

“Oja-Paali”: The Mirror to Ancient Assamese Folklore

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Introduction

“Ojapali” is an ancient musical art of Assam, which consists of song, drama and dance. Here the *Oja* (the lead artist) performs the art form with the help of some *Palis* (team of performers). The head of the *palis* is called *Dianapali*. The performance is based on tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Padmapurana etc. The songs are based on raga which is similar with the *Chajya Pada* (Buddhist mystical poems from the tantric tradition in Kalinga). At a time “Oja-pali” was the main source of entertainment in different ceremonial functions and festivals of lower Assam. The *Oja* and *Palis* must be expert in entertaining the audience and sometimes they even involve the audience to make the performance more interesting. Performers infuse “Hara-Gauri” (Lord Shiva and Parvati) as common Assamese couple; who work at paddy fields, weave clothes, go to river to bring drinking water etc. The only instrument played in “Ojapali” is *khutital* (palm sized cymbal).

The music of “OjaPali” has a raga system of clear classical orientation and the *Vaishnava* heritage. The classification of ‘*Savaras*’ by “Oja-Palis” into ‘*Ghora*’, *Mantra* and *Tara* corresponds to the Indian classification of ‘*Udara*’, ‘*Mudra*’ and ‘*Tar*’.

There is a typical pattern of dressing for the *Ojas* as well. He has to wear a *pag-jama* or a *ghuri*, along with bangles, *unguthi* (ring) and *nupur* and has to tie a *tangali* (a cloth tied around the waist). The performers wear long sleeved white gowns and silver jewelry.

There are three types of “Oja-Pali”:

1. *Vyah Goa Oja*,
2. *Sukananni Oja* or *Maroi Goa Oja* and
3. *Ramayani Oja*.

History

This musical form originates in the 12th-13th century or may be prehistoric. Rituals followed by the people of ancient Assam are reflected in songs, ballads of “Oja-Pali”. Myths claim that “Ojapali” was brought directly from heaven by third Pandava “Arjuna”.

Language

The language that is used in Oja-Pali is ancient Assamese. The beginning songs are sung in Sanskrit. Sometimes dialects of locality of Assam are also used.

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