“Oja-Paali”: The Mirror to Ancient Assamese Folklore

Hiranmayee Das Gogoi

Introduction

“Ojapali” is an ancient musical art of Assam, which consists of song, drama and dance. Here the Oja (the lead artist) performs the art form with the help of some Palis (team of performers). The head of the palis is called Dianapali. The performance is based on tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Padmapurana etc. The songs are based on raga which is similar with the Chajya Pada (Buddhist mystical poems from the tantric tradition in Kalinga). At a time “Oja-pali” was the main source of entertainment in different ceremonial functions and festivals of lower Assam. The Oja and Palis must be expert in entertaining the audience and sometimes they even involve the audience to make the performance more interesting. Performers infuse “Hara-Gauri” (Lord Shiva and Parvati) as common Assamese couple; who work at paddy fields, weave clothes, go to river to bring drinking water etc. The only instrument played in “Ojapali” is khutital (palm sized cymbal).

The music of “OjaPali” has a raga system of clear classical orientation and the Vaishnav heritage. The classification of Savaras by “Oja-Palis” into Ghora, Manira and Tara corresponds to the Indian classification of Udara, ‘Mudra’ and ‘Tar’.

There is a typical pattern of dressing for the Ojas as well. He has to wear a pag;jama or a ghuri, along with bangles, unguthi (ring) and nupur and has to tie a tangali (a cloth tied around the waist). The performers wear long sleeved white gowns and silver jewelry.

There are three types of “Oja-Pali”:

1. Vyah Goa Oja.
2. Sukanami Oja or Maroi Goa Oja and
3. Ramayani Oja.

History

This musical form originates in the 12th-13th century or may be prehistoric. Rituals followed by the people of ancient Assam are reflected in songs, ballads of “Oja-Pali”. Myths claim that “Ojapali” was brought directly from heaven by third Pandava “Arjuna”.

Language

The language that is used in Oja-Pali is ancient Assamese. The beginning songs are sung in Sanskrit. Sometimes dialects of locality of Assam are also used.

1Dibrugarh University, Assam, India.