

Suknanni Ojapali Music of North-East India and Its Classical Elements

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Introduction

Assam, a northeastern state of India, features a hybrid culture that has evolved with time. Its culture is a mixing pot where rituals, customs, heritage, lifestyle, faith and beliefs of various people are assimilated. In India, Assam has identified itself with a distinctive cultural heritage and traditions. Out of the diverse traditional cultures, Ojapali tradition is one of the oldest performing arts. The main aspect of this art is the performance of a narrative poetry through song, music, dance and drama. Generally performed by a group of five to six men, the lead artist is known as 'Oja' and he is accompanied by assistant artists known as 'Palis'. A small pair of cymbals called the 'Khutitaal' is the main musical instrument used during the performance. It has been developed under the guru–shishya parampara or the teacher–student tradition for generations. Scholars compared the character of Oja with "Udgata" who was the lead singer in Vedic Saam music (Samaveda the scriptures of Hinduism are considered as the roots of the classical Indian music and dance tradition). The Oja sings the epic poems, mythological stories in verse keeping in time ragas, talas, mudras and Palis repeat the song with the playing of cymbals and marking of time with their feet. The chief among the Palis is called 'Daina-pali' or the right-hand aide, who makes the theme further interesting by his humorous dialogues.

Types of Ojapali

The Ojapali can be classified into two broad classes from the thematic as well as structural point of view. The epic based Ojapali, is known as Vaishnav or epic based Ojapali. The non-epic based Ojapali is known as Shakti or Non-epic based Ojapali.

Epic Based Ojapali depends solely on epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Purana. This type of Ojapali is called Vaishnav Ojapali because this art form is presented in the Vaishnavite rituals. Epic-based Ojapali can be divided into seven sub-types (1) Biyah-gowa Ojapali (2) Ramayana Ojapali (3) Bhaura Ojapali (4) Durgavari Ojapali (5) Satriya Ojapali (6) Pancali Ojapali and (7) Duluri Ojapali. Among the various types of Ojapali the Biyah-gowa variety is the most ancient.

On the other hand, the Non-epic based Ojapali are Shakta or Shakti tradition and mainly based on folk myths. The sub-divisions of non-epic based Ojapali are: (1) Suknanni Ojapali

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(2). Bisahari gan gowa Ojapali (3) Mare gan gowa Ojapali (4) Padma puranar gan gowa Ojapali

Suknanni Ojapali and its Characteristics

Suknanni Ojapali is the oldest form of non-epic based Ojapali traditions. Suknanni Ojapali differs from the epic-based variety in respect of content, structure and context as this form depends on folk myths. The Suknanni Ojapali recites mainly the songs on Hindu folk Goddess of snakes Manasa from the Holy book of Hindu mythology “Padma Puranas” composed by the poet Narayan Deva. The Suknanni Ojapali troupe consists of Oja, Daina-pali, two Orapalis (back Palis) and two Agpalis (front Palis). Many evidences are found which clearly indicate that religious music consists of four art forms like Ojapali which were very popular and performed in between 8th to 9th century in connection to Lord Vishnu and Shiva. In this connection the words ‘Gandharva’ and ‘Jagor’ is found as an evidence in Ojapali. The word ‘Jagor’ is found in the context of Suknanni Ojapali too. The language used in Ojapali is ancient Assamese. All these epics and mythological stories have been prevalent in oral form since ancient age, like the ballad in English language of western culture. The Padma Purana has played an important role in developing beliefs and conventions, policies, eating habits, religious philosophy and language of Assamese society that reflects the life and society during the Middle Ages.

The origin and development of Suknanni Ojapali

The practices of worship and prayers based on Shakti tradition and folk beliefs have been prevalent since prehistoric times. Among these, the worship of snakes took the most prominent practice in India. According to the scholars – the worship of snake deities is present in several old cultures, particularly in religion and mythology, where snakes were seen as entities of strength and renewal like in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Greece and Italy etc. In India the snake worshipping is organized in different temples across India on the occasion of “Nag Panchami”- the festival of snakes. In due course of time the snakes were attributed a human form and a mixture of Nag and human idols were created which were worshipped as Nag Gods and Goddesses. The goddess Manasa is worshipped in the human form of serpent goddess in Assamese society and “lyrical stanza” is sung in reverence to her from the ancient age. Out of these traditions, the Suknanni Ojapali is an ancient form of singing style. According to different Ojapali singers - Suknanni Ojapali spread through oral traditions and running throughout the generations under the Guru Shishya or the teacher-student tradition. It is entirely an indigenous music tradition and there is no obligation to sing the stanza according to Indian classical music system, but certain rules have to be followed by the artists. Scholars have said that the term “Manasa” has originated from the Dravidian language - “Manas” means ‘heart’ and the goddess fulfilling the desires of the heart is called “Manasa”. On the basis of the sculptures obtained from Assam, it can be presumed that the tradition of worshipping goddess Manasa became prevalent in this part of India from 9th to 10th century A.D. An idol of the goddess Manasa belonging to the period from 9th to 10th century A.D. has been recovered from Surya mountain of Gowalpara district of Assam. Some other ancient sculptures of the goddess Manasa have also been obtained from different locations in Assam.

According to some Scholars, the tradition of worshipping Goddess Manasa started in Bangladesh (ancient Bengal) during the reign of the kings of Pal dynasty (from 9th to 10th

century A.D.). Due to the cultural assimilation and historical process of expansion, the tradition of worshipping the goddess Manasa reached from Bengal to Assam during 10th to 11th century A.D. and presentations of folk songs, dances, musical instruments began in reverence to the goddess Manasa. The holy book “Padma Purana” composed by the poet Narayan Deva is considered the foundation of the Suknanni Ojapali music. Occasionally folk dance ‘Deodhani’ is also presented by women at the end of Suknanni Ojapali.

Subject of Narayan Deva’s Padma Purana

The main subject matter of Narayan Deva’s Padma Purana is about Goddess Manasa - the god of serpents, very powerful and worshipped in different forms and with different names throughout India. There is a belief that Manasa protects the people from snake bite. Goddess Manasa is also linked with fertility and is worshipped for the revival and protection from several incurable diseases, even people believed that she can regain the life of a human being. This is illustrated in the Padma Purana with the help of the fable of Beula and Lakhindar.

Song from Padma Purana: Rag Bhairavi

“Beula krandana suni sasokita sadhu ani
Kande sunai sakkhura pore pani
Andhakarero mera ghore kande badhu akasware
Pramada kiba pholaila nagini
Chando bulle suna sunai tumasera budhi nai
Pasarili purbara dharane
Putra badhu dui juwa tahara karone kiba
Akarone tumi kanda kene.....”

The meaning of the song: There was a very rich ship merchant, named Chanda Saudagar. He was a great devotee of Shiva. He did not consider Manasa as a Goddess. Manasa Devi did not like this attitude of Chanda and killed all his six sons by sending black snakes. However Chanda did not relent. Later, Chanda’s wife gave birth to a male child whose name was Lakhindar. Lakhindar gets married to Beula but he was bitten by a dangerous cobra at the behest of Devi Manasa on his first night of the bridal-bed. Lakhindar cried in helplessness and breathed his last. Beula refuses to accept her husband’s death. She places his body on a raft and sets out on a hazardous journey towards the abode of the Gods. She pleads for his life and promises Manasa that Chanda will worship her. After Beula returns home with Lakhindar and her six brothers in law, Chanda finally bows before the powers of Manasa. Thus, Chanda, a devout follower of Shiva, changed his religious ideas and became one of the staunch followers of the Manasa Devi.

Divisions and the process of singing of Suknanni Ojapali from Padma Purana

In Suknanni Ojapali, songs are presented in three types of tunes such as vilambit (slow tune), madhyalay (medium tune) and drut laya (fast tune). As singing is presented in five parts, it is also called “Paanchali” song. These are: 1) Alap, 2) Vandana, 3) Diha, 4) Pada, 5) Upanhar.

1. Alap or initiation of the singing is made with the letters like ha, ta, na, ri, rita etc. The tune is expanded from mandra (lower) to tar (higher) swaras (notes). It is also called as Swar

Sadhana or beginning practice of notes.

2. Vandana : After singing alap, the Ojapali singers presents a song of prayer or vandana. This vandana song is presented keeping in harmony with the alap. e.g.:

Vando Dashbhuj Mahitale Puja, Asura Vadhar Hetu

jijane Karae Pooja Durgar Charane, Sansar Sagar Saetu

It is a prayer song from mythological stories of Padma Purana. The poetic composition expresses that all are worshipping Devi Durga. Devi Durga is the owner of ten hands and the goddess of power.

3. Diha: After vandana, Ojapali singers presented a song based on the mythological stories of Padma Purana. 'Diha' is the first part of the song.

4. Pada : Pada is the second part of the song .

5. Upsanhar : The songs presented at the end of Suknanni Ojapali is called Upsanhar. Suknanni Ojapali music and its classical elements- An analytical study:

Ojapali music has both margi (classical) and desi (folk) traditions. The Charyapada (a collection of mystical poems) of the 8th to 11th centuries suggest that raga based music was prevalent in Assam in a massive scale. The tune of raga based music of Boddhik (Buddhism) Charyapada is quite similar to ancient Assamese folk music. The raga and ragini in Ojapali are popularly known as Dhek. At present the tradition of Raga- Ragini classification is completely absent in the Indian classical music, however, this tradition is still followed in Ojapali. Raga Saranga in Ojapali has notes very similar to those in the Hindustani classical raga Vrindavani Saranga. In Ojapali music a few similar classical elements of Indian classical music are observed and described below.

The six basic elements of Indian classical music are Swara, Tala, Laya, Raga, Rasa-Bhava, and Pada.

1) Swara: The sound which has a vibration quality of a pleasing nature and immediately pleases the mind of the listeners without depending on any factor is called Swara. The series of seven swaras Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni denotes Saptak which literally means "containing seven" and is derived from the Sanskrit word Sapta which means "seven". In Indian classical music there are three Saptak- Mandra (lower), Madhya (middle) and Tara (higher). According to the folk artists of Ojapali the songs of Suknanni Ojapali are based on three notes or swaras: Mandra, Madhya and Sara.

2) Tala and Layakari: Tala may be called as musical time. It is bound by the number of beats which we call Tala. In classical music there are different Talas used for different styles. Ojapali music is also performed with specific tala and layakari. Variations in different tempos and rhythms in relation to a standard tempo and rhythm are called layakari. On the part of the musician, vocal or instrumental, the standard tempo is usually maintained by an accompanist. In Dhrupad-Dhamar style of classical music, layakari is very important. The Kalawant sings the Pada and

plays with the different timings of Tala highlighting the techniques and beauty of the Pada in a prominent way. The ektali or ekthuki (One beat), Duitali or duithuki (Double beat), Tintali or tintthuki (Triple beat) talas are used while performing Suknanni Ojapali.

3) Raga: The word raga is a Sanskrit word which means "colour, or passion". It may be defined as an acoustic method of colouring the mind of the listener with an emotion. Hence raga means a cluster of notes to which people's mind is attracted. Ojapali music is born through Raga -Ragini classification of Indian classical Music. Ojapali music is based on 6 ragas and 36 raginis. The different ragas used in Suknanni Ojapali music are Raga Bhatiyali, Poyar, Kau, Saranga etc. However, most of the ragas have been lost in times in Ojapali as it is an oral tradition and also for lack of practices among people. In Indian classical music Mela or Thata classification system is now scientifically adopted in place of Raga -Ragini system of medieval age.

4) Rasa: Suknanni Ojapali music is based on religious topics. It elicits devotional and psychological response from the listener. Rasa has been referred to as aesthetic delight. Some common Rasa of Ojapali Music is as follows:

a) Bhakti b) Karun c) Shringar d) Batsalya e) Vir

The Indian classical music also elicits a devotional response. The Dhrupad and Dhamar style of classical music was developed in temples and religious places. The taste of Bhakti, Karun, Shringar, Batsalya and Vir rasa are found in Dhrupad -Dhamar style as well.

5) Pada: It literally means the text or lyrics. In Dhrupad style of classical music the compositions or Padas are designed in a specific and clear pattern. Ojapali music also has specific and standard text.

There are a few other similar elements between Ojapali and Dhrupad style of classical music. The singing performance of Ojapali music may be divided into 5 divisions. Suknanni Ojapali divisions are Alap, Vandana, Diha, Pada, Upsanhar. On the other hand, the Dhrupad -Dhamar style of Indian classical music has 4 divisions along with Prarambhik or beginning 'Nom -Tom' Alapa. These are Sthayi, Antara, Sanchari and Abhoga.

Guru Shishya Tradition: Both the Ojapali and Indian classical music follows oral traditions or Guru Shishya tradition.

Language:

Ancient Assamese language is used in compositions of traditional Suknanni Ojapali music. Historically Dhrupad- Dhamar style of classical music was composed in Sanskrit language. Later on it has been composed in different Indian languages like Hindi, Braj, Abadhi, Maithili etc.

The apparels of the artists of Suknanni Ojapali:

The main singer 'Oja' wears a special dress called "Chaapkan" while presenting the song. He dons a turban on his head and ornaments around his neck and other parts of his body. He twines anklets around his ankles. The assistant singers wear a white dress and ornaments.

Gender:

Generally the Ojapali performers are male artists. But after the performance of Suknanni Ojapali by the male artist, ladies and sometimes male performers perform Deodhani dance for worshipping goddesses. The word “Deodhani” means the sound of god.

Occasions of performance:

Suknanni Ojapali is performed in the occasion of Devi Manasa rituals, Devi Durga and other rituals of Shakti traditions.

Conclusion

Suknanni Ojapali is a performing art of oral tradition and our ancient cultural heritage. This folk treasure has rich elements of performing style, follows fixed and clear rules of Raga-Ragini and other Indian Classical elements. Since the beginning of our civilization, music, dance and drama have been an integral aspect of our culture. Initially, these art forms were used as a medium of propagation for religion and social reforms in which music and dance play an important role to gain popularity. Ojapali music performs the theme from the Epics and the Purans and educates the society. It has rightly been serving as one of the best factors of unification and Sanskritization among the different ethnic groups of Assam. However, this folk culture is now surviving for preservation because a few villagers have been performing this tradition verbally. This is our cultural heritage, and we should preserve it before it becomes history.

References

Assamor Paribeshya Kola Ojapali- Dr. Naveen Chandra Sarmah