



# Kushan-gan: A Traditional Performing Art Form of Assam

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## Abstract:

Assam is a land of rich cultural practices, consisting of various folk and traditional drama and dance forms. *Kushan-gan* is a popular folk theatre of Goalpara region of Assam comprising of music, dance and acting. It is presented by semi-professional troupes consisting of around fifteen to twenty members. The theme extracted for the performance are basically from the epic Ramayana and has a religious appeal. *Kushan-gan* is also popularly known as *Raban-gan* or *Bena-gan*.

Key-words: Kushan-gan, Ramayana, bena-gan.

**Introduction:** The Study focusses on one of the traditional performing art of Assam, Kushan gan which is generally practiced in the Goalpara district. It is a popular folk-play. The origin of the term Kushan has been put forwarded by different scholars. It is said that the word '*Kusha*' is derived from Kusha, name of one of the sons of Rama who was expert in singing and was trained under Valmiki. It is a group performance of men consisting of both old and young. The performers in the troupe are divided into four main divisions-*mul* or *gital*, *dohari* or *dowari*, *pail*, *chengra* and *bain*. The *mul* or *gital* is the leading singer or expert, stage manager and director of the troupe. He performs by carrying a small one-stringed instrument known as *ben* and hence *Kushan-gan* is also called as *ben-gan*. Next to the *mul*, the *dowari* or *dohari*, is the head assistant and the pails are his assistants. *Chengra* means boy in the local dialect and they play the most attractive role. There are four to five boys dressed up in female costume and their main function is to dance. *Bain* are the instrument players that plays the *Khol*. It is generally organized on a puja or other occasion that starts in the evening and continues throughout the night.

**Objectives:** The proposed paper aims to study the following objectives:

- i. To study the origin and the mode of presentation of *Kushan-gan*.
- ii. To study the continuity and changes in the presentation style of *Kushan-gan*.

**Methodology and area of the study:** In this study the primary datas are collected through field work. The area for the field work is purposely selected in Goalpara district of Assam. The secondary sources are comprised of books, journals, audios and videos.

**Sources of the play:** The theme of a *Kushan* play are generally extracted from the epic Ramayana. And hence it is a Ramayana based performance. The stories of *Harischandra*, *Ravan badh*, *Mohiravan badh* among others are shown in a *Kushan* performance.

**Language:** The language used in a *Kushan* performance is a mixture of Bengali and local dialects. Generally the narrative pieces are in Bengali and local language and the comic scenes are delivered in local language.

### Performers of the play:

1. *Mul* or *gidal* or *gital*- The word '*mul*' means 'main'. Hence, the leading singer or the chief singer is known as *mul*. He is the manager, director and the principal singer of the troupe. The function of the *mul* is similar to that of the *oja* of *ojapali*. The word *gital* or *gidal* generally designates an expert singer. The *gital* or *gidal* should not only be an expert singer, but he should also be expert in dancing and *bena* playing.

The *mul* or the *gital* in a *Kushan* play, carries a small one-stringed instrument called *bena*. The *bena* playing is a distinguishing characteristics of *Kushan* play and hence it is also sometimes known as *Bena-gan*. When the *gital* establishes himself as an expert singer of *Kushan* play, he earns the title of *Kushani*. The function of the *mul* is similar to the *mul* of *Bhari-gan* and also the *Sutradhar* of *Ankia Bhaona*.

2. *Dohari* or *dowari*: Next to the *mul* the second important performer is known as the *Dowari* or *dohari*. He is the chief assistant or the principal assistant of the *mul* or the *gidal*. According to the Folklorist N.C. Sharma, the word *dohari* has been derived from the hindi term '*dohar*' or *dohra*, which means double. The *dohari* repeats the refrain which is narrated by the *oja*. A *dohari* must be expert in both singing and dancing. Besides, the *dowari* helps the *mul* in conducting dramatic dialogues, and also creates a humorous environment. The most important quality of a *dohari* is his capacity to make people laugh by delivering witty dialogues.
3. *Pail* or *Pali*: The *palis* are the assistant singers of a *Kushan* play. There must be at least five to six *palis* in a *Kushan* play. The main function of the *pali* is to repeat the refrain and support the choral singing, by putting syllables such as ha, a etc. at the end of every refrain. The *palis* should not only be expert in singing and dancing but should also be good in acting, because in a *Kushan* play, the story is acted by the *palis*. The chief among the *pali* is known as *Daina pali*. The function of *Daina pali* of *Kushan gan* is similar to that of *Ojapali*.
4. *Chengra* or *chokra*: Like the *palis*, the *chengras* are also an important part of a *Kushan* play. The *chengra* in the local dialect means boys. In a *Kushan* play there must be at least four to five boys dressed in female attire. They take the role of females and dances in graceful movements. Though they take part in singing and acting, their chief function is to dance and they dances throughout the whole performances. The age of the boys must be in between 12 to 14 years.
5. *Bayan* or *Bain*: The musical instrument player in a *Kushan gan* performance is known as – *bain* or *bayan*. The main instrument used in *Kushan* performance is *Khol*. Hence there must be two *Khol* players. *Mridang* is also an important musical instrument of a *Kushan* play. Like the *Khol* player there must also be two *mridang* players. *Bena*, which is played by the *mul* or the *gital* is a string instrument that accompanies the *bain* group. To keep the rhythm of the *geet* or *gan*, the *bain* group also uses cymbals. The cymbals are known as *mandira* or *juri*. The cymbals are generally played among the *palis*.
6. Actors or *Bawriya*: The *Palis* takes the role or characters of a *Kushan* play. In times of necessity the *mul* or the *gidal* also takes part in acting. The actors of a *Kushan* play are known as *Bhawriyas*, they must be expert in singing, acting and dancing.

**The Stage:** A *Kushan* play usually takes place in an open space, covered with *pandal*. A circular space is kept known as *Asar*, where the *bains* or *bayans* sit with their musical instruments. Again when a performer has no particular role to play, he takes his sit near the *bain* and waits for his turn. The performance takes place in the open space, next to the musicians. The audience takes the place all around the *asar* maintaining a space for the performance. A small way is kept for the entry and exit of the performers like other dramatic performance, there is also the arrangement of green-room for the actors to change their costumes and make-up.

**Musical Instruments:** The musical instruments used in a *Kushan* play are *Khol* and *Mridanga*. *Ghana vadya* such as *tal* is used. *Tata vadya* such as *bena* or *dotara* is an important musical instrument of *Kushan gan*. Along with the *ghana vadya*, *sushira vadya* such as *mukh basi*, *aar basi* are also used in *Kushan* performance.

**The Stage of a Kushan play:** A *Kushan* play usually takes place in an open space covered with *pandal*. A circular space is kept for the performance known as *asar*, where the *bains* or the *bayans* take their place with their musical instruments. When a performer has no particular role to play, he takes his sit near the *bayans*. The performance takes place in the open space, next to the musicians. The audience sit all around the *asar* maintaining a space for the performance. A small way is kept for the entry and exit of the

performers. Like other dramatic performances, the Kushan play also has the arrangement of green-room for changing their costumes and make-up known as *cho-ghar*.

**Presentation Style:** The presentation style or the performance style of a Kushan play begins with *prastavana*. In *prastava*, the *gidal* or the *mul*, the *dohari*, the *palis*, the *bains* and the actors takes their sit at the middle of the *asar* after entering the performance stage. In this stage, the *Khol* players plays the *Khol* with various rhythmic syllables and hence this stage is also known as *Khol bon*. The *bena*, *dotara*, *sarinda* and *basi* also accompanies the *Khol* at this stage. Followed by the *Kholbon*, the next stage of a Kushan play is the *Vandana*. They sing various types of *Vandana* such as- *Saraswati Vandana*, *ram Vandana* among others. The *mul* starts the *Vandana* and the *palis* narrates and repeats the same at the tune of the *Khol*, *bena*, *dotara* and *bahi*. Along with the music and the recitation of the *Vandana*, the *pali*, *dohari*, actors and the *chengras* sings and dances to the *padas*. After the *Vandana* the next stage is the main story of the play. The main story starts at the narration of the *gidal* and the *dohari*. At the very beginning of the play the *gidal* apologize if there would be any kind of mistakes while performing. At the next stage the actors among the *palis* takes the role of *Ram*, *Bibhishan*, *Ravan*, *Lakshman* etc and the story begins.

The story of the play proceeds through the singing of narrative songs which continues with short interludes or breaks. These short breaks are meant for short explanatory dialogues between the *mul* and the *dowari* or short piece of introduction for a song or a dance number. These kind of short explanatory dialogues are known as '*bhangtidewa*'. There are also dramatic breaks in between long narrative stories, where the *dowari* generally adds a comic flavour to it. These breaks are known as *ghats*. The *mul*, *dainapali* and also the *chengras* takes part in singing traditional songs such as- *bhawaiya*, *khemta*, *chotka*, *biyagit* etc. They also creates humorous environment with their wicked dance movements at the tune of the musical instruments and song. These kinds of humorous acts are known as '*Sonk*' or '*Fyasa*.'

**Costume of the Performers:** The Kushan performers wear very simple dress such *dhoti* upto the knee length and *shirt* or *kurta*. They also put a piece of cloth called *gamcha* around their neck. The *chengras* dressed in female attire such as *sarees* and they also put on ornaments.

**Conclusion:** Kushan-gan is a ritualistic art form and is performed mostly in religious occasions such as *Durga puja* etc. It is also performed for the entertainment of the people. Kushan-gan is an age old traditional folk drama and is a combination of *git*, *nriya*, *vadya* and *abhinaya*. Kushangan is also known as *Kushan pala*. *Pala* means the *nat* or the *story*. According to some scholars there was no *abhinaya* or *bhaw* in *Kushan-gan*, only in the later years the concept of *story* is added to it. The stories of the *Kushan* play was in oral tradition and the language was mostly *Rajbangshi*. But due to its lack of written document, people began to forget the oral stories of *Kushan-gan*. Later on, some experts added the stories of *Kritibasak Ramayana* to the oral stories and the language became a mixture of *Bengali* and *Assamese*. It is said that *Kushan-gan* follows the *Bengali* version of *Ramayana* written by *Kritivasa Ojha*. The *padas* that are sang in the interval of the stories are based on the local language and now a days, it is known as *Rajbangshi*. The characteristics of simplicity is found in the theme, language and production of the play. Changing state is one of the characteristics of *Kushan-gan*. According to the demand and situation of the society, the themes of *Kushan-gan* varies. The main aim of *Kushan-gan* is to spread mass education and spiritual education among the common people.

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