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## Folk theatre: The Kushan Gaan of North East

**Dr. Jayanta Kumar Barman**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Music  
Sikkim University

### Abstract

In the world India stands today like a heritage country and keeping with different type of culture and custom. Most of the ritual culture is discovered in North East India. Today traditional culture including folk art and art forms has been extinct day by day. The NE region has over 2000 km of border with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow 20 km wide corridor of land. The festivals and celebrations in the North-eastern states of India are a colorful reflection of the people and their lives. North East India comprises of eight states commonly known they are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.

Indian folk theatre is a mixture of song, dance and dialogue. There are many different kinds of Indian folk theatre performances in India, but many of these performances are dying out because of the popularity of Bollywood movies. Indian folk theatre varies from region to region. Each Indian folk theatre performance is a unique reflection of the regional culture, its values, and its peoples. Some forms of Indian folk theatre is still performed today, but only on special occasions in some rural villages in India. Theatre in India has encompassed all the other forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentation: literature, mime, music, dance, movement, painting, sculpture and architecture – all mixed into one and being called ‘Natya’ or Theatre in English.

The Kushan pala is an open air folk drama in North East India, where song, dance, Narrative and dialogue come together. This ancient form traditionally draws its theme from the Ramayana, narrations of which had become very popular in the region about 500 years ago. The Rajbangsi's believe that the origin of the word Kushan is from Kush, or straw, that was brought to life, by sage Valmiki, in the form of the second son of Ram. It is held that Kush along with his brother Lav, would wonder around singing ballads from the Ramayan, as thought by their Guru, the sage Valmiki, with Kush playing the Byana. This they believe is the reason why the Byana has been traditionally used as an accompaniment for Kushan Gaan, being the instrument held (andplayed) by the principle story teller or Gidal.

**Keyword: North East, Folk theatre, Kushan Gaan**

### Introduction

The kusan is a dramatic presentation of Ramayana folk theatre that was once found in many parts of North Bengal and Lower Assam in the part of North East India, the former greater Rangpur district of Bangladesh.

There is a no authorized written format of Kushan Gaan today, Main singer (Mool) expressed the story in own capacity. However today, it is extremely rare.

The kusan involves, singing, recitation of dialogue, acting, dancing, and musical accompaniment. The themes are essentially religious in nature and revolve around portions of Ram's sons Kush and Lob in the Ramayan. It's an Oral Tradition probably influenced by Bangla Kritibasi Ramayan and used the local language in the time dialogue and song. But its varied region to region.

According to oral belief, it seems that one day Sheeta's son Lob was missing. Sheeta was in great distress and Balmeeki Muni heard of her problems. Sheeta told Balmeeki that she did not know how to tell Shri Ram Chandra that their son was missing. When Balmeeki heard of Sheeta's dilemma, he told her to "bring some straw" (Kush = "hay" or "straw", "aan"= "bring"). When Balmeeki obtained the straw, he fashioned it into the form resembling the missing son Lob, and infused it with life. After some time, the missing son Lob returned, and from that day forward Sheeta had two sons, Lob and Kush. According to this etymology, "Kushan" means "bring straw". There is different story concerning the origin of the term. According to other people the word "kushan" means "To wipe away evil" ("ku"= evil, "shan"= "to clean by wiping"). This is supposedly derived from the concept of destroying injustice, which is a consistent theme of the kushan theatre.

### North East

The North East is a true frontier region. It has over 2000 km of border with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow 20 km wide corridor of land. One of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, each state has its distinct cultures and traditions.

From times immemorial, India's North East has been the meeting point of many communities, faiths and cultures. A place renowned for its magical beauty and bewildering diversity, North East India is the home for more than 166 separate tribes speaking a wide range of languages. Some groups have migrated over the centuries from places as far as South East Asia; they retain their cultural traditions and values but are beginning to adapt to contemporary lifestyles. Its jungles are dense, its rivers powerful and rain, and thunderstorms sweep across the hills, valleys and plains during the annual monsoons.

The lushness of its landscape, the range of communities and geographical and ecological diversity makes the North East quite different from other parts of the subcontinent. In winters, mist carpets the valleys but swirls around the traveller in hills during summer rains, thus creating an enchanting and romantic atmosphere. The region has borders with Myanmar Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The festivals and celebrations in the North- eastern states of India are a colorful reflection of the people and their lives. Throughout the year, different people celebrate festivals with lot of fanfare in different ways, most of them centering on their modes of living and livelihood.

North East India comprises of seven states commonly known as the "**Seven Sisters**". They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

Each state is a traveller's paradise, with picturesque hills and green meadows which shelters thousands of species of flora and fauna. In addition, the states provide scope for angling, boating, rafting, trekking and hiking. Besides, there are a number of wild life sanctuaries and national parks where rare animals, birds and plants which will surely provide fascinating insight to the visitors.



### Definition of some performers of Kushan Gaan

**Geedal or Mool:** The main performer known as the "Geedal" or "Mool" in hand the Byana is the main single string instrument. The geedal gives the narration in Bengali or in Kamatapuri or Rajbangsi as there were the areas covered by the historical state of Kamatapuri; But Bengali is the official language of both Bangladesh and the North East Indian state of West Bengal.

**Daina Pali :** The supporting singer-cum-actors are known as "Pali" or 'Daina pali'. The Daina pali is the Khapi player. Secondary Geedal the Doaree, who gives almost the same narration, but instead of a more standard Bengali (Bangla Bhasha), he translates it into a local vernacular dialect of Rangpuri or Rajbongshi. Doary is also take comedian part and explainer of some question of the theatre.

**Baowa Pali :** Baowa pali are the supporting singer who helps Doyari when he is not able to explain with singing properly. That means Doyari may be a good actor cum comedian, but may not be a singer as Gidal.

**Daina Baain and Baowa Baain :** The supporting musicians are known as the "Baain". They are named according to their instrument; like "Banshial" is the (bansuri) player; "Khuli" is the khol players (Daaina and Baowa) ; "Juridar" are the Mondira or Khaapi players and the Sarinda player.

**Chokra or Chhukri:** Chokra or Chhukri leads the important parts of the Kushan Gaan. Earlier time the female was not permitted to perform in theatre for dance, song or acting. So the Male person use to make up like a female. They were performed in type of light dance with popular folk song for the entertainment of the audience. Sometimes they were presented dances in the interval time of the theatre. The Chokra maintained his life style as female and keep long hair like a lady.





### Definition of some theatric words of Kushan Gaan

**Gaan** : Songs are classified as Nachari, Dhooya, Poyaar, and Khosha. Nachari gives dialogue and Narration; The Dhooya are performed supporting singers with popular folk songs that called Khosa Gaan, which are may not related to the story of theatre . The Poyaar are the musical themes of the performance, while the Khosha are comical riddles.

**Bandona** (invocation): The bandona is a prayer in the form of a song such bondonas may be in praise of gods, saints, or gurus (either spiritual or artistic). Like Debi Shoroshshoti Bondona , Debi Monosha Bondona (in folk-theatre Poddopuran only), Dasdikbondona (Invocation of the blessings of the cardinal directions, east, south, west, and north), Guru Bondona, etc. Each bandonais usually four to five minutes long. Everyone in the group participates in this; but there is no dance with bondona.

**Nachari** - This is a type song or a number of songs, whose lyrics describe the forthcoming *pala* (play). These are dialogues with acting in front of the audience. All the group members participate in this, with a full accompaniment of dance, music, etc. It lasts about five to six minutes. The musical structure is as of *vaoaiya* which is a very common folksong in this area.

**Palar kotha (dialogues and narration)** - These are a few lines of the dialogue which are delivered by the *geedal* in somewhat standard Bengali; the *dohar* quickly repeats/and elaborates in the local dialect. In this case it was Rangpuri or Rajbongshi. This is necessary because the locals do not understand standard Bengali very well. This continues for about 10-12 minutes. There is also acting with this. At times, one or two members of the *paiil* join in for dialogue and acting. There is no dance accompaniment, but there is music.

**Poyaar** - The *poyaar* is generally three to four lines, but sometimes as many as eight lines, of a popular folk song *vaoaiya*. The themes of which fit with the interludes of the preceding dialogue. It lasts about 10-12 minutes. All the members of the group participate. There is also dance and musical accompaniment. Generally the *chokra* do not sing because they are busy dancing. These folk dances demand strength in the knees as *chokras* (i.e., young boy dancers) are required to rise vigorously on the "*shom*" (i.e., *sam* or first beat of the cycle). At times three or four subsequent risings are required when a "*tehai*" (i.e., *tihai* or a triadic rhythmic device) is given with the *khol*(i.e., folk drum).

The *gach poyaar* is particularly interesting; It may be thought of as a theme. These are

fundamental *poyaars* made at the time script is first created. "*gach*" in Bengali means "tree", but in this context it means "original" or "fundamental".

One should note that the term *poyaar* in the context of folk theatre does not mean the same as it does in mainstream literary circles. Typically a *poyaar* is Bengali measure of verse consisting of two lines, each of which is 14 syllables. However the *poyaar* in the folk theatre of Dhorla River basin, area does not adhere to this structure.

**Dhooya** - These are also a few lines of any very popular *vaoaiya/chootka*, but not related to the theme of the play. All the members participate in this. The music of this is generally in a 3/4 time signature ("*druto*" or fast *dadra* *tal*).

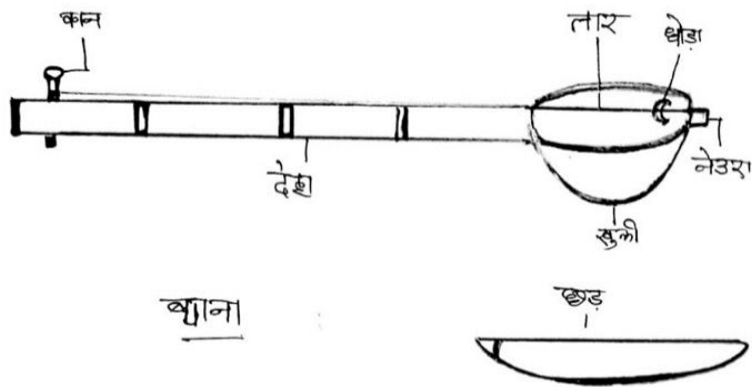
**Khosha** - This is a short comedy drama, which need not directly related to the story of the play. It generally lasts for 20-30 minutes. It is performed by *geedal*, *dohar*, and one or two of the *paiil*. There is no dancing in this, but there is musical accompaniment. Very often this comedy takes the form of a riddle. *Khosha* was extremely important in the old days when there used to be competitions (*norok*). It is considered to be the most interesting and most attractive portion of the performance.

**Ending** - In one night a play is performed for 4-8 hours. It is ended by singing a *dhooya*; however before ending, the *geedal* lets the audience know that it is finished and invites the audience for future performances.



### Musical instruments

There are a number of instruments which may be used in the kushan. Byana is the main and most important one string instrument in the Kushan Gaan . Beside from the Byana, there is a bowed instrument known as Sharinda (i.e.saringda). Over the years, this has come to be replaced with the violin or the harmonium; however the use of these Western instruments is not traditional. Arbanshi (i.e., bansuri or bamboo flute) is also commonly employed. There are also a number of percussion instruments used as well; principal among these are the akhrai (e.g., dholak), khol, mondira (i.e., manjira), and khapi (larger manjira).



*The Byana ( A main musical instrument for Kushan Gaan)*

### **The costume and ornamentation of artist**

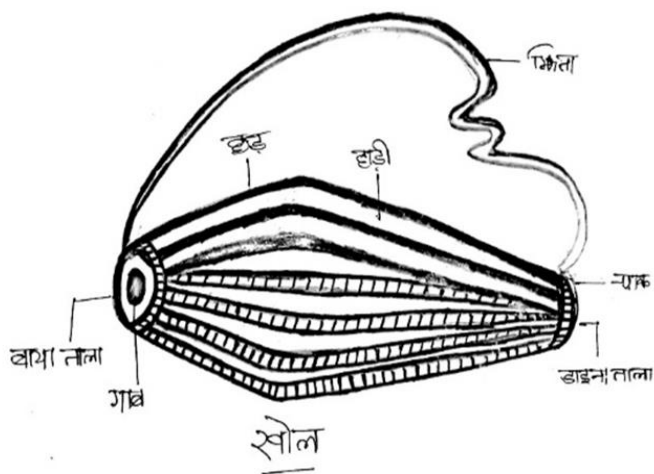
**Mool gidal:** Dhuti and Fatua in cotton. Gaamchha over the neck and Byana in hand.

**Doyari:** Costume will be a diffective shirt, Dhuti and the Gaamcha over the head.

**Chhukri or Chhokra:** Sharee, Odnaa . A man will take the Make up like a woman.

**Daina pali:** As per the character of the story. If it will “Lakkhoner Soktishel” then Costume needed of Raban, Mandadori, Hanuman, Lakkhan, Ram, Sita etc.

**Bain and chorus singers:** Dhuti, Genji and Gaamchha.



*The Khol ( A percussion instrument used in Kushan Gaan)*

## The steps of Theatre

### First step

Before starts the theatre Kirtan has been made for protection of any disturbance in the Basaghar or Sajghar by the Gidaal and Bain. There will be a 'Ghat' (pot of soil) as simble of God. The applications of these type of theatre divided in five way, like Asor Boisisto(The structure of choreography) Alor Boishiisto( Light management), Songeet o Nritya (Song and Dance) and Avinoy Kala(Dramatic expression).

### Second Step

Secondly all the the artist make a round shape on the open field in the house. Don't need any Manch (Stage). Artists and audience enjoyed in same platform. At first the Bain, Daina pali and Harmoni player start the rhythmic folk orchestration. Only music will be there for call and gathering of audience. Khol player make a queue for call the Gidal. He comes from Basaghar or Sajghar.

### Third Step

Gidal come and regard to all the audience, musicians, musical instruments and Gods. Then will start Swaraswati Bandana with musical instruments, no song will be there.

### Forth Step

After Pranam Gidal make a sloke in Sanskrit and start Raghu Bandana in sitting position, which called Basa Bandana.....

"Ram eso he.....O Bharosa....."

After again namaskar and will start Khara bandana in standing. Like.....

"Saman Raman Raban Raja....."

### Fifth Step

Start Poyaar with Bhajan, like

"Hori korilek lila chamotkar....."

### Sixth Step

Adesh Grohan parba (Permission from audience to start pala) . Gidal surrender here in from of audience that he know few pala ,not more than , and apply to audience which pala is permissible for theatre today.



## Seventh Step

Announced main pala by Mool as “Laxmaner Shaktisel”.

*“Bandonar Katha Bhair Chharan Diya Jai  
Lakkhoner Suktisel Pala Savate Janai”*

- Starts “Fyasa” with dance and song , in the end will be “Bhangni” (Explanation) of dance.
- Gidal make “Daksur” (the intro of upcoming parts) with Chhanda(Rhythm). Like – “Gagane hoilek bela ditio prohor

*“Bosiya montrona kore jato nishachor  
Sare sare bosiya jukti koren Rakkhos  
Jaite Raboner agot na kore sahos” .....*

Now “Mool’ starts the main story with the help of ‘Doary’, who is present as an actor as comedian, actor and the second singer of theatre. He honored to Mool as ‘Guru’. He through different type of question including Avinay or Song about ‘Dehatawa’ (Spiritually) to the Mool. And Mool Geedal explained the answer and along with story of theatre with his skill and capacity for the audience dramatically. When comes new character in second step of theatre then Doary become as a same character. Like When the Mool geedal take the role as ‘Raban’ and called ‘Mandadory’ (“Lakkhoner suktisel pala”)

*“Kothay Rani Mandadory, Aisen Twara Kori” .....*

( Oh, Mandadory where are you, please come ) in opposite site the Doary takes part as comedy and do something funny, and he also take part of Mandadory and he replied .....

*“Provu Kyane Dyakan Mok “ .....*  
(The lord, why you called me)

## Eighth Step

The Khosa Gaan is perform sometime in the gap (Interval) of Pala with the dance of Chhokra or Chhukri by some popular Chhatka (First beat) local folk song for entertainment of audience to release the bareness. Khosa song may not be Like.....

*“Bhal Koriya Bajan Re Dhakua  
Sundori Kamola Naache” .....*

The Khosa gaan may not related to the pala. But the rhythm and tune would be connectable to next performance.

## Ninth Step

Sometimes Mass communication and Mass reporting is the main part of pala. The theatre gives some social massage, social education for the mass through the folk theatre. But it also relates to the pala by Doyari or Mool through some technics and with the help of some local language, joyful words and folk tales also. In time being the story continue to coming end the pala with the folk orchestration along with dance in high tempo and finish after 4 to 8 hrs.



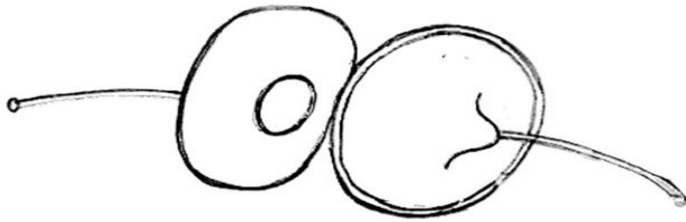
## Tenth Step

In the end again permission is needed from the audience to finish the theatre with pardon.

*“Das chakro Bhagoban kori nibedan*

*Lokkhoner shoktosel pala kori somapon”*

*Poyaar: any popular folk song with dance and become end.*



कर्ताक / जुरी

*The Kartal / Khapi / Juri ( The solid musical instrument used in Kushan Gaan)*

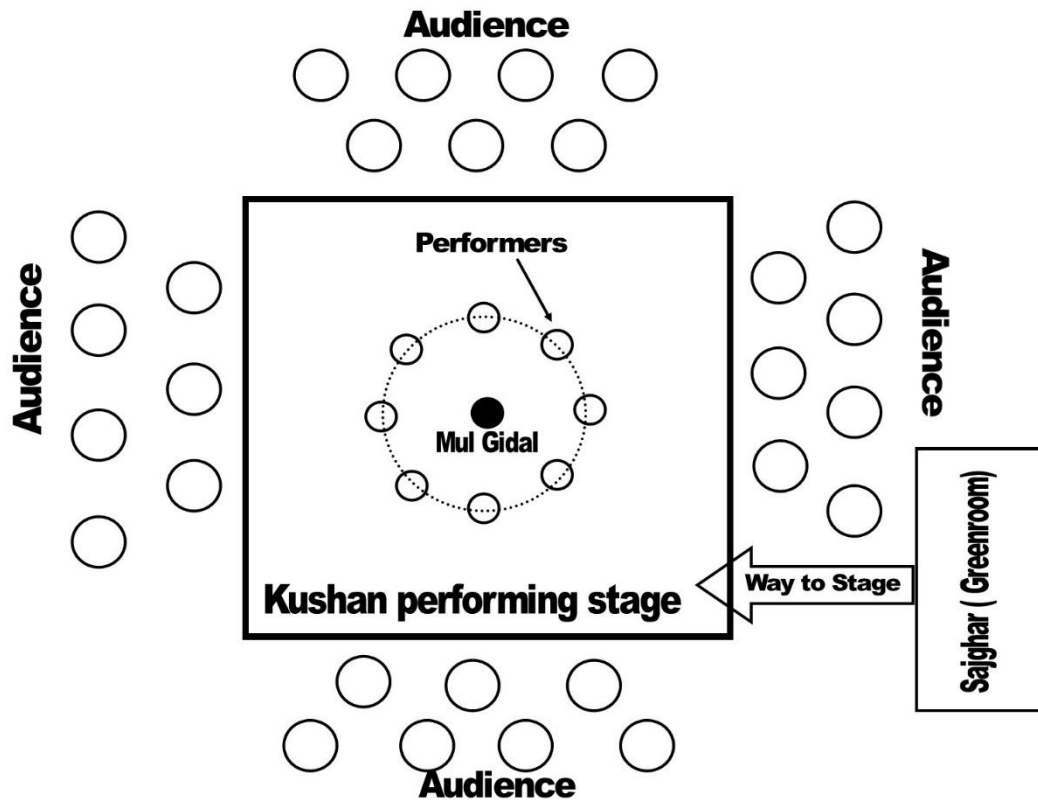
## Some of Gidal (“Kushani”)

**“Naren Kusani”** [Naren Roy]-Chakchaka, Coochbehar, North Bengal [WB]. He is the well-known person of kusan gaan. Now a day he sing very well and he maintain the originality of the song of kusan gaan and he was the Mool gidaal of kusan gaan at the time of very famous gidaal[singer]late “Lalit kusani”. And one of the time he was the group leader of full group of kusan gaan danc drama. Now he is working in a privet firm as a labor.

**“Bansi Gidaal”**- Tufanganj, Coochbehar, North Bengal,[WB] His name is the famous as Kusani. Bansi Gidaal code and name is the identity of him. He continuing the kusan gaan with his big group today.

**“Bhuban Roy Kushani”** – Vill: Baniyamari part IV . Po Sahebganj, Ps Golakganj, Dist-Dhubri, Assam. Pin-783331. He is the most famous kushani from lower part of Assam. He developed a group of Kushan Gaan who are performed in all over India with good costumed and well decorated with well presentation. He developed the story of kushan through notation (Structure) for bol of khol, dhol. Choreographs the dance maintaining traditional mudra(Method) or steps. He trained new generation for avoid extinction of this art form.

## Rural performing stage for Kushan Gaan



### Conclusion

In globalization we are also be progressive in our life style or can use modern technology for development of our thinking more and more ,but we are also be keep our origin in our mind our culture and custom. The Kushan art form has been extinct from our society very fastly. Kushan theatre gives some knowledge and massage to our society, its do mature the communication between mass. It's make the cultural mind. So it is necessary to keep in our region, society and also in community through some programe, initiated by Govt. or non govt. organization.

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