



FOLK THEATRE OF THE RABHAS IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BHARIGAAN

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Introduction :

North East India is a land of many different tribes community with diverse ethnic origins. As a part of North East India Assam is also the inhabitant many tribes and non-tribes who are living together. The Rabha community of Assam is one of the major tribal communities of the North Eastern region of India. One of the nine scheduled Tribes in the plains districts of Assam, the Rabhas are widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal, Manipur etc. As per 1971 Census, they constitute 8.63% of the total plains tribal population of Assam and 0.63% of the total State population. Their rate of literacy is 22.24% according to the same census and rank fourth among the scheduled tribes of Assam Plains.¹ Linguistically the Rabha belongs to the Bodo sub-group under the Assam-Burmese group of the Tibeto – Burman stock.² From the point of ethnic affinities they resemble the characteristics of the Mongoloid race, which was priorly known as ‘Kirata’ i.e. the Indo-Mongoloids.³ In Assam there are sub-clans among the Rabha tribes i.e. Rangdani Rabha, Pati Rabha, Maitari Rabha, Bitalia Rabha, Dahori Rabha, Changa Rabha, Kocha Rabha etc.⁴ Out of the clans the pati Rabhas had given up own language, culture and mingled into the culture heritage of Assamese race. The language spoken by the Rabhas are called Rabha language. The language speaking sub-groups of the Rabhas i.e. Rongdan, Maitori and

Kocha speak their own respective dialects of Rabha among themselves in their day to day life. But they can also communicate with other neighbouring people like Assamese and Bengali speakers with a peculiar form of Assamese or Bengali pidgin. On the other hand Pati, Dahori, Hana, Bitolia and Totola sub-groups, who have lost their own Rabha language, are well versed in Assamese or Bengali creole rather than standard Assamese or Bengali.⁵ The majority of the Rabha people reside in the village or the remote areas. The main occupation of the Rabhas in general is agriculture. The staple food of the Rabhas is rice. They are omnivorous. They prefer dried powdered fish, meat of pig, goat, hen, duck, pigeon etc. They also like to eat various kinds of vegetables. Mod / Sako i.e. rice-beer is their pure favourite beverage. The Rabhas were originally a matriarchal tribe. Due to the impact of Hinduism they have abandoned this practice and have accepted the patriarchal tradition.⁶ They are rich in their own ethnic culture. They celebrate different festivals like agricultural or seasonal festivals, calendaric festivals, limited participation festivals, rites of passage etc. Among these Baikho, Khokci or Daduri worship, Hachang worship, Fire worship, Runtuk Bachek worship, Grimbuda worship, Langa-burha worship, Barmani worship and so forth. Singing and dancing as well as playing on various musical instruments are essential in the contexts of these festivals. The Rabhas in general celebrate various rites of passage connected with birth, marriage and death. The Rabhas are the follower of animism and their supreme God is Rishi i.e. Shiva. The Rabhas have different folk art or folk theatre form like – Bharigaan, Hanaghora, Barmani puja, pauradeo puja, Tukuri puja etc. Besides these artform there are some different folk-dance performance also like – Sather dance, Hamzar dance, Fire dance, Hanaghora dance etc. But at present these art forms have many change ed and transformed to a different form. Among the different artform ‘Bharigaan’ is one of the most popular folk artform among the Rabhas of Kamrup and Goalpara district of Assam, India. In this study attempts are made to discuss about popular folk drama performed mainly by Pati Rabhas of Goalpara and Kamrup district of Assam, India.

Title of the article : The title of the research article is- FOLK-THEATRE OF THE RABHAS IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BHARIGAAN.

Aim and objective of the study : The main aim and objective of the research paper is to study about the Bharigaan folk theatre among the Pati Rabhas of Goalpara and Kamrup district of Assam, India. Following are the aim and objective of the study-

1. To study the various aspects of Bharigaan and the present status of the theatrical performance.
2. To study the causes of declining trend of the Bharigaan performance.
3. Measure for promotion and preservation of Bharigaan.
4. To encourage the new generation for involvement in revitalizing this type of traditional folk theatre.

Methodology : In this research work is based on both primary and secondary source. Effort is made to collect all the relevant data through the observation and interview method. As it is impossible to cover all the teams and all the particular areas, we try to cover only two areas and two Bharigaan teams for collection of field related data. These two areas and teams are –Kothakuthi Hirapara Bharigaan team, Kothakuthi, Goalpara, Assam, India and Bondapara Bharigaan team, Bondapara, south Kamrup, Assam, India. We collected secondary data from Articles published in different magazines, books and early research works. The study is based on analytical method.

Review of literature : Various available literary writings on the concerned topic are reviewed. In fact, the literature related to Bharigaan of Rabha's is not so vast. The subject matter of Bharigaan is epic. The main source of Bharigaan composition is the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. Regarding Bharigaan what the undersigned say-

1. Rajen Rabha : In the preface, Ghatothkoch Badh, ed., Rajen Rabha mentions the term Bharigaan.
2. Dr. Nabin Chandra Sharma: In his book, Bharatar Uttar purbanchalar paribeshya kala, he writes about Bharigaan in few pages and describes it with some examples.
3. Dr. Upen Rabha Hakasam: In his book, Rabha- Lokasanskriti, he writes a few pages about Bharigaan.
4. Dr. Lalit ch. Rabha : Bhaona Sanskriti: In title: Loko Natyanusthan Bharigaan Aru Asomar Natyakola: Sristir pora Bartomanoloi, he writes on Bharigaan describing its traditional wave among pati Rabhas.
5. Dr. Paramananda Rajbongshi: In his book, Folk theater of Assam and Khulia Bhauriya, he writes a brief description on Bharigaan as a folk theatre of Assam.
6. Bhubin Rabha : In his book, Rabha janajati aru Sanskritir Abhash, he writes on Bharigaan in a few pages.
7. M.G. Singha : In his book, Asamar paribeshya kala : Bharigan, he writes about the origin and development of Bharigaan.
8. Dr. Upendrajit Sarma : In his book, Paschim Asomar Lokonatyia, the writer deals in Bharigan /Bhaugaan theatre tradition of West Assam. Thus we see that, some literature is available on Bharigaan though not satisfactorily.

Discussion: Eminent Folklorists R.M.Dorson for study of folk culture as well as folklife has classified it in his book titled –“Folklore and Folklife : An Introduction” into four pronged aspects- Oral literature or Verbal Art; Physical folklore or Material culture; Social folk customs and Folk performing Arts.⁷

Folk performing arts is the forth sector of Folk Culture.Folk performing arts may be divided three sub groups-Folk drama, Folk music and Folk dance. R.M.Dorson defines folk performing art as-“ A forth sector of folklore and folklife may be designated performing folk arts. Here , we think primarily of traditional music,dance and drama. While the renditions of a folk tale or folk songs are not usually referred to as performances,they are more casual in nature than the conscious presentation of these arts individuals or groups with folk instruments, dance,costumes and scenario props. The performing arts intersect with each other and often appear conjunction.”⁸

Folk art form has a rich place in human society of the world through which the people can enjoy and get happiness.Folk theatre or drama is apart of performing art which is a fusion of music,dance and acting. But the existence area of folk drama is very limited. R.M. Dorson observed –“ Folk drama exists on a village or small group level.The performers are members of the community and therefore known to most of the audience. The dramas are given on special occasions only most commonly a seasonal festival.”⁹The tradition of Assamese folk drama is very old. In Assam there were different local tradition of folk drama among different groups of people like Putala nach, Dhulia Bhaona,Khulia bhaona, ojalali etc. According to Dr.Paramananda Rajbongshi –“ We can divide the folk theatre of Assam into classical and semi classical categories. Putala Nach(puppet dance), Dhulia, Khulia, Bhari Gan and Kusan Gan – these five arts have been indentified as being fully classical folk theatre. Geet(Music),all the fore elements are the main features of these arts.These four elements are frequently exhibited in the performance of these arts.”¹⁰

The Bharigaan is a traditional folk theatre current in Assam,India mainly in the south Kamrup and Goalpara districts , more or less confined to the pati Rabhas.This folk theatre has been playing a mojour role by passing down Rama tradition . According to Dr. Upen Rabha Hakasang –“Among the Rabhas especially in the Pati Rabha society , there is a religious procession or Folk Drama with the sentimental features of the Bengali Krittivasi Ramayana , hence the name Bharigaan .¹¹ Another eminent writer Dr. Paramananda Rajbangshi observed –“ The Bharigaan is an exceptional kind folk item of south Goalpara . This dying art form of South Goalpara, based on the stories of Ramayana and the Mahabharata , has contributed significantly to the folk culture of Assam. The Pati Rabha can be said to be preserving the Bhari gaan tradition at present , though other tribal communities can also said to be participating in it .¹²

According to Dr. Paramananda Rajbangshi -"In this item where music takes precedence over acting , we have a Main Bhaoria who is a known as a Muli or Gedal along with a group of accompanying artistes . The Muli like the Khulia Bhauriya of Darrang starts the sing items (pada) , which the other artistes repeat . He is also seen to carry a fan . He usually wears the Dhoti and the Sadar and is sometimes seen to wear the beads of the Rudakshar beadsso. They also practice the use of Mask. Just like the comic character (Bohuwa) the ketuwa characters are also very relevant . Where it is necessary , Masks are used by Ketuwa . Mime and Masks are both important elements in Bhaari Gaan ."13

In Indian social life the influence of Ramayana is noteworthy . Centering around the main characters of these two epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata hearsay is prevalent in the society . In Bharigaan the influence of the characters like Ram , Laxman and Sita are prevalent .14

"There are some dividers in the play Bharigaan. The units of Bharigaan are Khol player, invocation, proposition, and main plot. The main plot is again in several dividers. These dividers are action, dance, song, dialogue, hands, humour and epilogue. Prior to main action, khol and tal players muse their hands with dancing poses. Such play is called Khol badan. Then the Oza enters on the stage posing to dance keeping sowor in right hand and plays posing to dance with the prime khol player and a tal player. At this time, the Oza does not sing any hymn. At this play by the Oza and the khol player, there is similarity with the play of Oza and khol player in paddapuranar gaan. In the stage of invocation, the Oza inaugurates invocation and the palis imitate while the khol and tal players accompany their music.15 A piece of such invocation is quoted below-

Tumi Hari dinomay e tini bhubanae koy

Ke janae tomar mohima

Qowti qowti prajapati chaturmukha kora tuti

Dannya dannya Ramchandra Surya bongsha janmi rai

Dasharata tonoya doyal Rogunatha.....16

Then the step is proposition. At this point, the Oza attempts to create curiosity in the heart of audience with the announcement of the name of proposed drama.17 Such a quotation is below-

Dosha din yudhya kori Vishma maharathi

Shar sayyat Shayan kora Mahamoti

Atop or shuna dron porbor samar.....18

After such proposition, the action of the play begins with nritya-geet. The Oza makes entrance the very important. The characters of Bharigaan are as inactive as of the puppet show. The Oza makes them active through songs sung with music.¹⁹When the main drama ended, one hymn is sung by the Oza and palis. The performance is closed by a dance named Kali nritta. One youth wearing the musk of kali dances so rapid in the scale of tal and scope of khol.

Masks play an important role in Bharigaan folk theatre. Mask is popularly known as Mukha in Assam, India. In Bharigaan performance most of the actors wear only wooden masks. Masks are made in such a way that it is wearable.²⁰ Various colours are used to make the masks attractive. These masks are kept in the worship hall. The performing team under the guidance of the Oja prayer offered to these masks specially in some religious occasions like Shyama puja, Ambubashi, Sankranti etc.²¹ It is mentioned that in some performance of Bharigan there is no use of mask.

In the language of the Bharigaan one can find traces of the Bengali Dialect. The influence of Bengali folk art has also inspired a different style in Bhari Gaan in South Goalpara, besides greatly enriching it.²²

Conclusion: The Bharigaan is one of the traditional dramatic performance of the greater Assamese Folkculture. Now is in declining trend and may become an extinct form if proper and timely measures are not taken for its promotion and preservation. In present time it is a challenge for the Bharigaan teams to continue their performance in changing scenario. It is the responsibility of the department of cultural Affairs to take promotion and preservation of Bharigaan and other similar folk theatre of the state.

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