrityar oitirjya, Sattriya Dance*, (New Delhi:published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1997),P-55

Muktar Bayan received the first ever Sangeet Natak Akademy award and in 1970 Gahan Chandra Goswami received an award for sattriya itself. [163]

There were many performers of Ojapali who devoted their lives to this art form they didn't come to the purview. They needed economical encouragement and funds to continue their work. According to Medini Mohan Nath it was total disrespect to performers as they were having a very difficult time.[164] Later in 1983 Lalit Chandra Nath Oja received Sangeet Natak Akademy Award for Ojapali and became the first one to receive it.

Interestingly during this time, some *Sattriya* practitioners, moved out from the *Sattra*s and started their own *Sattriya* schools. Jatin Goswamiisone name. Jatin Goswami along with Bishnu Parasad Rabha, a leftist cultural activist started a dance troupe called '*Pragjyoti Kala Parishad*' in 1962. Indira P.P Bora became the first female *sattriya* dancer after seeking her formal dance study in *Kalakshetra* under Rukmini Devi. In an interview she said, 'Rukmini Devi could see the beauty of the Sattriya dance. My guru allowed me to perform *Sattriya* as an item of ten minutes or five minutes in many shows. This was in 1969-72. Rukmini Devi thought it was very beautiful and she encouraged me.'[165].While Indira P.P. Bora's *sattriya* dance was widely popular in the national landscape, *Darangi* women dancers were equally neglected. *Deodhwati*, a dance form of *Darang* associated *Manasha* myths practiced by women. It is often regarded as the female counter part of Ojapali performance. Women participation in *Deodhwani Dance* was widely practiced since time in memorial. Due to lack of patronage in modern times, these dances are diminishing from the cultural landscape. On the other hand *Deodhwani* is still practiced along

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[163]ibid

[164]Medini Mohan Nath is the son of Lalit Chandra Nath oja. The above statement made to us during our field work.

[165]http://www.narthaki.com/info/intervw/intrvw63.html (access on: 19/3/2015)

with Ojapali in *ManashaPuja*, but this dance has never been highlighted like *sattriya*. Later in different writings Maheswar Neog expresses his emotion for these dance forms. According to him by recognizing a dance through paper works doesn't mean that it would achieve the success. There has to be expert and intelligent practitioners, who could represent these forms inside and outside the country. On the other hand it needs some scientific discussion to keep these forms forward. He added, "It is true that *Sattriya*, Ojapali and *Devnati* carry classical elements in it. We need to carry these forward with practice and scientific research."[166]

These above lines express the kind of limited practice of the dance form and lack of performance research in intellectual sphere. 1950-60 is a period when Assam was having colonial hangover, royal patronage was slowly drying up especially for performances like Ojapali, *Manasha Puja* s being limited. All these factors become resulted in the gradual declination of the Ojapali art form.

Changes and marginalization of the performance

The basic profession of Ojapali performers was agriculture, but with the coming of industrialization and urbanization working in the paddy fields is not profitable for them any longer. It is difficult for the new generation to earn their livelihood from agriculture. Performers like Phularam Nath are now joining the industrial labor forces to earn their livelihood. In a recent interview with the researcher he said, "I have spent most of my years performing Ojapali with Lalit Chandra Nath Oja, but now I can't survive with the income of Ojapali, I too have a

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[166]Neog Maheshwar, *Asomot dhrupadi nrityar oitirjya, Sattriya Dance*, (New Delhi:published by Sangeet Natak Akademy, 1997),P-57

stomach, so I have to sacrifice something."[167] Many performers also expressed their grievances of funding agencies and said that there were hardly any help from them.

The present scenario is that Ojapali today is confined to a few families like Lalit Chandra Nath Oja, Kinaram Nath Oja, Dharmeswar Dutta. The celebration of the *Manasha* puja is also changing. The entire crisis can also be read in light of the contrasting picture of upper Assam where *Bihu* and *Sattriya* are thriving as successful professional genre. Many *Sattriya* practitioners have opened their practice centre to provide professional training. A similar trend can be seen with *Bihu*as well.

The popularity of the *Stage Bihu* (Bihu dance performance on the stage) as well as *Bihu dance* along with *Sattriya* is seen as representing the state or regional culture. It helps the popular practitioners to expand the professional artistic activities.

The question which I am trying to raise is how the recognition and categorization of the forms at the national level and within cultural policy, effects its survival in its local milieu. I would like to argue that the decline of Ojapali is also because it could not transform itself into a professional form. If we see Ojapali as being part of a religious and secular practice, then we can assume that while the festival cycle still sustains the performance. Then the secular aspect can only happen if these forms develop a professional circuit for themselves.

Examples can be cited here from *Bihu* dance, which was once attached to agriculture, but changing scenario doesn't really confine the performance to the seasonal agricultural celebration. Although it is changing over the period its popularity still continues. Although there are various changes in relation to *Bihu*, and is circulated through VCD films and other means of

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[167]Nath Phularam, the above statement made by him during field work.

commercialization, its popularity remains the same. Ojapali not being able to create a professional means of survival for itself is related to a number of issues, which one is its connection to a religious belief system. There is a basic reluctance on the part of the believers to see its commercialization.

In 2010, a regional centre for cultural resources, north east zone set up a *Guru sishya Parampara* (the tradition of teacher and student learning) school under *Sukananioja* Lalit Chandra Nath and appointed some experienced performers as teacher. Surprisingly after three years it shut down as the funding system dried up. Medini Mohan Nath who served as organizer for the school explained, "The school was a hope for us to keep alive the art form, but it was surprise to us why regional cultural resources centre has done this without even informing us."[168]The whole issue of state patronage of folk forms open up debates regarding how funding agencies engage with folk art forms. I find this quote of Baz Kershaw relevant in this context, "The culture, run by a ruling class and that is largely the function of cultural production to reinforce the structures of power by promulgating a dominant ideology which operates in the interest of such ruling classes."[169]

The school was set up at a time when OjaLalit Chandra Nathwas recipient of the Tagoreaward for National integration, but in 2013 the gradual deterioration of health condition prevented him from running the centre as a result of which the regional centre stopped the funding. The fact that there were other performers who could have taken over the responsibility did not seem important or relevant to the regional centre. A number of them were employed by the school and part of the

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[168]Medini Mohan Nath made this statement during an interview with the researcher.

[169]Kershaw Baz, *Chapter1 Performance, Community, culture, the politics of Performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention* (London,published by Rout ledge, 1992)

centre, which continued to run. Yet hegemonic decision closed the school and the efforts of instituionalization.

Performing 'Darangi' cultural identity

The word '*Darangi*' means the district of Darang. Earlier kings of Darang and their people were also regarded as *Darangi* people or *Darangi* king. It is difficult to identify when the exact word '*Darangi culture*' came into being. As we consider post 2000 as the period of decline of the art form, it is also the time when it became an exclusively associated with the *Darangi* people.

Another reason behind the whole thing is that all other old performances, oral traditions were diminishing by that time in *Darang* and when *Udalguri* was separated from *Darang* district to *Bodoland*, it became a significant cultural symbol and identity. Similarly *Bodoland* with its traditional performance form of *Bagurumba* used it to project their cultural identity. *Bagurumba* is a dance form, comprising of female *Bodo* dancers with male performers in music that is regarded as the rhythm of the valley (Assam). When *Bodo*dancers dance this wearing colorful *Bodo* traditional cloth, it is look like a butterfly flying in a garden.

Meanwhile the practitioners and the people of Darang started claiming Ojapali to exist as a part of *Darangi* culture. The works of Nabin Chandra Sharma, Kanak Chandra Sahariyah accentuates this cultural association. They too see Ojapali as the cultural identity of the *Darangi* people. Dr. MaheshwarNeog in his writings hardly mentions the *Darangi* culture while talking about cultures of *Darang*. While others like Kanak Chandra Sahariyah and Nabin Chandra Sharma are keen to mention the word '*Darangi culture*'. Sahariyah in his book '*Darangi Loksahitya*'(Darangi folk literature) uses the word *Darangi* and Nabin Chandra Sharma also categorizes the folklores of *Darang* in his various writings. Mention may be made here that

Kanak Chandra Sahariyah and Nabin Chandra Sharma belongs to *Darang* and their identity attached to what we discussed as *Darangi* culture. Therefore I see their works as an assertion of the *Darangi* identity. While Maheswar Neog and BirendraNath Dutta mentions Darang, but hardly uses the word '*Darangi culture*'. This wide range of references indicates the evolution of the cultural identity and the growing association.

Meanwhile many theatre practitioners of Assam and neighboring states which had emerged out of Assam, started using different elements of Ojapali for their theatre productions not as part of *Darangi* culture or identity politics but mere experiments with the form or idiom. There were influenced by the 'theatre of the roots movement'. The works of Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal also proved to be inspiring along with the central and state government's funding projects. Along with Ojapali the other traditional form which was popular as part of the theatre of the roots was *Ankiya Bhaona*. It is significant that though Ojapali was very popular amongst Assamese directors in the theatre, it was never written about or cited. Subsequently when it became associated with '*Darangi* culture' and identity politics of a particularly a region, such experiments with its idioms diminished and it lost its new generation of interest by contemporary directors. While interest in Ojapali intensified within a certain community and region it lost a wider base.

Separation of *Udalguri* district from Darang in 2004 can be read in this light. *Udalguri*, a *Bodo* dominated area earlier was a part of *Darang* district also known for the vibrant culture of *Bodo*s. *Bodoland*, which is now comes under BTC (*Bodoland Territorial council*) is the centre of separate *Bodoland* movement of *Bodo* community. The demand of separate *Bodoland* start against the hegemony of Assam government leaded by separatist groups NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and BLT (Bodo Liberation Tigers). After BLT surrendered in

2003, Bodoland Teritorial council has been formed. But NDFB's constant demand for liberate *Bodoland* from the Indian expansionism and occupation, free the *Bodo* nation from the colonialist exploitation, oppression and domination, establish a democratic Socialist Society to promote liberty, equality and fraternity; and uphold the integrity and sovereignty of *Bodoland* is still on.

When *Udalguri* was separated, many Ojapali performers also fell into the newly formed district who were creating their own identity cultural practices and engaging with performative practices to formulate new identity markers. The vital question is what happens to the Ojapali performers who live in the *Udalguri* district?

I would like to cite Medini Mohan Nath who says, "I think the performer who has been practicing *Suknani* and *Biyahgowa* Ojapali of *Darang* is regarded as the performers of *Darangi* culture. We are not trying to be different from the mainstream Assamese culture. We just want to preserve the peculiar nature of *Darangi* cultural performances like Ojapali, *Deodhwani*, which are gradually disappearing from the cultural landscape of Assam."[170]From the statement, what I can assume is that*Suknani* and *Biyahgowa* Ojapali (which are carrying the nature of Ojapali practiced in *Darang*) perform anywhere in Assam, can be identified as *Darangi* culture.

While problematizing the matter into the larger cultural discourse, we could see that for the performers of *Udalguri* and *Mangaldoi*, Ojapali is a *Darangi* culture but for the others like *Nalbari, Rangiya* or *Barpeta Goalpara,* the districts situated in the extreme lower Assam, (although they hardly practice regularly) is not fully acceptable. Because these districts have their own typical nature of Ojapali which are different than the *Darangi* Ojapali. For example,

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[170]Statement made by Medini Mohan Nath during our fieldwork.

performances like *Bhaira* and *Kushan Gaan* are like Ojapali but it has a life of its own which doesn't hold the nature of *Darangi* culture.

The entire politics around performative forms and cultural identities is well illustrated by the labeling and constructing Ojapali as the performance genre of the *Darangi* culture. Even within lower Assam performance genre like *Thiya Naam, Kamrupiya Dhuliya, Bhaira, Mohoho, Chera Dhek* etc are almost extinct and was a corollary of the process of associating Ojapali with *Darangi* identity. These performance forms once popular entire lower Assam now hardly seen. Whether there are attempts being made for popularize *Thiya Naam,* but others completely disappear. All of these are folk forms and hence its express the folk and nuances of the social picture of lower Assam. *Thiya Naam, Kamrupiya Dhuliya, Chera Dhek* (muslim community people performed this) has religious contents like Ojapali, while *Mohoho* performed by agrarian community people for the welfare of agriculture.

Current status of Ojapali

The demise of Lalit Chandra NathOja in 2013 was a great loss for Assamese culture, as he was known as the doyen of Ojapali and first person to take this art form to the national platform. New generation practitioners are now taking up the practice and trying to hold regular practice and workshops. The movement was said to originate from Lalit Chandra Nath's house where he trained his students in one room. A new space has been allotted to be dedicated to the training and workshop. Unlike their earlier generation, these new *Oja* and *Palies* are very keen to improvise and experiment with this art form to make this more attractive for larger audience. Nayan Jyoti Nath, grandson of Lalit Chandra Nath, said thus, "Of course I have learned this art form my grandfather but I think with the changing time it needs some kinds of innovation,

therefore we are trying to engage with this form in theatre, plays and designing it newly for the stage performances."[171]

On the other hand, very recently Pabitra Rabha a theatre activist of Assam recreated an Ojapali group in his village in *Tangla, Udalguri* district, comprising some veteran performers. Recently they produced an audio CD of compilation of Ojapali songs. While asking NayanJyoti about his take on Ojapali and *Darangi* culture, he said that they are now representing Assamese culture as a whole. Although '*Darangi culture*' is associated with them, it is important to be more inclusive specially in terms of other marginalized practices. Nayan Jyoti Nath is keen that different practitioners should practice different forms and they could come together in such a heterogeneous space.

It is very interesting to hear that these new generation practitioners are planning to live life with different cultural activities. Most of them are trying to be professional theatre artist and simultaneously engaging with practicing Ojapali. For example Niranjan Nath, who is a student of National school of Drama, also, practices Ojapali with his group. They are trying to innovate this performance form with new and interesting contents. For example, recently they are in a process to performa modern play through Ojapali. New songs and performance texts are being created for the play to make it more like Ojapali. Niranajan thinks these can be another way to popularize these old performances.

The group consists of ten members and has performed in a number of places in and outside the state. They have also performed at the invitation of Sangeet Natak Akademy and North East Centre for Cultural Resources. Their intent is not only to practice but to popularize this art form.

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[171]The above statement made by NayanJyoti Nath. He is a new generation Ojapali performer, continuously busy with the performance.

The groups of young enthusiasts have adopted workshop techniques which allow the new institution to survive without substantial government aid. The new institution has also faced criticism and seen as having losing its uniqueness. The older debates around authenticity and purity is often brought up but also genuine critique regarding the dismembering a form to just take on the idioms.

While seeing other traditional performances of Assam like *Bihu, Ankiya Bhaona*, one realizes the fact that these are still popular. While *Bihu* has retained its popularity through commercializing its music and performance, *Ankiya Bhaona* still holds on to its belief system. *Bihu dance, Husori* originally performed in every house in the village during *Bohag* (Assamese New Year), is now in decline. It is now more popular as a commodity which is circulated through VCD films and other technologically mediated packages.

Ankiya Bhaona too is subjected to such changes and responding to the growing commercialization. Once it was performed in *Brajawali* Language, but now performed in colloquial Assamese. Once it was performed by the Villagers and now we can see many professional groups performing it like Mobile theatre groups. These are of course changes coming with the time. Impact of globalization and neo- liberalism has captured these forms and these are manifestations of larger forces. Therefore it is said, "Cultural globalization can be viewed in different lights, whether progressive and liberating or threatening, impoverishing and destructive of local culture and business. Similarly local culture is sometimes regarded as something worthy under threat, whereas in other discourses it is presented as backward and parochial."[172] I think popularizing culture with timely reinvention is one of the initiatives that

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[172]Benyon John, Dunkerley David, *General introduction, Globalization: The Reader*(USA: Published by Routledge, 2000), Page no: 17

can protect our culture at the time of globalization. Here, time could also be read as the factor of reinventing tradition and myths. With the demands of time changes are bound to happen but also subjected to reinterpretations. Here the critical intervention of Diana Taylor in terms of repertoire and archive is significant[173]. Of course, performance practices cannot be preserved lively in the archive and laboratory; therefore there is a need for timely improvisation to sustain with time to time.

Conclusion

After a detailed study on the Ojapali, I would like to put forward some observations on the present status of the cultural scenario at large. My study suggests that forms like Ojapali needs to be researched and further explored. This, in this particular context, leads to the complex problem of exploring potentials in terms of popular forms which survives around its audience participation, a local cultural spirit and the actual picture of its increasing marginalization and what I have emphasized in my third chapter as the workshop and pedagogy aspects which are

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[173]Taylor Diana, *The archive and the repertoire* (London: Duke University press,2003)

now are being institutionalized. For the new generation practitioners Asim Kumar Nath, Niranjan Nath and Nayanjyoti, the new pedagogic endeavors, workshops and other training process is seen as modes to popularize the performance once again. There are certain problems in the reality and what I see as the future potentialities. For me a popular form can't be popularizedwith standard methods of training where certain belief system and traditional learning methods were associated. With the changing time, the belief system and traditions have dried up. On the other hand the performers moving away from agrarian life and towards industrial labourchanges engagement with forms which are organically connected to such day to day practice.Today, highly colorful and easily accessible modes of entertainments are competing with such forms. I would in this context like to stress that forms like the Ojapali cannot be so easily modified into a cultural industry or commodified. This is true of most popular, local and what can be called folk genre. Do we then see the workshops where they are breaking the conventional nature of Ojapali performance and trying to make it relevant using modern theatrical elements, as an attempt to survive by making it a commodified product which can exist in the cultural market as an ethnic cultural manifestation?

A similar example would bePabitra Rabha, who has produced an Audio CD of Ojapali.To preserve the traditional content of Ojapali, this may be seen as documentation where only few performers know the traditional songs of Ojapali.How do we balance the two aspects of forms like Ojapali and though I do not intent to romanticize it or retain a form as it is associated with our childhood and community, and want it to develop a more relevant performance in terms of contemporary world, we do not want to adopt a purist approach.

In the last chapter I drew the example of *Bihu,* how it is still able maintain its popularity. I think with the changing time these performances need to open up. We all know that Ojapali too is a

religious performance and it has deep attachment with the tradition, but the Assam movement brought changes to it. During the movements while disseminating what is often called 'messages' performers had the ability and motivation to perform it within the spaces of active politics and negotiate with democratic, sub regional and sub national levels. The other form with which it can be compared with is the case of *Sattriya.*Here the process has been one of classicization and codification and in a way distanced the performance from the space and audience. The professional training system of *Sattriya* became city centric (under different Gurus) and the Old method of learning system in *Sattra* became unpopular. The city centric professional training is specially accessed by upper –middle class people and now this upper middle class hegemony completely distances this performance. Although it is called a 'professional training', I didn't find it really creating any impact towards socio-political conditions of its cultural milieu. Although *Bihu* became commercialized and becoming a part of commercial television, I still feel it has a connection with its locale. At least common people can have access to it. It doesn't have those sorts of boundaries like *Sattriya* is creating now. Therefore there are scopes in the hands of modern Ojapali performers to lead the performance form among the people with relevant socio-political contents.

During the entire research, I found that the cultural politics played by the state agencies are as expected confining and process of standardization. Nowadays funding is also an important matter of consciousness for survival of an art form, which changes according to geography and belief system. The politics is the reason why professional changes happened with dance forms like *Sattriya* and *Bihu, which* didn't include Ojapali. But interestingly most of the lower Assam people still identify themselves with Ojapali.

During my research work I have came across many people who mention their experiences of Ojapali and recall the performance modes. Many of them recalled watching the performance once and subsequently express sadness for disappearance of this form. When I asked them about the possible reason for marginalization the art form they blamed government funding agencies for not providing funds. According to them these funding agencies always neglected the performance forms from lower Assam. The anxiety of Lower Assam people against the power bodies of the state clearly point to cultural impositions of upper Assam on lower. For example, *Bihu* was never a part of Lower Assam culture, but it is became a part of them as it is projected as the main festival of Assamese people.

Now a day, Ojapali performs separately (without the rituals of Manasha Puja), for me it is a positive change. The changes bring a life to the performance. The modern touch of the Ojapali is indeed acceptable but at the same time performers should raises the question of how it can still adhere to the traditional structure of narrative, storytelling and other performance aspect as well. In my entire dissertation, I have repeatedly emphasized on the secular aspect and the performer's liberty. These are very typical as well as valuable aspect of the performance. These aspects allow the performance to be updated according to the time.

During my research I found it quite problematic that very few performers nowadays perform it. But at the same time it is quite popular in the *Darang* region. Although it is difficult to identify whether it is people's 'Sentiment' or 'real engagement for the performance'. As I described in my 2nd chapter the performance in *Manasha* puja ground was being watched by 70 people. The number of audiences increased just before the start of the performance (chapter II). Yet the question remains do we still read it as popular engagement or absence of the older enthusiasm.

In terms of the performance itself and its spontaneous expression and manifestation, the contrasting example for me was the performance at the Sriram centre, Delhi (14th Sept. 2013). These comparisons may seem persuasive but also problematic and does not reflect on the Ojapali as being performed in Darang. Then the question persists as to why it doesn't evoke the same sentiment in other parts of Lower Assam in recent times? How do these preferences reflect contemporary Assamese performance scene and is one of the solutions in spreading its demographic spread. Can its performance be made relevant to represent Assamese culture when neo-liberal policies are again creating homogenous cultural trends?

These larger questions, problems and critique frame my chapters and research.

In my chapter I I have tried to locate the history of performance forms of Assam through the larger existing historical sources. I would in that respect call my attempts as a historiographical mapping then replicating a linear historical narrative. It was quite surprising for me to find that there is very little cultural history written. The state which has a long tradition of popularperformances is yet to map its cultural practices historically. The objective of the first chapter was to unravel the performance histories, particularly Ojapali from larger historicalnarratives written in local languages and often in anecdotal style when it came to cultural practices.

This in turn made me take help from other oral histories. For example Ojapali's history is not traceable only from the written sources. The larger socio-political consequences associated to this performance form could be foregroundedwhen old performers and the community as an audience opens their mouth to tell interesting stories associated with it. It was interesting to reveal different layers of history and to see how different performances played different roles in

spreading religion, politics and identity. One of the significant research elements that came out in the chapter was the *Panchali* literature period. My argument in thisperiod associated to the writing of texts of performance forms, which never came out in any other research earlier. On the other hand till date research on Ojapali demandsthat the *Panchali* poets *Mankor, Durgabor and Narayanadeva* belong to the same period. I argue they belong to three different stages of the period and their works are like volumes of *Manasha* texts. I find there are lots of evidences which show up in my research in relation to historiography. These are the findings that I made in this chapter which can further open up new debate in the field of performance studies while looking at the Ojapali performance.

The chapter II was focused more on the performance and my major intervention is in terms of foregrounding the Oja and Pali.I feel in a performance studies research analyzing the performance form is more important than anyother aspect. Here I try to see how traditional performances like Ojapali impact both village and urban audience.The two performance analysis in this chapter goes beyond the particular performance and tries to use them as case studies to express the finer nuances through the tools of analysis which theatre and performance studies provide me with. During the course of writing this chapter I have raised several questions regarding the declining popularity of the form, its marginalization and its negotiating with the division of Assam.Marginalization of the forms like Ojapali happens not only because of the time and time has also impacted upon its performance texts. Thus changing of performance texts also has a major impact on it as I have discussed in the chapter. Since the performance is grotesque, sometime performers' liberty became the reason behind the departure and interpretation. Therefore the debate of 'rules or no rules' (what I mentioned about *Sattriya*) here came into the forefront. I feel this performance analysis of Ojapali is the key to understand the

performance form in all its aspects. This will of course hopefully open up new directions in the Ojapali performance.

The Lower Assam- Upper Assam culture debate was untouched while talking about performance forms. Ojapali however helped me to see the cultural scenarios of both parts of Assam where I still feel some kinds of cultural gaps. Tracing examples from *Sattriya, Bihu* along with Ojapali I try to touch the debate of 'Politics of Performance'. I argue the dominance happened with the cultural forms of Lower Assam and was the reason behind the creation of separate identities like *Darangi.* For me it is quite thought provoking as to how anyone traces any fractional identity when there is a vibrant regional identity.This opens up the layers of historical and cultural politics. The projection of upper Assam cultures as State culture and Sivsagar district as the cultural capital came out as the potential reasons when I went deep into it. I feel these are of course untouched topics when we study a cultural form. In Chapter III, I open up possible ways to revive the performance form. My major argument is towards experimentation with the performance and makes it more relevant to the contemporary time. I think this chapter will allow the readers to understand the politics of performance in Assam and why micro identities are becoming important tools to assert specific identity in a globalized world.

In my entry point and also final analysis what guides me through is that Ojapali still captures the identity of *Darangi* people. Whenever we are thinking of Ojapali what comes to our mind is *Darang*, where it belongs. This main-thread allowed me to move from Ojapali to discuss both Bihu and Sattriya.Even when Ojapali was popular in entire lower Assam, *Darang*was the hub. The *Sukanani* form of Ojapali became popular and with the popularity of the from *Darangi* identity also attached to it. The current experimentation with Ojapali is also having the *Darangi* marker on it and it will remain the same. Thus it also connects to the debate of citizenship and

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feeling of belonging for the Darangi. In that sense for the rest of Assam and its audience was it estrangement and alienation. Through the actual practice, reconstructingand analyzing the performances I have tried to actually connect to the materiality of the performance and find its links with such questions and issues.

In my final paragraph as I lay down my pen, I would like to pursue my interest in the research of Ojapali by foregrounding its performance but the discourses and debates which have come up in the course of my researchwill now be used to make stronger critical frameworks for the examples I cite and performances I reconstruct. For exampletangible and intangible cultural debate is vital here in the sense that when it comes to government and identification of cultural forms;for performances like Ojapali tangible and intangible doesn't fit as category where we can't ignore the popular nature of it fully.Similarly other areas which I have touched upon and want to pursue in the same vein are discourses around identity politics, citizenship theories and larger issues of writing on culture and performance as a living form reflecting its audience and community but within changing times.

Annexure

Oja Lalit Chandra Nath and his group during a performance in Manasha Puja, Mangaldoi, 2012.

Lalit Chandra Nath Oja   Guru Kumud Kalita Oja   Lalit Nath teaching Ojapali the new performers.

Lalit Chandra Nath Oja with his Palies Phularam Nath , Kumud Kalita and others in his residence Mangaldoi in 2011.

Two performances by the new group of Ojapali 1. On a public place at Darang, 2. On the stage in Mangaldoi, 2013.

Girls practicing Deodhwani Nritya as a part of the new ojapali and Deodhwani training process at Mangaldoi, 2014

New training process of Ojapali by the youths of Darang and Mangaldoi, 2014

আপুনি নাটক কৰে অথবা আপুনি গান গায়
আপুনি নৃত্যৰ অভ্যাস কৰে
অথবা আপুনি সাহিত্যৰ লগত জড়িত
অথবা আপোনাৰ এটা সৃষ্টিশীল মন আছে
আপুনি মানুহক ভাল পাই, জাতিক ভাল পাই
তেন্তে আপুনিয়েই সেইজন
যাৰ বাবে এই আয়োজন

গণতালৰ উদ্যোগত

সংগীত, অভিনয়, নৃত্য, সাহিত্যৰ জৰিয়তে জীৱনৰ অনুশীলনৰ
এক প্ৰাচীন লোককৃষ্টি
ওজাপালি আৰু দেওধনী

(Most enjoyable traddition of music, theatre, dance and literature)

১৫ দিনীয়া আবাসিক কৰ্মশালা

মুখ্য প্ৰশিক্ষক ঃ ললিত চন্দ্ৰ ওজা
২০ চেপ্টেম্বৰ পৰা ৫ অক্টোবৰ, ২০১৩
স্থান ঃ ছিপাঝাৰ
যোগাযোগ ঃ 8876916618, 9859800987

Exerpts from new practice of Ojapali, at Ganataal, Mangaldoi, 2013

Photo courtesy: Nayan Jyoti Nath.

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