

Satriya Ojapali Music of Assam and Its Classical Elements

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Abstract

Satriya Ojapali was introduced by Mahapurusha Srimanta Shankardeva to spread Vaishnava faith and for centuries, this form of performing arts natured and preserved by the Sattras of Assam. Srimanta Shankardeva developed Satriya Ojapali by blending different elements of ancient local folk traditions like Byas gowa Ojapali with its own outlook. Byas gowa Ojapali is one of the ancient forms of religious tradition prevalent before the neo-Vaishnava movement and still practice in Darrang district of Assam. Satriya and Byas goa Ojapali are the epic based performing arts follows the margi or classical style of performance. There are certain Ragas like Rag Saranga in Ojapali which has very similar notes to the Hindustani classical Raga Vrindavani Saranga.

Keywords: Ojapali, Satriya, Raga, Folk.

Introduction:

In India, Assam has identified itself with a distinctive cultural heritage and traditions. The culture of Assam is often referred to as hybrid culture. It has been developed as a mixing pot where rituals, customs, heritage, lifestyle, faith and beliefs of various people are assimilated. Out of the diverse traditional cultures, Ojapali is one of the oldest performing arts.

Folk tradition Ojapali is a performing art and the main aspect is performance of narrative poetry through song, music, dance and semi acting that includes all the four forms of art. Generally performed by a group of five to six men, the lead artists is known as 'Oja' and he is accompanied by assistant artists known as 'Palis'. Scholars compared the character of Oja with 'Udgata' who was the lead singer in Vedic Saam music¹. Oja narrate themes from the mythological stories with music, mudras (gesture) and dance and Palis repeat the song with playing of cymbals and marking of time with their feet. The chief among the Palis is the 'Daina-pali' or the right-hand aide, who makes the theme further interesting by his humorous dialogues.

¹ Navin Chandra Sarma, Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.2

Origin of Ojapali:

Many evidences are found which clearly indicates that religious music consist of four art form like Ojapali were very popular and performed in between 8th to 9th century in connection to of Lord Vishnu and Shiva. In this connection the words 'Gandharva' and 'Jagor' is found as an evidence in Ojapali². Among the common people the popular believe that Ojapali was brought directly from heaven by “Narada Muni” and many of them says that it was brought by Pandu putra “ Arjuna” where he played the role of “Brihanala”³.

Subject & Language:

This ancient form of Ojapali art is originated from the religious place like temples and other auspicious places. Tales of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Padmapurana are the dominant subjects of Ojapali.

The language used in Ojapali is ancient Assamese and somewhere blend of Sanskrit and Assamese words which are used specially in slokas and mallitas e.g. a shloka from Kirtana:

*“Shri Krishnaya Basudevaya Daivaki Nanda Nathasah
Nanda Gupa Kumaraya Govindaya Namoh Namah.”⁴*

In between 12th to 13th century many Assamese poets like Madhab Kondoli, Harihar Bipra, Ananta Kondoli contributed to Assamese literature by translating the epic's the Ramayana, the Gita etc. to the local Assamese language⁵. The local artist got the lyrics in written form and they composed the traditional songs of Ojapali.

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, which is known as Vaishnav or epic based Ojapali. The non epic based Ojapali, which is known as Shakti or Non epic based Ojapali⁶. Epic Based Ojapali depend solely on the 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) Byas-gowa Ojapali (2) Ramayana Ojapali (3) Bhaura Ojapali (4) Durgavari Ojapali (5) Satriya Ojapali (6) Panchali Ojapali and (7) Duluri Ojapali. Among the various types of Ojapali the Biyah-gowa variety is the most ancient.

² Navin Chandra Sarma, Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.6

³ Data collected from interview with Sastri Nath Oja, Darang District, Assam

⁴ Karuna Bora, Sattriya Nrittyar Rup Darshan, p.163

⁵ Karuna Bora, Sattriya Nrittyar Rup Darshan, p.158

⁶ Navin Chandra Sarma, Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.41

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

Satriya Ojapali :

Satriya Ojapali was introduced by Mahapurusha Srimanta Shankardeva in 15th century to spread Vaishnava faith and for centuries, this form of performing arts natured and preserved by the Satras. Srimanta Shankardeva developed Satriya Ojapali by blending different elements of ancient local folk traditions like Byas Ojapali with its own outlook⁷. The most important place of initiating the Neo-Vaisnava Movement initiated by Srimanta Shankardeva is seen in two unique institutions—Satra and Namghar, which are associated with social, religious and cultural life of the Assamese people. The Satra and Namghar were not merely centers of religion, even it also promoted mass education and serve as a centre of musical pursuit, songs, dances and bhaona (drama). The Satras contributed a rich treasure for literature and developed new form of arts like Satriya dance (classical dance), Borgeet (devotional music), Ankiya Naat or Bhaonas (a form of one act play), Gayan-Bayan, Rasleela, and Satriya Ojapali.

The main singer, Oja, wears a special apparels 'Chaapkan' on his body. He dons a turban on his head, carries a cloth called challeng on his shoulder, wears a traditional ornament on his hand, makes a mark on his forehead (tilak), twines anklets around his ankles, and wears a loincloth. The assistant singers also wears Chaapkan, a loincloth, a garland of Tulsi around their necks, a turban on their heads, and make a mark (tilak) on the forehead.

The use of the musical instrument Bina, Benu & Mridangam:

The musical instrument called 'Khutitaal' is mainly used for maintaining laya in Ojapali. However, evidences found that clearly indicates the string and wind instrument like Bina, Benu & Mridangam were used in Ojapali. In many compositions of Ojapali, the names of those instruments and their sounds are clearly mentioned. As an example a 'Vaidya Kheyali Geet' of Satriya Ojapali is as given below:

*'O ki Anada Aju Samara Samaje
Haise Borise Surabhi Kusum
Vividha Bajana Baje
Dhum Khiti Khiti Dhin Dhin Na Dhin Na
Na Der Dani Din Na Din Na
Mridanga Muruja Bajai
Sa Sa Re Sa Re Ga Ma Ni Dha Pa Dha Pa Pa Ma
Gandharva Gane Ki Bajai....."*⁸

⁷ Karuna Bora, Sattriya Nrityar Rup Darshan, p.161

⁸ Interviewed with Ananta Oja, Majuli, Assam

The meaning of the song: Everyone enjoying and delighted by listening the music, beats of instruments called Mridang (Percussion Instrument), beautiful tune of Muruj (Flute), song and swaras sung by the Gandharvas. Different flowers are flowing from the heaven and it has given the pleasure to everyone.

Performing Structure of Satriya Ojapali:

The performing structures are:

(1) Raga: a. Malita b. Charan c. Shloka (2) Geet (3) Diha and (4) Pada

(1) Raga:

a) Malita: Alap (initiation) is presented in a raga using the syllables of He, Re, Ri, Ta, Ne, Na followed by a raga malita. Malita highlights the origin of raga. Malita is followed by a raga charan i.e. elaboration of raga.

Malita-Raga Saranga : *“Chintang Nargag Dantang
Bahl Bhuja Yog Manthang*

*Bhavyang Cheyang Dhajyang Madhuryang Sarang Ragang
Madhur Mathnang Vidho Shukla Varnang Dharang”⁹*

It is a melodious raga with bhakti bhava (devotional state of mind) describes lord Ganesha.

b) **Shloka:** After raga or Raga Malita, Ojapali singers presents a Shloka (sanskrit couplet). An example:

*“ Sri Krishnay Vasudevay Devaki Nandnath
Nandnath Kumaray Govinday Namoh Namah”....¹⁰*

2) **Geet:** After “Shloka” Satriya Ojapali singer presents “Geet”. In some Satras it is known as "Patnika Geet" (beginning of a song). An example of song composed by Srimanta Shankardeva in Raga Kafi performed by Oja in traditional tune:

Song- Raga Kafi (Traditional Tune)

*Diha- Bhajiu Hari Hrididi Roop Ghari
Pada- Dekhi Bhaila Sabe Pulkit Mann
Sukhey Bhav Sindhu Jai Banistari....¹¹*

It is a prayer Geet for Lord Krishna describing his divine act.

⁹ Karuna Bora, Satriya Nrittyar Rup Darshan, p.175

¹⁰ Navin Chandra Sarma, Assam Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.197

¹¹ Interviewed with Ananta Oja-Auniati Satra, Majuli, Assam

3)Diha and 4)Pada : Diha and Pada are the two section of a song based on the stories of epics. The songs are followed by a Dasavatara pada. To exhibit the variations in the song, artists sings 'Bana' (notes in the higher octave) and 'Dhura' (changing of tunes according to the essence of the story) in between Diha and Pada. At the end, Vaidaya Kehiyali (song that expresses playing of different instruments) and Upadesha (depicts the moral advices to audience) is presented by the artists.

*Diha : K "Ae Nath Najayon Rane
Swami Dasi, Dharuhu Charne
Pada : "Aaru Krishna..."¹²*

It is presented the story of 'Balivadh' of Ramayana. Raja Bali's wife requesting him to avoid war with Lord Rama because she is afraid of the consequences.

Satriya Ojapali music and its classical elements:

Ojapali music has both margi (classical) and desi (folk) tradition. The Charyapada of 8th to 11th century suggest that Raga based music was prevalent in Assam in large scale¹³. The tune of raga based music of Boddhik Charyapada is a quite similar with ancient Assamese folk music. Satriya Ojapali follows the Raga-Ragini system. Presently the tradition of Raga-Ragini classification is totally absent in Indian classical music, however, this tradition is still followed in Ojapali. There are certain Ragas like Rag Saranga in Ojapali which has very similar notes to the Hindustani classical Raga Vrindavani Saranga. In Ojapali music 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 as Saptak 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, Satriya Ojapali songs are based on three notes or swaras: Mandra, Madhya and Sara. Indian classical music is based on 12 shuddha (full tone) and vikrit (distorted) notes.

2) **Tala and Layakari:** Tala is that by which music is established or regulated in time. It may be called a musical time. It bound by the number of beats which we called Tala. In classical music there are different Talas used in different style. Ojapali music also performs 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 musician, vocal or instrumental

¹² Interviewed with Ananta Oja-Auniati Satra, Majuli, Assam

¹³ Durgeswar Nath Oja, Byah Sangeetor Ruprekha, p.13

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. Satriya Ojapali has fixed talas like Chaou tala, Titala, etc.

3) **Raga:** The word raga 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 cluster of notes to which people's mind is attracted. Ojapali music is born through Rag -Ragini classification of Indian classical Music. Ojapali music is based on 6 ragas and 36 raginis. The Satriya Ojapali follows 6 ragas -Bhairav, Mallab, Sarang, Hindol, Deepak and Megh. Among all, Sarang Raga is the very popular and ancient one. 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:** Satriya Ojapali music is based on religious topics. It elicit devotional and psychological response from the listener. Rasa has been referred to as aesthetic delight. Some common Rasa of Ojapali Music:

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

The Indian classical music also elicit devotional response .The Dhrupad and Dhamar style of classical music 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 Padas are designed in a specific and clear pattern . Satriya Ojapali music also has specific and standard text.

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

Conclusion:

Ojapali is 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 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 group 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.

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