

# Traditional Performances of **SOUTH KAMRUP**



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**Dhaneswar Kalita**

Foreword by  
**Dr Kapila Vatsyayan**

**T**he word Kamrup evokes many beautiful images of this region of India which is shrouded with myth and is the home of many communities. The traditional performances of an area represent a distinctive cultural pattern and indicate the nature of amusement of the people of that culture. But these traditional performances which fulfil some social functions, too, still remain untouched by the concerned scholars. It is more true in respect of the traditional performances of South Kamrup.

This study has been done on the basis of indepth field study. Here it is tried to evaluate the manner of performance, the historical and legendary evidence current among the village people and the social situations of these artforms of the area both in tribal and non-tribal societies. Over and above the natural contexts some artificial contexts were also applied to study the proper form of some of the traditional performances. The songs or the rhymes incorporated in this study are given in the proper language as sung or narrated by the indigenous people to convey the flavour of the original version. In the bibliography some related references have been added to understand the matter more clearly.

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OF  
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Dhaneswar Kalita



*With a Foreword by*  
Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan



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## Foreword

The word 'Kamrup' evokes many beautiful images of this region of India which is enshrouded with myth and is the home of many communities. The fascinating mosaic of cultural groups and inter-action in Kamrup is reflective of similar phenomenon in other parts of India. The historical antiquity of the region and the comparative inaccessibility of some of the sub-regions has attracted scholars both from within the region and outside. Monumental work has been done on the historical dimensions of the culture of Kamrup although many more primary sources are yet to be tapped. The living traditions of the communities, their lifestyles, arts and culture have also attracted scholars and some valuable work has been done. The communities have been known by many names, sometime called 'tribal', at other times 'non-tribal,' and yet at other times 'village rural communities'. Muslims and Hindus have lived in close proximity and although each group can be identified as a separate group, there has always been inter-action amongst the groups, and between the religious communities.

Shri Dhaneswar Kalita has focussed attention on what he terms folklore items in South Kamrup and he endeavours to delineate the contours of the social heritage of the people of this area. Generally all this can be contained in the larger rubric called 'folk culture' or 'folklore'.

Shri Dhaneswar Kalita raises some valuable questions in the

introduction and pertinently does speak about the redefinition of the words 'folklore', 'tribe', 'non-tribal' etc. But when he enters his area of field, he leaves these questions of analysis to the future researcher. His concern is with the description of the performance, description of the musical instruments, place of the performance and the people who are the performers. As a person who knows his area, his descriptions are of value. They give very valuable information, throw light on the interaction amongst groups and between communities and also categories of performances. He treats Ojapali form in some detail. A comparison of his presentation with the authoritative work of Dr. Maheshwar Neog would be interesting.

Shri Dhaneswar Kalita also goes into other performing arts peculiar only to the region of South Kamrup such as Jejera. The Jejera performance is largely restricted to South Kamrup and it is a different version than Ojapali. The connection between Jejera and the Nagara-nam is a field for further exploration. Valuable are also the notes on forms of Mahoho and the various dance forms of the Pati-Rabhas on which not much work has been done.

I hope that the work of Shri Dhaneswar Kalita will stimulate further research in these fields and that he and other scholars will persevere to understand and analyse the folklife of the communities of this region.

Member Secretary  
Indira Gandhi National Centre  
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New Delhi-110001

Kapila Vatsyayan

## Preface

The traditional performances of an area represent a distinctive cultural pattern and indicate the nature of amusement of the people of that culture. It is one of the fields of folklore research where much attention has not yet been paid by the scholars particularly in Assam. The fairs and festivals play a dominant role in the cultural heritage of Assam, and the performances are also associated with the same. But these traditional performances which fulfil some social functions too, still remain untouched by the concerned scholars. It is more true in respect of the traditional performances of South Kamrup. Moreover, there are some traditional artforms which may rightly be termed as local. For example, *Bhatheli* is current only in North Kamrup, *Caitāli-nām* can be found in South Kamrup only. So also *Jejerā* troupe is current only in South Kamrup. Regarding the traditional performances Goalpara district stands unique. So the idea struck me that for a detailed picture of the traditional performances of Assam we must study these artforms on the basis of area division.

The area of South Kamrup is known scantily by the historians as no recorded evidences can be found regarding its political or social history. Whatever has been recorded in *Baharistan-e-Ghaibi* also portrays some political features of that period only. Till now nothing has been done in the field of traditional performances except some articles in Assamese published only in local journals. In this study which is in fact

based on M. Phil. dissertation most of the work has been done on the basis of field study. Here it is tried to evaluate the manner of performance, the historical and legendary evidences current among the village people and the social situations of these artforms of the area both in tribal and non-tribal societies. Over and above the natural contexts some artificial contexts were also held to study the proper form of some of the traditional performances. The songs or the rhymes incorporated in this study are given in the proper form of language as sung or narrated by the indigenous people to convey the flavour of the original version. In the bibliography also some related references have been added to understand the matter more clearly.

I owe a deep sense of gratitude to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayanji for writing a very valuable foreword for this book. I must also acknowledge my debt to our respected teacher Dr. B. Datta, Professor and Head of the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. It would not have been completed without his inspiring guidance. He is the source of inspiration in my life. Dr. N.C. Sarma, of the same department who is also another source of inspiration has suffered a lot in helping me in different ways. I must acknowledge his immense help. I am highly grateful to Dr. P. Das another teacher of the same department for his valuable suggestions and encouragement.

I must also offer my thanks to Dr. P.J. Mahanta of D.K. College, Mirza for his suggestions.

It would be an injustice if I do not recognize the help extended by the informants or the active bearers of the traditional performances who have helped me in the field work among whom I must recognise the help extended by Shri Bhubin Ch. Rabha of Loharghat and Shri Deben Boro of Bamunigaon whom I must offer thanks.

Dhaneswar Kalita

Chapter 4 : Forms Current Among the Tribals

of South Kamrup

(A) Performing Artforms current among the  
Patā Rāshās

(B) Performing Artforms current among the Bodos

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## 1

## Introduction

THE STUDY of folklore material has emerged in the modern world as a serious and significant academic discipline. Tremendous progress has been made by the Western folklorists in this field. Though folklore material has been incorporated in many of the works of ethnology of the tribes of India by Western ethnographers and a lot of collection has been done by Indian ethnologists, we have much to do in this respect.

It is admitted by all that most of the works of folklore before the sixties had concentrated on the text only and little was done to study the context. After sixties a new band of 'energetic younger folklorist'<sup>1</sup> came up to study about the communication process of folklore which R.M. Dorson has termed as 'contextual folklore'.<sup>2</sup> R. Abrahams, Don Ben Amos, Delt-Hymes, Alan Lomax, Alan Dundes, K.S. Goldstein and some others are pioneers among them. B. Malinowski has earlier formulated the concept of 'context of culture and context of situation' so as to find out the meaning of "primitive languages". As he had declared: "The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless".<sup>3</sup> About the importance of folklore Ben Amos and K.S. Goldstein explain: "For contextual folklore studies a text

is necessary but not sufficient documentation; they require proxemic, kinesic, paralinguistic, interactional descriptions, all of which might provide clues to the principles underlying the communicative processes of folklore and its performing attributes".<sup>4</sup>

From the above discussion it may be assumed that contextual analysis is more fruitful for the study of folklore than mere dependence on the text. Among the various elements involved in the contextual study of folklore, performance is one of the most important. Performance is the medium of communicating any thoughts or ideas. Though it is difficult to explain the term 'performance' it indicates, normally, the manner of the delivery of a folklore item. In fact every folkloric action may be said to have performance. But as an artform it is treated separately. Here it is used to indicate the manner of action presented in items such as songs, dances, plays, mimes, instrument playing, etc.

### Indian Perspective

India is regarded as the repository of folklore materials. But the exploration of those materials has not yet been done fully till now. As regards the study of folklore materials of India H.M. Nayak rightly remarks : "Indian folklore is scattered in several languages which have long histories. It invites all attempts to define and categorize its richness and complexity. For the past few years scholars, native as well as foreign, have done tremendous work in collecting this rich and varied material. But attempts to study and analyse these collected materials are of very recent origin".<sup>5</sup> What has been done so far is also regarded as descriptive in nature and much has not been done in analytical devices.<sup>6</sup> As regards the performing artforms, largely spread all over India, sporadic works have been done so far. In the context of Assam also much work has not been done regarding the different performing artforms current in different areas of Assam.

An attempt is being made here to take up for discussion the different forms of performing artforms of South Kamrup. Being limited in its academic scope the discussion will be rather descriptive than analytic.

### Area of the study

The area of my study is the South Kamrup, *i.e.* the southern part of Kamrup district which is separated by the mighty river Brahmaputra. The location of South Kamrup is as follows : Nagaon district is on the east and southern part of Goalpara on the west, Brahmaputra on the north and the hills of Meghalaya on the south.

As for the socio-cultural milieu, South Kamrup is divided into two regions by the city of Guwahati. It stands at a point and the two regions lying to the east and west of it, are more or less separated in respect of socio-cultural relations. Though our study is primarily based on the traditional performances of South Kamrup, it must be pointed out that the traditional performances more specifically connected with the socio-cultural heritage of the area are to be found only in the western region, that is between Dhupdhara on the west and Guwahati in the east. Guwahati, being a cosmopolitan city, is also excluded from the purview of the area.

Palashbari being the nerve centre of South Kamrup excluding Guwahati is known for its trade and commerce from the past. Most of the area is covered by the term "Palashbari area". The specific area chosen for a detailed field study is the Palashbari region which has its own distinctiveness in various ways and to which the present researcher has easy and direct access, being a native of the place.

Though South Kamrup is inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal population, it is primarily dominated by the non-tribals. It is seen that the border areas are covered by the tribal population excluding the riverine area of Brahmaputra. Among the tribals, the Rābhās (only the Pāti Rābhās) are largest in number, while the Bodos come next. There is a small number of Garo villages most of which have already been converted into Christianity. Interestingly enough, history indicates that South Kamrup was once dominated by the Garas and Khasi kings (local chieftains).<sup>7</sup>

Within the political boundary of South Kamrup, there are some Karbi people ; but as most of them are concentrated in the region east of Guwahati, they are excluded from the area of the study. The hill-dwelling Karbis have some business

transaction with the rest of the people in our study. There is also a Muslim population in the area. Except in their religious practices the local Muslims differ very little from their Hindu neighbours in their way of life. Moreover, there are no distinctive traditional performance current among them in this area. Rather, they had once joined in Hindu traditional performances like *ojapali*.

### **Importance of the study**

An attempt has been made in this projected work to study the various folklore items of a particular area in Assam mainly from the performance point of view. As such, the items selected for a close study include those forms in which the performance rather than verbal texts constitutes the essence or otherwise a major context. Also more emphasis is given on the performances that are primarily of a public nature than those of a private nature. Since many of those performances are connected with various public ceremonies, the study includes a description of the ceremonies involved.

From the study of the performing artforms of South Kamrup, we can draw a picture of the socio-cultural heritage of the people of this area. Most of the performing artforms of this area are connected with religion. Through these performing artforms we can go into the religious mind of the people also. These artforms have served as factors of unification and integration amongst the different ethnic groups. For example, various tribal groups have first adopted the artforms and then gradually moved towards integration and assimilation into the Hindu Aryan fold. There are some institutions that have become common to both in tribal and non-tribal community. Again, the Muslims of South Kamrup had traditionally taken part in the *ojapali* artform.

Another important factor is that the performing artforms play an important role in discharging functions like recreation, communication of knowledge and education, and some of them have a great ritualistic significance.

The performing artforms prevailing all over India represent an extremely rich and hoary tradition. But only a very small part of it has been studied so far. So there is great need to

study those art forms prevailing in every corner of India. It may help the researcher to make comparative study of the different regions as well as to formulate an all-India perspective. Assam has a rich heritage in the field of performing artforms. There are different patterns of performing artform in different areas. To get an overall picture of performing artforms of Assam we must study the material scattered in different areas. In this respect the traditional performances of South Kamrup have a special importance.

It is intended here to provide some empirical materials about this artform so that it could help in the study of traditional performances of Assam as a whole. It may also help in developing the theoretical framework for a broader study.

For the convenience of discussion the traditional performances of South Kamrup have been divided into three broad groups—(a) Major performing artforms, (b) Minor performing artforms, and (c) Tribal performing artforms.

#### **Objective of the study**

It is known to all that 70 per cent of the population of India live in villages and the villagers are treated constituting the folk. So the Indian society is, by and large, a folk society. If we are to study the Indian culture we must study folk culture where the real picture of the Indian mind can be found. In order to cultivate the habit of studying folk culture we must go to the villages and study it carefully where we could get the proper tradition of a society.

Tradition is a medium of cultural identity. But nowadays, tradition has been facing a crisis. As a researcher remarks : "Modernization or urbanization is the most dangerous enemy of tradition. Due to the onslaught of modernity the potent tradition suffers a lot".<sup>8</sup> It is almost true that modernity is destroying our culture, our tradition. Assam is very rich in traditional culture in general and particularly in the field of performing artforms also it is equally rich. But day by day, people have been turning away from them for which some of our tradition has already been lost both in the tribal and the

non-tribal societies. In our study we have taken up some of our traditional performances that have almost reached a dying stage. I feel it necessary to study and analyse such artforms as are endangered of being extinct. So far no such attempt has been made for the rescue and restoration of such artforms of this area.

Studies like this may shed light on the folk elite continuum and on the concept of Desi and Margi polarities.

### Methodology

The area under study is my native place. I have been personally taking part in some of these artforms since my childhood days. The rest of the material with which I was not directly involved had also been witnessed by me on different occasions. The tribal performing artforms had also been familiar since our childhood days. So, somehow, I had already the rudimentary ideas about these artforms. However, for the purpose of this study, I collected data through fieldwork. Most of the data were collected through interview from different active and passive bearers. I could collect data from natural context as has been held in different religio-cultural functions. Some of the data of the *Mare-gan* current among the Pāti Rābhās were collected through artificial context also. Field equipment like the camera and the tape-recorder were also utilised.

In addition to the observation and interview methods, I have utilised library books for reference. The local journals and magazines also helped me considerably in collecting the necessary material.

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