

History and Evolution of 'Khol Vadya' - An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Srimanta Sankaradeva, founder of the Nava Vaishnava religion in Assam, is the father of the Sattriya Khol Vadya. He created the Khol Vadya suitable for the Sattriya Performing Arts. This tradition of Sattriya Khol Vadya has been passed down orally as a living tradition for 550 years ago through Sattria institution. Although there are many other unrestrained instruments similar to the Sattriya Khol Vadya in India, the method of manufacturing and playing style of the Sattriya Khol Vadya in Assam is to some extent different from other instruments of India. The Khol Vadya is a part of the Sattriya culture of Assam and has undergone various evolutions since its creation to accompany the Satriya dance, Ankia Bhaona, Bargeet etc. and has gained its place as a distinct Performing Art. There are three styles of Sattriya Khol Vadya: Bardowa, Barpeta and Kamalabari styles. The playing style, distinct rhythm, and style of performance distinguish it from other instruments prevalent in India. Traditionally, the Sattriya Khol Vadya performed only with Sattriya music and drama. However, this trend is now moving out of the Sattria and becoming an independent art form. Nowadays, the Khol is included in the education system as an academic subject and a subject of research. The purpose of this article is to discuss the physical identity of the Sattriya Khol Vadya, its history, evolution and its place in the present day. The term "Khol Vadya" mentioned in this research paper refers only to the Sattriya Khol Vadya of Assam.

Key Words: Sattriya Khol Vadya, evolution, Sattriya, Rhythm, Style of playing.

Introduction:

The culture of a nation is a reflection of that nation. Culture is the backbone of a nation. A nation's legacy is incorporated into and transformed by its culture. The culture of a nation is the manner of life, cuisine, traditions, and folk Arts of the people who inhabit that region.

The definition of culture given by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor is as follows:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1871, p.1)

For the sake of religious awakening, Srimanta Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva established the Vaishnava ideal in Assam and produced literature, culture, and Performing Arts. These endeavors have enhanced the rich heritage of Assamese culture. For five hundred and fifty years, Sattriya culture has been practiced and discussed continually as a living tradition. This culture has a rich history of practicing its traditional art forms at 'Thans', 'Sattras', and 'Namgharas'. In addition to these traditional venues, the art form has now also gained popularity as a stage Performing art. The Vaishnavite religion is associated with a wide range of artistic and cultural expressions, including Ankiya Bhaona, Bargeet, Sattriya dance, Khol Vadya, and so on. These were developed by Srimanta Sankardeva and were discussed on the Sattras before becoming a fully developed genre. In the twenty-first century, this genre has become more and more popular worldwide, whether through academic pursuits or Performing arts.

Sankaradeva, the father of Assamese literature and culture, dedicated his life to promoting and spreading the Vaishnava religion. He expressed his devotion through various forms of creative expression such as music, literature, and Performing Arts. One of his notable contributions to this cause is the creation of a musical instrument called "Khol Vadya." Srimanta Sankardeva designed this instrument specifically to enhance the musical aspects of his debut play 'Chihnayatra'. While similar instruments are known by different names in North East India, the Khol of Assam stands out for its distinct character. Assamese instrument 'Khol' has a distinct manufacturing process and their performance technique is unique as well. According to the *Katha Gurucharita*, Sankaradeva built the 'Dima' (shell) of Khol Vadya with the help of Kapilimukh's potter. The Khol, a living oral tradition that dates back around 550 years, has been used through Sattras-Namghar as the primary accompaniment instrument in many Sattriya cultural practices, including Ankiya Bhaona, Bargeet, Sattriya dance etc. This essential traditional element of Sattriya culture has changed and transformed greatly over the course of five hundred and fifty years, eventually emerging in a refined and fully developed classical style. It's worth noting that the Khol hasn't just been used as an accompanying instrument, but it has also created a distinct genre of its own. Assam has witnessed the widespread use of Khol Vadya. It has basically three Thuls (Style) - Bardowa, Barpeta, and Kamalabari.

The Sattriya culture of Assam has triumphed over all odds, emerging victorious in the face of natural calamities and political unrest. This resilient culture has withstood the test of time. However, in the wake of the shifts in religion and culture, the culture has also experienced substantial transformation. It's the same in case of Khol Vadya also.

The process of manufacturing the Khol Vadya, variations in pronunciations of bols and variations of playing method, use of grammatical techniques in Bols, effect of North Indian classical music on the creation of notation, solo performance and compositions, the inclusion of khol in modern education system, along with other factors have altered the Khol tradition. The objective of this paper is to study of the development and history of the Khol instrument from its inception to the 21st Century.

Significance of the Study:

‘Khol’ is one of the Traditional major percussion instruments with Classical qualities. This musical instrument, which has been played by living oral tradition for the past five and a half centuries, is almost ready to enter the classical canon. After going through several changes, the instrument is currently being studied and incorporated in subject of research. However, there is still a dearth of research on its various components. Therefore, there is a great need to study the history and evolution of the Khol Vadya.

Methodology:

An attempt is made to analyze the subject through descriptive, survey, comparative and historical methodologies.

Origin of the Khol Vadya, Method of Construction and its Physical Characteristics.

Tatang Tantrigata Gyeyamawanandhastu pouskaraml

Ghonang Talastu Bigyaha Sushiro Bangshauchyate ll

(Natyashastra 28/2)

(Shukla Shastri, 2017, p.3)

According to the *Natyashastra* of Bharat Muni and the *Sangeet Ratnakara* of Sharangadeva, Indian musical instruments are divided into four categories. These four categories of instruments are TatVadya, GhanaVadya, Avanaadhha Vadya and Sushir Vadya respectively.

Within these classifications, Avanaadhha Vadya are those that have the ability to generate sound through striking with sticks or the fingers of a hand clothed in leather. This musical instrument category includes the Khol Vadya among others. As stated in the Charitputhi, Sankardev created the Khol Vadya when he felt the need of a musical instrument for performing his debut play "Chihnayatra".

The *Katha-Gurucharitra*, edited by Upendra Chandra Lekharu, states:

Guru kopili Mukhar kalanga kakhara kumarata

Khol Gorhale Jokha di, daina saat Angul,

Beyan Tero Angul hol,chale...

(Lekharu, 2020, p. 28)

The literal meaning of the Khol Vadya, as stated in *Hemkosh* by Hemchandra Barua, is as follows: “A hollow inside, two-headed leather stitched instrument. A Kind of Drum” (Barua, 2015, p. 395). In other words, Khol has a hollow shell made of soil, which has two mouths, both covered with skin (Verma 2010, p. 39).

The first usage of the Khol Vadya was in the Chihnayatra drama, which was performed by Sankaradeva when he was 19 years old, as stated in the Charitputhis. The instrument has been

practiced and used as a living oral tradition ever since. However, there are some variances in manufacturing style between the descriptions provided in the Charit Puthis and the manufacturing methods used today for Khol Vadya. Naturally, there are certain variances too in the way it produces sound along with some alterations in the manufacturing techniques.

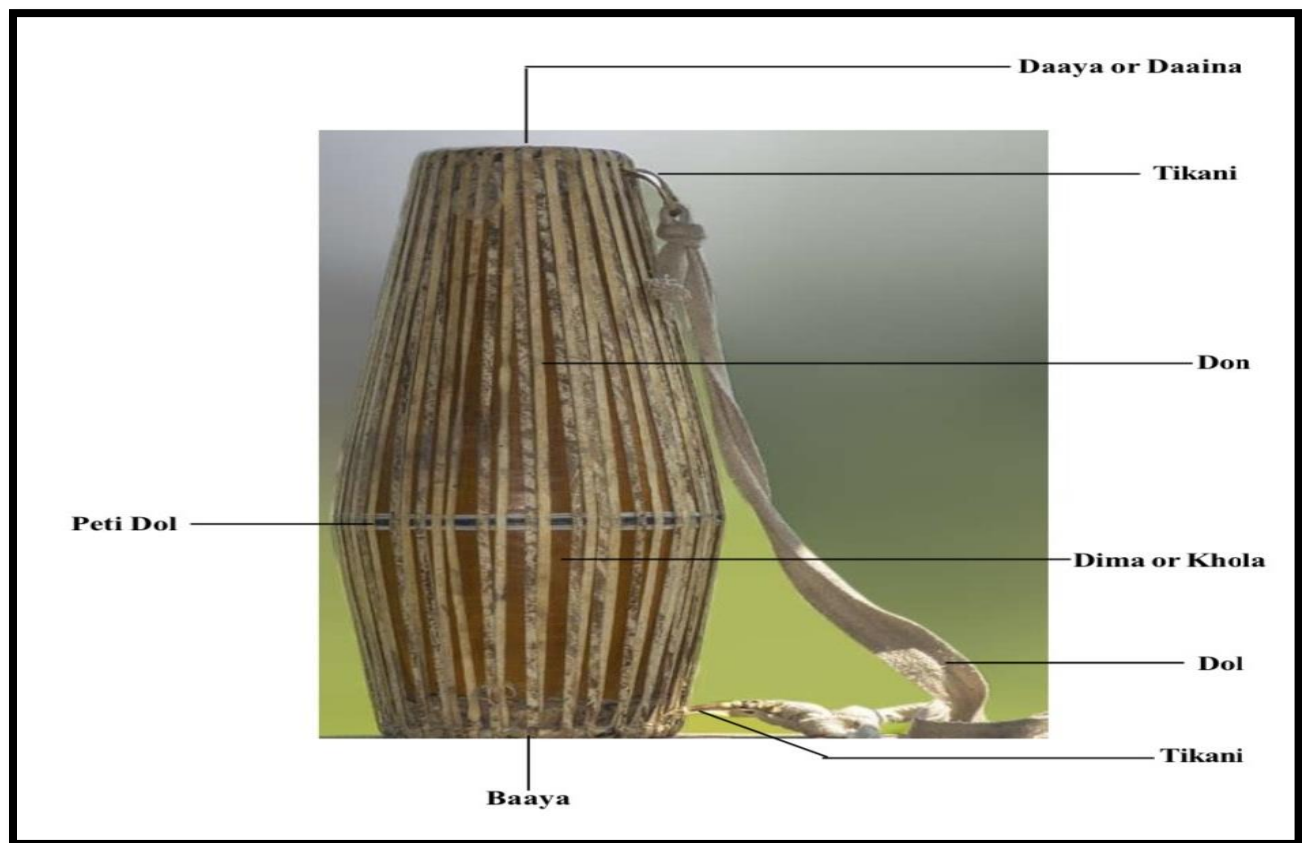
Sankaradeva elevated the Khol to a unique performance named 'Dhemali, which is same as 'Purbaranga' (preludes) in Sanskrit drama. Prior to the bhaona, the singers (*gāyan – bāyan*) performed 'Dhemali' to acquaint the audience with the play and to ensure a successful performance. Khol-Taal are the primary musical instrument used by the *gāyan-bāyan*. Taal Vadya (Cymbal) is used as the primary accompaniment to the Khol Vadya .

The procedures for making the Khol Vadya:

The descriptions given in the Charit Puthis and the current techniques for making Khol Vadya differ somewhat in terms of manufacturing style. In the past though the Khol Vadya was made of clay, Khol instruments are now also made of wood. A piece of wood carrying the jackfruit tree's trunk is required to construct the "Dima," (shell) in order to create a high-quality shell of Khol Vadya. Khol Vadya made of neem tree wood are likewise excellent. Khol instruments are also made of wood, such as mango and beech trees, albeit these are only temporary. In the first stage of making the Khol Vadya, the piece of wood is hollowed out inside to form the 'Dima' or shell. The shape of the Khol Vadya varies from one place to another. Khol from Upper Assam measures approximately 26-28 inches in length. In Lower Assam, the Khol's length ranges between 20 and 26 inches, depending on the players (Bayans) age and the convenience of playing. The Khol's shell has a larger mouth on the left side and a smaller mouth area on the right. The small side of the khol which is opening on the right side of the shell is around 4-6 inches in diameter, while the one on the left side is about 6-8 inches in diameter. The shell has an elevated centre with a diameter of roughly 34–36 inches. The right and left faces of the Khol are covered with leather. Cowhide is commonly used to build high-quality Khol instruments.

Introduction to the Parts of Khol Vadya:

The components of the Khol are 'Dima', or shell, 'daya' or 'Daina', 'Baya', 'Tali', 'Malua' or 'Bandhani', 'Don', 'Katnitali', 'Puli', 'Petidol', 'Ghun', 'Dol', 'Tikni' respectively.



Dima or Khola (shell):

The main element of a wooden shell shaped like a chebulic fruit is the ‘Dima’ or Khola. Although this shell was formerly made of clay, we can now see that they are also made of wood. The length of the shell is about 20-26 inches. In terms of length, there are regional variations.

‘Daya’ or Daina - The “daya” or “daina” is the name given to the smaller head located on the right side of the leather-covered shell. The “daya” or “daina” measures roughly 4–6 inches in diameter.

Baya - The larger head on the left side of the shell, wrapped in leather, is known as the ‘baya’. The diameter of the ‘baya’ is about 6-8 inches.

Tali - The term "tali" refer to the two primary layers of skin that cover the prime area of “daya” and “baya”.

Malua or Bandhani - A 'malua' or 'bandhani' is the word for the outermost rim of the instrument, which is a braid of fine leather rope around the mouths of the “daya” and “baya” sections.

Don - The leather cords used to fasten the ‘talis’ of the “daya” and the baya of the Khol are referred to as “don”.

Katni Tali - The thick leather skin attached to the bindings of the Khol’s ‘daya’ and baya is known as ‘katni tali’.

Puli - The puli is a set of 32 small holes used to link the two skins of the “daya” and ‘baya’ sides of the Khol and tie up the ‘don’.

Petidol - The rope wrapped around the 'Dima' or Khola to enhance the beauty of the Khol is known as ‘Petidol’.

Ghun - The dark patch in the middle part of the ‘daya’ and baya of the Khol is called the 'ghun'. This 'ghun' is prepared by mixing iron powder, charcoal, and other ingredients.

Dol - A ‘dol’ is a term for the rope that is used to hang the Khol around the neck or shoulder and make playing it easier.

Tikani - There are two small, ring-shaped, round ropes called ‘tikani’ at each end of the Khol that are used to hang its string or ‘dol’.

The evolution of the Khol Vadya:

As previously stated, the Khol has been constantly played as a living, oral tradition for five centuries and fifty years. Culture has a unique quality of continuously evolving and adapting over time and therefore it is compared to a flowing river. The state of Assam has been afflicted by a number of natural occurrences. It was challenging to establish an atmosphere that was suitable for cultural practice in Assam, a region plagued by earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. The state of Assam has been devastated by numerous political conflicts, both large and small. Among other things, British rule, the introduction of the Bengali language into Assam, and three Burmese invasions have all contributed to these disputes. Sattriya culture is practiced with considerable difficulty in that ravaged Assam through ‘Than’s, ‘Sattras’, ‘Namghars’, etc. The Ahom invasion and the battle with the Kacharis were too much for Sankaradeva to handle, according to the *Guru Charit*, so he left for lower Assam.

As stated in the *Guru Charit*, Sankaradeva could not withstand the invasion of the Ahoms and the fight with the Kacharis and left for lower Assam. During his residency in Bardowa the rising conflict between the Bhuyans and the neighboring Kacharis became intense, and that is why Sankardev left Bardowa forever in 1516 AD at the age of 67, with the Bhuiyans, family, and disciples.

(Raichoudhury. 2019, p. 16)

In order to spread religion, he built a number of worship centers (Thana) in lower Assam and with the assistance of his cherished pupil Madhavdeva created a variety of literary, artistic, and Performing Arts (song, instruments, dance and drama). Among the Thans or Sattras established by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in lower Assam, notable are Chinpara Bhithi Than, Kamarkuchi Than, Patbausi Sattras etc. founded by Sankardeva. On the other hand Sattras like Sundaridia Sattras, Barpetas Sattras, Ganakkuchi Sattras, Baradi Sattras etc. founded by Madhavdeva.

Sankaradeva and Madhavadevas not only produced Vaishnava-centric literature and music, but also developed a wide range of performing Arts such as songs, instruments, dances, dramas, (bhaonas, and yatras).

Apart from creating and implementing Vaishnava-focused literature and culture, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva also cultivated an extensive array of Performing Arts, including songs, instruments, dances, , bhaonas, and yatras. One of the essential components of this Performing art is the Khol Vadya .

When Sankardeva and Madhavdeva travelled to lower Assam for preaching, they were joined by Khol experts such as Kamalananda Majhi, Sarvajay Atoi, Bhima Bayon, and others and they settled in Tatikuchi, which is now in the Barpetas district.

Later, in order to carry on the art and culture of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva to future generations, Mathuradas Budha Ata, the first Sattradhikar of the Barpetas Sattras, distributed literature, culture, art, service, diverse rites, and so on among different dynasties, a practice known as lineage tradition.

Among these the dynasties that engaged in singing and playing of the Khol (gayan-bayan) are the Bhima Bayan ancestry, Aghona Bayon ancestry, Sutradhar ancestry, Gandhia ancestry, and Dakshinhati Hatigot. A steady stream of art and culture created by Shankar and Madhava has been maintained through this lineage tradition, which started with the Barpetas Sattras. However, it was Badula Ata, Madhavdev's most favored pupil, who carried the traditions of Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva to upper Assam, where he established the Kamalabari Sattras as a hub for the ongoing practice of these traditions. Furthermore, the Bardowa Sattras in Bardowa, the birthplace of Sankardeva, continued to serve as another centre for the practice of this culture. The post-Shankar-Madhava era saw the division and growth of Sattras, which contributed to the advancement and growth of this art and culture.

Khol Vadya has persisted in use throughout Assam for five centuries and fifty years despite several geographical obstacles, conflicts in time, evolutionary processes, and so on, and is currently even outside the country as one of the most significant aspects of Sattriya culture. To arrive at its current shape, Khol Vadya has changed in a number of ways. The following is an overview of these changes:

- 1) **The process of manufacturing Khol Vadya:** The fact that the Khol instruments are not manufactured using the previous techniques has already been discussed. By altering the size, they are produced for the players comfort and according to the player's age rather than in the same measurements as they were made during Sankaradeva's time, as stated in the *Katha Gurucharita*. As a result of the change in size, there are surely a few alterations in the generation of sound. Previously, there was some difficulty in tuning the Khol Vadya, they were nearly bound to a single scale. However, now a day the Khol is built to be attached to a scale ideal for recording or performance on stage and in the studio, so that the musician can adjust the scale as needed. This is accomplished by attaching a few screws to the right side (daina) of the Khol, enabling the player to adjust the scale as needed. Additionally, in order to modify the sound, a lot of players employ various experimental construction techniques.

- 2) **Differences in pronunciation of 'Bol-Bani' (sound):** There are already differences in the evolution of the sound of the Khol, whether owing to geographical factors, linguistic differences, or variations in pronunciation from place to place. For example, in the Sattras of Lower Assam – Barpeta Sattrra, Sundaridia Sattrra etc., the main sounds of the Khol are 'Tong' or 'Nong,' 'Taak' or 'Naak,' 'Taa' or 'Naa,' 'Dhin' and 'khit.' Alternatively, the principal sounds of the Khol in Upper Assam's Sattras, such as those under Kamalabari thul, are 'Tao,' 'Taak,' 'Dhei,' 'Khit,' or 'Khit', 'Taak,' 'Dhei,' 'Daa.' The sounds 'taa,' 'dhin,' 'khit,' 'dhei,' and 'thei' (Barpeta, Sundaridia) and 'Tao,' 'Dhin,' 'Khit,' 'Dhei,' and 'Thei' (Kamalabari Thul) are played in the same way; the only distinction is in how they are pronounced linguistically. Later, some of the sounds of the Mridanga were also included in the 'Guru Mridang Dhemaali' prevalent in the Barpeta Sattrra. The sounds of the Mridanga, which are employed in royal Chali dance, are also used in Khol performance. The sounds of the Mridangam include 'ghed,' 'gheda,' 'khetani,' 'ghedani,' 'dang,' 'didang,' 'ididang,' and so on.

- 3) **Application of grammatical methods in Bajana:** Although it has been observed that some musical sounds of the Khol are still in circulation through the Sattriya tradition from the parts in a grammatical sense, more systematic recording exists for the different types of music, particularly those employed in dance, that have been passed down orally. Similarly, the traditional music played on the Khol, such as humorous and bhaona-centric music are recorded in a grammatical method. The first book to systematically document the music of Khol Vadya and the music of Sattriya dance is *Sattriya Nritya aru Sattriya Nrityar Taal* by Keshav Chankakati and Maheshwar Neog (ed.). Special attention is paid to the dimensional calculation of sounds. When putting together the rhythm or music table, the North Indian musical system is taken into account. The rhythms and melody of Khol Vadya incorporate symbols used in North Indian music for

rhythmic table preparation, such as X (sam), (matra), 2, 3, 4 (tali), 0 (khali), S (avagraha), I (Vibhag), and others.

- 4) **Differences in Rhythm:** Depending on the variety of 'Thul' (groups) in Sattriya culture, there are variances in the music or sound of the same rhythm. These variations can be attributed to linguistic or geographical barriers as well as the creative expression of artistic minds. Some rhythmical music uses 'tali' (clap) and 'khali' (empty) in slightly different ways. It is worth noting, that the music and rhythms of the various thuls (groups) correspond with the singing styles of Bargeet, Angkargeet, etc.that are performed in respective Thuls.

Difference between Sattriya Khol Vadya and Khol of other states.

We are aware that other instruments like the Sattriya Khol of Assam are played in different states of India but the Khol of Assam is different from the Khol played in other states due to some distinctive characteristics. The features are listed below-

- The Sattriya Khol Vadya was created by Mahapurusha Sankardeva and is used only in Sattriya Culture.
- The Sattriya Khol Vadya of Assam is a traditional instrument with classical qualities rather than a folk musical instrument.
- The playing style of the Sattriya Khol incorporates hand movements, bhariman, dance etc.
- Its Bol-Bani are different from other Khol Vadya prevalent in different states of India. The Satriya Khol Vadya has its own Taal system.

Conclusion:

Traditionally used as an accompaniment piece, the Khol has been featured as a solo instrument on contemporary stages for a number of years. In addition to the conventional rhythmic instruments, when the Khol was introduced as a Performing art on the contemporary stage, musicians' artistic abilities led to the creation of numerous new composing instruments. Following the national recognition of Sattriya dance on 15th November 2000, various musical instruments appropriate for dance were invented to be performed along with the structural dances that were gradually appearing under Sattriya dance. In duets with other Indian classical instruments, the Khol Vadya is also frequently played independently. Jagannath Bayan, Haricharan Bhuyan, Pradip Bayan, Bhaskarjyoti Ojah, Manoj Kumar Das, Bhavananda Barbayan, Niranjana Saikia Barbayan, Bipul Ojah, Kusha Mahanta and others are among those who introduced Khol Vadya to the global platform. In 2017, Jagannath Bayan received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for the first time from the Sangeet Natak Akademi of India,

which recognized the Khol Vadya as an Assamese traditional musical instrument. Manoj Kumar Das, a disciple of Jagannath Bayan, was also given the Yuva Puraskar for the year 2018 in the traditional music Assam (Khol) section by Sangeet Natak Akademi.

While Luit Konwar Rudra Barua State College of Music and Jorhat Sattriya College of Music provide undergraduate with Honors options in the Khol Vadya, there are no postgraduate options available in this field. In September 2023, a postgraduate course in Khol Vadya was initiated by the Department of Performing Arts at Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Visvavidyalaya, NaSatra, Barpeta. In that same university, a few scholars have used the Khol as a subject for their Ph.D. research. Furthermore, scholarly works such as books and essays have been written about Khol Vadya. The most notable of these are Dilip Ranjan Barthakur's "Khol-Vigyan," Manoj Kumar Das's "Khol-Vidya," Mahananda Das Bayan's "Khol-Vadyanka," Ghankanta Bora's "Khol-Vadya Kosh," Govind Saikia's "Sattriya Khol Pradeep," etc.

A number of organizations affiliated with the Indian government's Ministry of Culture, including Sangeet Natak Akademi, Centre for Cultural Resource and Training, North East Zone Cultural Centre, and others, have been offering research projects, senior-junior fellowships, workshops and national scholarships in an effort to maintain and advance the Khol Vadya tradition. In addition, the Assamese traditional musical instrument Khol Vadya receives grades from All India Radio in 2023. Manoj Kumar Das, the author of article, is B High Grade in Khol Vadya (a traditional musical instrument of Assam).

The various aspects of the Khol Vadya tradition have failed to receive the appropriate amount of exposure and propagation despite being a living oral legacy for five centuries and fifty years. A great number of elements of Khol Vadya have not yet been investigated; hence certain pieces of this tradition have already faded over time. It can be hoped that through thoughtful consideration and careful evaluation, we can work towards improving this tradition and ensure that it is carried out in the best possible way

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