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Durgavari Ojapali: Songs of Durgavari Ramayana by

Durgavar Kayastha

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Abstract

The songs of Durgavari Ramayana is known as Durgavari Ojapali music of Assam. The song composed by the poet Durgavar Kayastha is performed in Durgavari Ojapali. However, this tradition is on the verge of extinction. Certain compositions of this Ojapali form have been found in a place called Hajo, Assam, where an evidence of the last chorus of this singing form was found. The book "Durgavar Ramayana" is a lyrical poetry composed by Durgavar, and is generally known as 'Durgavari'. Several poets called it 'Lyrical Ramayana' because the Durgavar rendered the Ramayana into the form of songs. Durgavari Ojapali is the epic based performing arts follow the margi or classical style of performance. There are certain Ragas like Rag Dhanashree in Ojapali which has very similar notes to the Hindustani classical Raga Dhanashree.

Key Words: Ojapali, Durgavari, Ramayana, 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 music.¹ 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 Sarma, Navin Chandra : Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.2
Volume-II, Issue-VII

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 Ojapali. 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”.²

Subject & Language: This ancient form of Ojapali art is originated from the religious place like temples and other auspicious places. Tales of the Ramayana and Padma Puran 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 Durgavari Ramayana:

*'Rama Lakshmanag Purbajang Raghubarang
Sita Pati Sundarang kakutstha Karunamayang
Gunanidhing Biprapriyang Dharmikang Rajendrang.....'*³

Meaning-The sloka is about lord Shri Ramachandra.It is a prayer song about him.

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 language.⁴ The local artist got the lyrics in written form and they composed the traditional songs of Ojapali. The content and mood of presentation as well as the transmission of the Ojapali have given it a folk character.

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 Ojapali.*⁵ 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.

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.

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

³ Das, Pravin Chandra : Durgavari Ramayan.p.15

⁴ Bora , Karuna: Satriya Nrittyar Rup Darshan, p.158

⁵ Sarma, Navin Chandra : Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali, p.41

The apparels of the artists of Ojapali: The Oja and Palis of Biyah- gowa Ojapali don special apparels during musical performance. The Oja dons white turban on his head, one capkan (a kind of flowing shirt with the pyjamas). He also put on a girdle around his waist and hangs an ornate pachara (a kind of cloth made form Muga cocoon) on his either shoulders. He twines anklet around his ankles and gamkharu, necklace and rings on his fingers and mark of sandalwood on his forehead. The Palis too put on loin cloth made from cotton and a capkan. They also wear stylish turban of white sheet over their heads. The Oja in Satriya Ojapali wears a special dress called “Chaapkan”. He puts a turban on his head, carries a cloth called Challeng on his shoulder, a traditional ornament in his hand, makes a sandalwood mark on his forehead (tilak), twines anklets around his ankles and wears a loincloth. The Palis also wear a special dress Chaapkan. They wear loincloth, a garland of Tulsi (Holy Basil) around their neck, a turban on their head and make a mark (tilak) on the forehead.

Durgavari Ojapali: Durgavari Ojapali is related to the Vaishnava tradition and Ojapali performance is mainly based on themes of "Durgavari Ramayana" composed by the poet Durgavar Kayastha. This Ojapali tradition once widely popular in lower Assam mainly in Kamrup and Darang Districts. Durgavar was a well known poet, musician as well as singer and Oja of Assam who flourished in the early part of 16th century A.D. The book "Durgavar Ramayana" is a lyrical poetry composed by Kabibar Durgavar, and is generally known as ‘Durgavari’. Several poets called it ‘Lyrical Ramayana’ as Durgavar rendered the Ramayana into the form of songs. In 1915 A. D., Bisay Chandra Biswasi, a resident of Hajo, Assam, edited and published a collection of songs of the Durgavara Ramayana under the title Durgavari, the Giti Ramayan composed by Durgavar.⁶ The book is called Giti Ramayana as the book is composed in Ragas. Biswasi collected only four cantos (kanda), viz. Aranya, kishkindhya, Sundara and Lanka Kandas of Ramayan of Durgavar though he believed that the poet had composed the other three cantos also⁷. Dr. Maheswar Neog, noted Assamese-language scholar and poet published the ‘ Durgavari Geet Ramayana’ composed by Durgavar in 1954 ; he sourced most of the songs from the collection of Mr. Biswasi.⁸

Contents of Durgavari Ramayana: The Ayodhya kanda or canto of Durgavari Ramayana is elaborate in six parts. This kanda begins with a prayer to Lord Shri Krishna, Mahadeva, goddess Durga, and at the end to Rama. The Ayodhya kanda has 94 stanzas. It is followed by the Aranya kanda, Kishkindha kanda, Sundara kanda, Lanka kanda, and Uttar kanda. The Uttar kanda has 28 stanzas.⁹ The canto of Ayodhya kanda in Durgavari Ramayana narrates the preparation for Ramachandra’s enthronement, ill advice of Kunji to the queen Kaikayi and accordingly their conspiracy to make Bharata as the king of Ayodhya , Kaikayi’ request to king Dasaratha to make Bharata the king of Ayodha in Rama’s place, as

⁶ Durgavari : Kabibar Durgabar Racita Giti-Ramayan, Hajo, 1837 Saka

⁷ Das, Pravin Chandra : Durgavari Ojapali p.82

⁸ Das, Pravin Chandra : Durgavari Ojapali, p.82

⁹ Das, Pravin Chandra : Durgavari Ojapali, p.86

well as to send Ramachandra to the forest, Ramachandra, Lakhmana and Sita's journey to the forest. This canto is mostly narrative and the materials collected from the Assamese Ramayan of Madhav Kandali. The Kiskindhya , Sundara and Lanka kandas of Durgavar relates Rama's friendship with Sugriva. Hanumana's mission to Lanka, coming of Bibhisana to Rama's camp etc. Durgavar also gives a beautiful description of the Kamaparva madna kheri festival in his work. The description is furnished in connection with the exile of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. During their stay in the Citrakuta, Rama once pined for Ayodhya at the time of Kamaparva madana kheri. Seeing Rama in melancholy mood Sita created a kingdom in the forest by illusion where everything belonging to the real Ayodhya was present .In that maya Ayodhya Rama, Sita and Lakshmana celebrated the Madana festival.

Dr. Banikanta Kakati describes Durgavar's works as a rural version of Valmiki Ramayana.¹⁰ Dr. Birendra Nath Datta , an Indian academician, a researcher of folklore, a singer and lyricists has said about the musical qualities of the Durgavari music, 'A beautiful coordination was established between raga and folk music forms in the Durgavari song '. Dr. Maheswar Neog says: "with all its original lyrical beauty Giti Ramayana is for most part only a popular version of Madhav Kandali's work, meant for the use of the Oja of Ojapali chorus. The narrations of the story is sometimes scrappy and disjointed, but then the gaps could be filled up by the Oja or Daina Pali. Some passages, especially in the payer or ordinary verse portions are set to tune (raga) with additional musical quantities."¹¹

Some features of the Durgavari Ojapali:- Daugava, in all probability, was an Oja or the leader of the Ojapali chorus. The Oja leads the chorus and his assistants or Palis repeat the same .The Dainapali carries on a dialogue with the leader of the group, from time to time, for explaining the plot to the audience. Durgavar perhaps composed the songs and padas of the Ramayana as well as Padma Purana for the Ojapali chorus.

Durgavari Ojapali music and its relation with Indian Dhrupadi music: Ojapali music have 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 scale.¹² The tune of raga based music of Boddhik Charyapada is a quite similar with ancient Assamese folk music. Durgavari 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.

¹⁰ Kakati, Banikanta: Purani Assamiya Sahitya;1940,p.16

¹¹ Kakati, B (ed) : Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 56

¹² Nath, Durgeswar Oja: Byah Sangeetor Ruprekha, p.13

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 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. Durgavari Ojapali has fixed talas like Keharwa tala, Titala etc. These are the names of talas used in light Indian style of music. For example-

A Pada in tala- Keharwa
Raga -Ahir

*Aa Ki Hanuman
Boro Bhoya Lage Mura Mone
Sugreba Bulanta Suna Bau Suta Hanuman
Koiroiba Manusya Ase Dui
Janu Bali Dada Ati Swabhabote Crudhaboti
Ante Janu Bali Duta Dui
Bhajaka Lakhilu Bora Bhoya Abe Lage Mura
Sighre Pasu Giri Gabhara.....¹³*

Meaning: The song is based on the topic of Bali badha of Ramayana. In the song Sugriva says Hanumana about his elder brother Bali's nature and his cruelty.

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 36.¹⁴ But it has different opinion. The Durgavari Ojapali follows 22 ragas. The ragas are-Ahir, Kambar, Dhanashri, Shri Basant, Kedar etc. Among all, however, most of the ragas has been lost in times in Ojapali as it is an oral tradition and also for lack of practices

¹³ Das, Pravin Chandra : Durgavari Ojapali, p.90

¹⁴ Sarma, Navin Chandra : Assamor Parivesyakala Ojapali , p.244

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:** Durgavari 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. Durgavari 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. The Durgavari a literary composition of a particular author named Durgavar and it is mainly based on the version of his predecessor, Madhav Kandaali. Durgavari contains a large number of material, which are not related to the original Ramayana story but collected from the folk or popular Ramakatha current in the region. The songs of Durgavari are to ragas and the poet mention 22 ragas. The songs of Ojapali has been transmitted from generation to generation more by mouth than through written manuscript. It may be mentioned that in spite of the wide popularity of the songs in a considerably big area for about five hundred years only one or two copies of traditional manuscript of the Durgavari Ojapali have been found so far. 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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