

**GĪTS OF BIYĀH-GOWĀ OJĀPĀLI:
AN EXPOSITORY STUDY**

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The present chapter is directed towards providing an overview of the work done and putting on record pertinent points realized in the course of this study, mapping the traceable transformations in the vital and peripheral artistic aspects pertaining to the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system. It is believed that a detailed discussion of the reformations understood in the performance of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* owing to interpolations, exclusions and adaptations would render the present-day status of the art form clearer and bolder.

The analytical data pertaining to *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*, strewn across the body of the present work, has sufficiently given evidence that this ancient art form, owing to its oral survival through the ages, now stands undefended to the lateral art systems and to inevitable socio-cultural changes. In the given state, the transformations, to a great extent, cannot be observed as healthy as these have jeopardised the sustenance of the strictly individual elements of the art form resulting in an unwelcome deviation. The present work, therefore, has striven primarily to accumulate the vital musical matter scattered across different *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* groups through substantial field investigations. The collected information has been further ordered and analysed to frame an organised study on the subject so that the endangered *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* materials can be located, recognised and sustained.

Furthermore, the relevance of the art form slowly being outstretched to the stage as a performing art and not merely a ritual-focused art category, has widely necessitated the understanding of the precise musical profile specific to the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system. If the performance materials are not organized into a format that can be decoded and subjected to performance by a learner, then the existence of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* on stage will be short-lived. The shift of the art form to the stage is appreciable on the ground that the electrifying performance of a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* band can have a larger audience with renewed interest in this ancient art form. This would, in turn, cement the factor of sustainability attached to the art in the present coupled with the appropriate preservation of the unique

performance complex. Thus observing closely *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as it exists today, this research work has endeavoured to affix undivided attention to the systematic understanding of the musical body of the art form because it has never been selected for a methodical examination before and because herein lies the nucleus of this performing art which, if being preserved properly, would definitely ascertain the sustenance of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* through future times.

Attempts have been made in the introductory chapter to present a satisfactory elaboration of the proposed title of the study. A review of selected literature along with the objectives and methodology pertaining to this research project have been dealt with. Since the present work has chosen the *Gīts* of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as the area of interest, this chapter has been utilized to prepare a detailed understanding of the same by putting forth the background and purpose necessary for the study. A proper introduction to certain key terms and concepts such as *Ojāpāli*, *Ojā*, *Pāli*, *Sangīt* etc., has been attempted. Following a discussion on the necessary factors associated with the art form of *Ojāpāli* in general, such as its origin and antiquity, places and occasions of performance, different types etc., *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* in particular has been extensively treated. The different performative strands – structure, function, costume etc. – associated with the selected art form are subjected to a systematic presentation. The chapter thus focuses on creating a necessary backdrop against which an expository study of the *Gīts* of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* can be broadly understood in the chapters that follow.

Certain interesting socio-cultural findings have been observed which shall be introduced at the outset. To begin with, the costume discipline has witnessed conspicuous alterations. The *Tañāli* is believed to have made its way into an *Ojāpāli* circle from Bhutanese traders (Barua. A. C., 1974, 910). *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath states that he procured a *Tañāli* from a trader from Bhutan for a sum of rupees forty only (field note 26/04.01.22). It can be thus safely conjectured that the inclusion of the *Tañāli* within an *Ojāpāli* artiste's prescribed costume took place owing to the flourishing of small trade by the Bhutanese in Assam.

Another interesting note of change is observed in the manner the *Cādar* is worn today. Earlier the *Ojā* used to wrap one end of the *Cādar* around the hip below the *Tañāli* so that the loose end hangs in front (Costume, Pic1-Cādar) (Goswami, B.M. (1997), (COSTUME, Vid 1 - Cādar). However, the present-day *Ojās* are

found to simply hang down the *Cādar* from either side of the neck (COSTUME, Pic 2 - *Cādar* worn nowadays) / (COSTUME, Pic 3 - *Cādar* in *Sattriyā Ojāpāli*). Moreover, inspite of costume guidelines set by the *Biyāh-Sangīt Vikāś Committee*, the traditional green *Cādar* has been found many a time avoided for other varying colours.

One instance of the breakdown of the traditional rigidity defining the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system can be seen in *Ojā Jiban Kalita* removing the *Muṭhi-khāru* (bangles) much before retiring as an *Ojā* as he could not continue to do so while joining as the *Deurī* (priest) of the Neo-Vaishnavite *Sattra* of Khatara. The crucial thing noticeable in this incident is that the named *Ojā* continued his *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* performance even after this. This event prominently highlights that owing to social circumstances and pressure, the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system had to adopt a certain degree of flexibility. The given example indicates the fact that an *Ojā* can now perform without the *Muṭhi-khāru* just as *Ojā Jiban Kalita* did provided such is deemed necessary according to the arising situation (COSTUME, Vid 2 - *Jiban Kalita's muṭhi khāru*).

Another change is located in the increasing use of a paste from limestone instead of the original sandalwood paste on the forehead by the performers. *Dāināpāli* Dineswar Nath states that the high price of sandalwood has led to its substitution by limestone which is much affordable and very well compensates for sandalwood (field note10 /04.02.22).

As mentioned earlier, apart from the costume-specific transformations, major changes have been witnessed in the question of where and when a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* band can perform. The different scholarly texts mention *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as an exclusive and inseparable part of any *Vāsudeva* ritual conducted within the premises of a temple. However, with time, a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* recital began to be allowed in the royal palace in rituals centered around the Goddess. The *Ojās* residing in the village of Vyaspara began to be categorized as the *Jāgar-gowā Ojās* who enjoyed exclusive royal patronage. The *Jāgar-gowā Ojās* are still practising and are responsible for carrying out the *Jāgar* ritual in such places as the Ardhanariswar temple at Pāti Darrang, the Rudreswar Devālaya, the Tamreswar Devālaya and the Durgā temple in Vyaspara.

As a common man is ignorant of the difference between *Lord Viṣṇu* and *Lord Vāsudeva*, whether or not a *Lord Vāsudeva* ritual is practised as a part of a death ritual, a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* performance is generally considered vital. According to the priest Achyutananda Sarma, nowadays the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* troupes are invited to perform in death rituals solely depending on the financial condition of the household who invites and not as a requirement along with the worship of *Lord Vāsudeva* in death rituals (field note16/14.02.22). Commonly thus they only come to showcase an evening performance and rarely sing the Ritual *Gīts*.

From temples and *Nāmghars* to households, *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* has now made its journey to the stage purely as an art form fit to be understood, recognised and appreciated for its unique artistic portfolio. Stage recitals are estranged from the original purpose of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* and presented on different occasions and in different places. To cite a few examples, *Ojā Rudra Nath* and his *Pālis* mentioned that they had performed in Mājuli in a popular Neo-Vaishnavite festival (field note39/11.07.19) Similarly, the *Ojāpāli* group of *Ojā Tirtha Nath* performed in Bardowa Sattrā in 2019 as a part of the entertainment programme specifying *Doul Utsav* (festival of *Holi*) (field note26/06.06.19). *Ojā Candra Kanta Baishya* too admitted of being a part of such a festival for a number of times (field note 22/08.09.19).

Furthermore, the Government is seen adopting *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as an instrumental tool to promote various schemes or to spread awareness. Examples of the involvement of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* in awareness campaigns include oral rehydration schemes for diarrhoea, spreading awareness regarding AIDS and the pandemic of Covid 19. The art form has also been adopted as a rehabilitation programme. For example, *Oja Tirtha Nath* has been training inmates of the Mangaldai prison as a means to rehabilitate them.

The second chapter is solely devoted to conduct a thorough and critical inspection of the *Gīts* which advocate the nature of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music. An arduous task of collecting the *Gīts* found scattered on field, organizing, classifying and sequencing them to formulate a firm idea of a full-length *Gondhcauparī sabhā* performance preceded the examination and evaluation of the transcribed musical material. The available literature on *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* furnish a very small body of loose and imprecise information on the *Gīts*. Besides this, sufficient

contradictory notes have been marked in the versions of different texts and different practitioners on some of the most vital aspects associated with the subject of *Gīts* which further complicated the process of unearthing the exact musical plan in a *Gondhcauparī sabhā*. The chapter, thus, though struggles to arrive at a conclusion, ultimately succeeds in discovering a near-exact musical form of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* in a performance by meticulously arranging the collected data. This chapter sticks to its objective of constructing an organized understanding of the form and status of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music as prevalent today and puts forth a very systematically arranged description of the primary *Gīts* in the sequential format followed in a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* performance.

Major instances of transformations have been marked in many a category of *Gīt* listed in the second chapter. It is but the gripping influence of Neo-Vaishnavism which is but too obvious not only in the sung materials but in the overall performance dynamics. A fleeting Neo-Vaishnavite inclusion could not have probably affected the original *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* mood. However, it remains a fact that assimilation permitted in one area makes the other areas vulnerable. In this process, many more external elements rush into the system and try affecting the innate nature of the art.

The first example is that of the *Adhibāsar gīts*. Field examination reports the circulation of only three *Adhibāsar gīts* in current times. However, a fourth is traced in Nareswar Sarma's compilation (Barua, N. S., 1975, 46) and also documented from *Ojā Dugdharam Kalita* (PS, Vid 1- 4th *Adhibāsar gīt*). Priest Achyutananda Sarma reveals the interesting fact that in earlier times the text of the songs rendered during the ritual of *Adhibās*, voiced a sincere celebration of the primordial deities. However, the present *Adhibāsar gīts* are preoccupied with the *Kṛṣṇa* element. The exclusive dominance of *Lord Kṛṣṇa* in these *Gīts* oppose the very basic sentiment of the ritualistic design of *Adhibās* within a *Gondhcauparī sabhā*. This development can be, of course, linked to the overpowering emergence of a Neo-Vaishnavism-inclined society. Not just the *Lord Kṛṣṇa* element but other Neo-Vaishnavism traits are also recognizable. For example, the first *Adhibāsar gīt* is written in the Brajavali language known to originate during Śrīmanta Sankardeva's times. The *Bhanitā* in the same *Gīt* is, further, very much a Neo-Vaishnavite poetic feat.

But it is not that only Neo-Vaishnavism made its mark on *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music. Before the advent of the said cult, the general Vaiṣṇavite upsurge throughout the country seems not to spare even *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*. One instance in support of this view can be cited in a verse line of the second *Adhibāsar gīt*. This line has been recorded as “*Sindura dhupa ārati diyā Rādhā Kṛṣṇa nibediyā*” by A. C. Barua (Barua, A. C., 1974, 886). Later however, *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath is found replacing *Rādhā* with *Rāma* (Oja, D.N., 1989, 120). The ‘Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa’ cult is central to Vaishnavism that flourished before Śrīmanta Sankardeva popularized Neo-Vaishnavism. The *Carit-puthis* state that Mathura Dāsa Buḍā Ātā alias Gopāl Ātā belonging to the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism was brought to Mādhhabadeva by Narayan Thakur (Goswami, B. M., 1997, 60). It can thus be informed that the replacement of *Rādhā* with *Rāma*, indeed, bespeaks the transition from one form of Vaishnavism to Neo- Vaishnavism.

How Neo-Vaishnavism has seeped into the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* territory is also evident in the incident of *Bhāgavat Jātrā* (PS, Vid 2 - Bhāgavat jātrā). Such an event relates to the act of taking out the sacred text of *Śrīmad Bhāgavat* from the altar of the *Nāmghar* for a ritualistic procession and then placing the same at the altar where the ceremonial *Ghat*, wherein *Lord Vāsudeva* is invoked following Tantric procedures is kept (PS, Vid 3 - Bhāgavat in the altar). This practice is only relevant when a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* is instituted within the premises of a *Nāmghar*. Another important event relating to *Nāmghar* and the *Bhagavat* is *Sadācār* which *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath claims to have been incorporated into the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system by the *Ojās* initiated into Neo-Vaishnavism (PS Aud 1 - Sadācār in Sabhā). *Sadācār* is an integral part of the *Sattra* regimen. *Ojā* Haren Nath suggests this act when he says that at the outset and at the very end of a recital one needs to first bow to the *Bhāgavat* and then to the audience (PS, Vid 5 - Obeisance to the Bhāgavat 1.10 mins). *Sadācār* like *Bhāgavat Jātrā* is encountered in *Gondcaupari sabhās* conducted within the *Nāmghar* premises (PS Aud 2 - The Bhāgavat in Sabhā).

Be it the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism or not, the strong Tantric hold is also found loosened in certain respects. For example, the *Sarba bhadra mandal*, which is drawn on the altar whereon is placed the ceremonial *Ghat*, is not only found to vary in different *Sabhās* but also, as priest Achyutananda Sarma declares, has

diminished in many places to such a level that only the central motif remains intact while the surrounding designs are freely manipulated thereby proving the fact that the rigid Tantric control is somewhat falling apart (field note 20/10.05.21) (PS, Pic 1a/b - Sarba Bhadra Mandal).

According to the priest Achyutananda Sarma nowadays artisans prefer to make the idol of *Lord Viṣṇu* instead of *Lord Vāsudeva* for the purpose of worship because unlike the strict rules that govern the creation of an idol of *Lord Vāsudeva* there are no rigid guidelines in making the idol of *Lord Viṣṇu* (field note 20/11.05.21). As Tantrism has to bend to changing times in a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli sabhā*, so has to certain previous stances meant to maintain the dignity of the *Sabhā*. For example, as *Ojā Dharmeswar Nath* observes that the gravity of an otherwise serious recital is affected by the intermittent verbal communication between the *Ojāpāli* and the members of the audience nowadays (field note 05/19.05.19). In actual terms, the band is supposed to engage with the appraisal of the invoked Lords in order to please them with an undivided focus and steadfast dedication (PS, Vid 4 - Ambience).

In *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* is traced the existence of syllables like ‘*Ha, Ta, Ne, Na, Ṛ, Ṛta*’ which are actually the defining elements of *Gurubandanā* in *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* (PS I, Vid 1 - Tā Ne Na in *Sattriyā Ojāpāli*). Unlike *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*, however, these syllables are not linked to the five primordial deities in *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* (Barua, A. C., 1974, 1062). It is believed that Śrīmanta Sankardeva used the then prevailing *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as a successful tool in instrumentalising the mass popularity and acceptance of his Neo-Vaishnavite school in general and *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* in particular. Hence, it is not surprising to locate *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* elements in the *Sattriyā* system. As a matter of fact, B. M. Goswami remark in his book that “*Sattriyā Ojāpāli* is nothing but a Neo-Vaishnavite edition of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*” (Goswami B. M. 1997, 60). Such things not only prove that *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* existed before Śrīmanta Sankardeva but also throw light on the fact that with time an interesting reversal of role is witnessed. More clearly, when once Neo-Vaishnavism had to rely on *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* to some extent and draw materials from it to make its hold stronger, in today's time, it is *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* which is resorting to a free-handed adoption of Neo-Vaishnavite styles to retain its popularity among the masses.

The *Gunjari rāga* being almost excluded from the performance assembly nowadays, *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music has somewhere suffered considerable loss. Though not put to practice by any *Ojāpāli* singer, two *Ojās* cursorily sang it for the purpose of documentation. (PS I, Aud 1 - *Gunjari rāga*). While such exclusion has altered the musical face, inclusions have, no doubt, done the same. *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath puts forth his belief that the *Pātani gīts* are later inclusions. He dates these back to the 17th century during the reign of the Koch kings. Not only *Pātani gīts*, but other materials like *Viṣṇu pada* and *Jhunās* had been newly added to the existing musical body. It is also believed that during this time, the hand gestures were appropriately modified to attach some grammar on to them and thereby a classical shape (Oja, D. N., 1989, 20).

The *Bhanitās* which also seem to have been incorporated later exists only in the *Gīts* listed in a text like that of *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath's (Oja, D. N., 1989, 61). However, the *Bhanitās* are not found to be put to performance practically by any performer. Even old-school *Ojās* like *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath deny finding anyone singing such *Bhanitās* during his entire career (field note 17/30.11.19). A few examples to suffice this point of incongruity between text and practical performance with regard to *Bhanitās* can be cited here. The concluding lines of the *Pātani gīt* of *Rāga Śyāmgadā* as given below are not rendered by the singers (PS II, Aud 1 - *Bhanitā* discussion 1). “(Prān bhāyāre) - *Kahaya Mādhava dāse dīna hīna mati, Janame janame houka Kṛṣṇata bhakati*” (Ojā, D. N., 1989, 61). Instead of these lines, the performers sing the *Gīt* with the phrasal text “*Kṛṣṇara guna gāva āmi nācite nācite*”. This concluding phrase not recorded in print has been observed as an orally-transmitted entity by *Ojā* Tirtha Nath (PS II, Aud 2 - *Bhanitā* discussion 2). Another example is the *Bhanitā* of the *Pātani gīt* of *Rāga Sāranga* the verses of which are totally omitted during a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* performance.

The transmuted structure of the performance design of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* is, of course, also linked to alterations primarily generated by socio-economic conditions. One such example is the current practice of singing the *Ghunni* of either *Rāga Śyāmgada* or *Nāt* in a *Pātani gīt* based on any *Rāga*, although *Ghunni* is supposed to be an introductory body to the *Rāga* dealt in the later parts (PS II, Vid 1 - Common *Ghunni* for *Pātani gīts*). This event is a proof that the learners do

not intend to go for an elaborate training due to various factors such as paucity of time or the practice of the art form not being economically rewarding. Whatever be the reason, this is a major blow to the rich music of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* because except these two all the other *Ghunnis* are lost and consequently there is sufficient distortion in the *Rāga* structure of a *Pātani gīt*.

A similar distortion is understood in a *Viṣṇu pada* recitation. Violating the rule of repetition, the *Pālis* today seldom repeat the *Rāga* before and after the *Padas*. This means that they do not learn the same either. This has created the danger of the extinctions of the said section from a *Viṣṇu pada* recital because with no *Dāināpāli* knowing this performance part, it will be completely lost with the death of the *Ojā*. It is but quite obvious that if things are not learned or handed down, they will be lost for sure. Further, majority of *Ojās* now resort to learning only one or two *Dihās* while the old-schooled ones admit learning at least seven *Dihās*. This loudly speaks of a disturbing shrinkage leading to unhealthy transformations.

Regarding *Viṣṇu pada*, another aspect to be noticed is the fact that the *Daśāvātāra* verses are sometimes lifted from the text of *Kirtana* composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva which is central to Neo-Vaishnavism (Ojā, D. N., 1989, 67).

A similar instance is noted in what Ojā Maheswar Nath of Dalanghat sang in his recitation of the *Daśāvātāra*. Ojā Dharmeswar Nath points out that a few lines have been taken from the *Kirtana* (PS III, Aud 1 - Kirtana verses in *viṣṇu pada*). Ojā Maheswar Nath later admitted that with his initiation into Neo-Vaishnavism, he could not afford to get enough practice in the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* form (field note 10/21.09.21). Not only *Viṣṇu pada*, the popular stage of *Kathopakathan* is seen to adopt many phrases and verses popular within the *Sattras* (PS III, Vid 1 - Viṣṇu Bhāñani from Kirtana).

Of the musical matter that has gone out of practice with changing times, can be counted *Rabhār janma* and *Gor bānā*. Late Ojā Durgeswar Nath stated that it is with the *Kathopakathan* followed by *Rabhār janma* that the *Gurumandali* is considered to close down (Ojā D. N., 1989, 65). Though the verses of *Rabhār janma* have been recorded in texts, for example by Ojā Durgeswar Nath (Ojā D. N., 1989, 68) and A. C. Baruas (Barua, A. C., 1974, 891), the current practitioners are not found to recite this and the *Gaid* practically closes with the *Kathopakathan*. It can be marked in passing that the verses of *Rabhār janma* are

found to be different in the mentioned texts. *Ojā* Tirtha Nath remarks that it is possible that the segment of *Rabhār janma* had been an intrinsic part of previous recitals which ultimately succumbed to the pressure of unfavourable conditions and got excluded from the main musical body. Interestingly the named *Ojā* offered to sing the *Rabhār janma* verses in a typical *Ojāpāli* tune extemporaneously for the purpose of documentation.

Similarly *Gor bānā* which has been held as the ‘King of rāgas’ in text, is an outmoded thing. In earlier times, an overnight recital in a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* must commence with the *Gor bānā* which is however, not seen practised nowadays. With *Gor bānā* went a whole lot of intricate details defining *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Rāga* system thereby suggesting an unhealthy transformation of the musical face. It is a very important development marked during field study that the *Ojāpāli* joining the Neo-Vaishnavite circle have begun to replace *Gor bānā* with a few verse lines termed as “*Guru stuti*” as stated by Komal Nath *Dāināpāli* (PS IV, Aud 1 - Guru Stuti). (PS IV, Vid 1 - Guru Stuti).

A senior *Ojā* like *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath expresses deep concern over such un-mindful assimilation because this has threatened and disturbed the core structural feature of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* and its music (PS IV, Aud 2 - Guru Stuti discussion). Though inextant, the *Gor bānā* could be rescued to some extent through *Ojās* Dharmakanta Deka and Tirtha Nath. Both, however, gave strikingly contrasting recitations of the piece. The former also sang a *Ghunni* to it (PS IV, Aud 3 - Ghunni of Gor Bānā).

That the rich music of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* is fast withering can be traced in the manner the performers handle the *Bānā* today. With the extinction of *Gor bānā*, *Thiya rāga* came to be sung for raising the curtains on *Sangītālāp*. As observed, most of the new learners now resort to learning and reciting the *Ghunni* and the *Nayan dihā* with an *Ākhyān* to begin this stage of *Sangītālāp*. The main body containing the *Thāvars* of the *Thiya rāga* are left out. On the other hand, *Doñuwā bānā* is not popular among all the *Ojāpāli* bands. Those who know the same sing it along with *Thiya rāga* but exclude many crucial segments within the pieces, for example the *Nārayana dihā* and end up singing a very concise or skeletal copy of these materials (PS IV, Vid 2 - Concise version sample). This is a very alarmingly

negative development because such unhealthy practice is jeopardizing the sustenance of the richer details of this music.

A major transformation that floats on the surface is found in the choice of lyrical text, especially of *Ākhyān*, by the different performing groups. No *Ojāpāli* band is seen adopting an *Ākhyān* text from printed literature. Moreover, there is evidence that in earlier recitations, not just epical but Puranic literature had also been considered for recitals. For example, *Ojās* Dharmeswar Nath and Muktarām Sarma have reported that late *Ojā* Santiram of Pipirār chowk used to adopt textual matter for his *Ākhyāns* from the *Agni Purān* (PS IV, Vid 3 - *Ākhyāns* discussion). This vogue of rendering Pauranic text in *Ākhyāns* is not seen today. Instead, as already noted in other performance materials, the trend of extracting verses from the text *Srimad Bhāgavata* to render an *Ākhyān* is fast on the rise. To cite an instance, the ‘*Samudra manthan Ākhyāns*’ from the *Bhāgavata* is regularly put to practice by *Ojā* Chandra kanta Baishya (PS IV, Vid 4 - *Ākhyān* from the *Bhāgavat*).

The sharp Neo-Vaishnavite impact is also visible in the *Kholā dihās*. Though twenty-three *Kholā dihās* have been listed in *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath's book (*Ojā*, D.N., 1989, 63-65), the practising artists are found to sing many more than are unrecorded in books (PS IV, Aud 5 - Orally transmitted *Kholā Dihā*). As a matter of fact, *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath has commented that the *Ojāpālis* who are the followers of Neo-Vaishnavism newly compose and sing *Kholā dihās* with a predominant Kṛṣṇa element (PS IV, Aud 6 - *Kholā dihā* discussion). This, again, is a matter of concern because the ever-increasing interference of a Neo-Vaishnavite tendency is sure to irreversibly affect *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*'s unique image. An example of a *Kholā dihā* freshly composed with Kṛṣṇa overtones has been documented (PS IV, Aud 7 - Newly composed *Kholā dihā*).

Intrusion of Neo-Vaishnavism is also detected, for example, in the *Kholā dihā* numbered nineteen in *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath's book (*Ojā*, D. N., 1989, 84). The phrase ‘Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa’ in the book is found replaced by ‘Rāma-Kṛṣṇa’ by the active practitioners (PS IV, Aud 8 - Rādhā-Rāma).

The countenance of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Rāga* system has also experienced mammoth changes over the years. Since the names of many *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālis*

Rāgās are same as those traced in the Buddhist *Caryapadas*, the active role of these *Padas* played within the frame of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Rāga* system is clearly discernable. Further, positioning the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Rāgas* within the system of *Rāga-rāginī* of medieval Hindustani music clearly speaks of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* drawing in materials from parallel classical systems. Moreover, certain texts try to uphold the belief that the *Rāgas* of this art form derive its origin from a classical system precisely prevalent in ancient Assam (Dutta, B., 2011, 33). What all of this suffice as strong evidence is to the fact that the *Rāga* culture specific to the performance had been undoubtedly very rich and wide-ranging.

As stated earlier, priest Achyutananda Sarma mentioned that the art form in due course of time got transferred from the expert hands of the *Ganak-Brāhmin* community to the agrarian community thereby resulting in the loss of many finer details of the *Rāga* complex (field note 13/ 03.03.22). It is but very obvious that being ignorant of the intricate grammar that defines a *Rāga*, the performers could not engage in the sustenance of the subtle elements specific to the framework of a *Rāga*. This might be the reason why there is no extempore activity guided towards detailing a *Rāga's* melodic identity extemporaneously during his solo part by the *Ojā*. It is from his memory that he renders a fixed progression.

The grammatical ignorance has also led to considerable deviations that spring out of the violation of *Rāga* rules. For example, the *Bandhā dihā* that follows a *Rāga* recitation is actually a summarized piece concentrating the melodic concept unique to the *Rāga*. However, the singers nowadays lift any *Dihā* to attach it with a *Rāga* they perform (PS IV, Aud 9 - Bandhā dihā discussion). They are quite unaware of the completely different melodic profiles of the two things. It has also been seen, as for example in *Pāteni dhāl pada* that the melodic body of the main *Pada* part does not match with that which precedes or follows it. The singers, as can be assumed, brought to use a commonly-used melodic movement to fill up the space upon the loss of the actual material. This incorrect assimilation within a piece has heavily changed the overall picture and in fact has led to the breakdown of a *Rāga* concept.

What is more disturbing to realize is that the *Ojāpāli* singers today resort to learning and singing only one or a maximum of two *Rāgas*. *Ojā* Dharmakanta

Deka states that in bygone days the singers were meant to compulsorily master seven to eight *Rāgas*. Even the audience had such level of expert understanding of the various *Rāgas* that they could request the singers to sing a *Rāga* of their choice. The scene today, however, as already noticed, is extraordinarily poor and suggests an extreme dilapidation of the *Rāga* system. With the beauty of *Rāga* rendition almost dwindling, lighter performance materials like *Ākhyāns* and even *Kathopakathan* have become increasingly popular among spectators.

The fifth stage of *Miśra gīts*, as has already been noticed, is a heterogeneous complex and herein can be located many solid instances of assimilation. As a matter of fact, this stage has been relatively kept more open to allow the entry of varied materials from different sources to bring in more colour. As this stage is meant to deliver pure entertainment, from time to time pieces popular outside the realm of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* have been incorporated. Of course, the *Ojāpāli* flavour is found successfully instilled to make each item appear very much a part of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* discipline. *Ojā* Durgeswar Nath observes in his book that the origin of the *Jhunās* can be traced back to the time of Koch King Dharmanarayan's reign (Oja, D.N., 1989, 20). The *Gīts* centring around Lord *Śiva* and the Goddess are more intrinsic to the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system than the *Kṛṣṇa*-centered *Gīts* which are obvious assimilations from the Neo-Vaishnavite order. The *Kṛṣṇa gīts*, however have become more popular at the present times and are found rendered more sincerely than the others. Other *Gīts* such as *Kabirar gīts* and *Durgābari gīts* are rarely put to performance whereas the *Bāramāhi gīts* have gone completely out of practice. As overnight recitals are decreasing, the prevalence of the *Purabi rāga* along with the *Puweli gīts* has also been highly affected. (PSV, And 1- Purabi rāga DO).

Among the miscellaneous instances which speak volumes on the changes sweeping the shores of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* especially due to social factors shaped by the established popularity of the school of Neo-Vaishnavism, can be first counted the rendition of *Daśāvatāra* verses in a recitation of the *Pānitōlā dihā* and *Padas* meant to address in its text many deities including *Jalarāja* (deity of water). Thus the exclusive inclusion in it of the ten incarnations of Lord *Viṣṇu* is not acceptable as *Ojā* Dharmeswar Nath reports (RITUAL, Aud 1 – *Daśāvatāra* verses in *Pānitōlā*). This is, in fact, a matter of extreme concern because the very

essence of the ritual and *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* seem to be under threat. (RITUAL, Aud 2 – Pānitōlā verses discussion).

Secondly, the original verses that portray a picture of *Homa* are not rendered by the *Ojas* initiated into Neo-Vaishnavism during a *Homa*. The *Dihā* “*Jaya mamō Narayana yajñaswara Hari*” along with the etiological ballads pertaining to the ingredients used in the *Homa* are dropped by such *Ojās* primarily to showcase their steadfastness in the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy where there is no place for a ritualistic activity like *Homa*. They instead sing the *Dihā* “*Kṛṣṇa ye Hari bāndhaba e Rāma*” followed by the *Daśāvātāra* verses.

Thirdly, it has been observed that *Ojā* Haren Nath uses the *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* terms *Tiling* and *Khup* to describe the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Bols* (rhythms) *Khām* and *Tuk* (TĀLĀ, Vid 1 – Tiling and Khup). Various performance elements from *Sattriyā* and *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* in particular are being incorporated into the performance of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* on stage as has been observed in multiple occasions (PS V, Vid 1 - Changes on stage).

Some interesting additions to this work collected from extensive field work shall be discussed at this point. The probability of more than the three mandatory *Adhibāsar gīts* was substantiated by the audio-visual recording of the fourth *Adhibāsar gīt* from *Ojā* Dughdharam Kalita as stated earlier which also points to the fact that many more *Gīts* were indeed in vogue in the past. The *Doṅuwa bānā* is not found in any text. As mentioned, it is usually performed immediately following the *Moraṇi* of the *Thiya rāga*. This *Bānā* has been documented and transcribed for this work. Though the *Doṅuwa bānā* is prevalent to a certain extent, the associated *Nārāyan dihā* is hardly known by the present generation *Ojāpāli*. Instead they sing the *Nayan dihā* which follows the *Moraṇi* of the *Thiya rāga*.

Similarly the *Doṅuwa pada* finds no mention in the texts. As mentioned earlier, in the rare occasions when in a scriptural tale the verse lines in *Pada* meter are rather few in number the *Ojāpālis* sing the *Doṅuwa pada* demonstrating four different movements but omitting the mandatory *Dihā*. The existence and practice of such a piece has been discovered at the end of interviewing several *Biyāh-gowā*

Ojāpāli groups on field. Only a handful of singers reported the practice of singing this *Dihā*-less *Pada*-metered *Ākhyān* on special occasions.

Similarly the *Nāgeri jhunā* has also not been mentioned in any printed text. As mentioned, this category of *Jhunā* is no longer performed and according to *Ojā* Tirtha Nath has become obsolete some thirty years back. He however demonstrated a few verses for documentation in this work. The *Dihā* “*Gobindāi japa mana bhāi*” for the *Sāmarāṇi gīt* has not been found in any printed text and has been included for the study from *Ojā* Muktaram Sarma and his group.

A few classifications and nomenclature have been rearranged and detailed following the end of the field work and after discussion with the senior bearers of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*. The second stage named *Pāteni gīt* has been suggested to be renamed as *Pāteni* since, as mentioned earlier, the *Pāteni gīt* was found to be the fourth subpart of *Pāteni* starting with *Ghunni* followed by *Pāli rāga* and *Śri Kṛṣṇa Śloka*. Though practitioners had a divided opinion whether the *Ghunni* here was a part of the *Gurubandanā* it was later confirmed that the *Ghunni* was indeed the beginning of *Pāteni* and not the third *thāk* of *Gurubandanā*. Next why the *Rāgas* within *Viṣṇu pada* cannot be addressed as *Viṣṇu padar dhek* or *Viṣṇu padar thāwar* was clarified. The *Dihā* “*Jai hari*” so commonly performed along with the *Daśāvatāra* verses during the second day of a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* performance finds no mention in any printed text.

Within the stage of *Sangitālāp* the *Rāgas* have been retitled and categorized as *Bānās* and *Rāga-bānās* for the present study though no such demarcation has ever been attempted by the scholars in their works or by the active performers. The justification for such a division has been clearly stated in the second chapter of this study. Renaming the fifth stage of the performance as *Miśra gīts* instead of *Jhunā* (as found in printed texts) has been suggested since this stage was found to consist of *Gīts* apart from the *Jhunā gīts*.

It was also interesting to note during fieldwork that some verses are sung both by the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as well as the *Suknānni Ojāpāli* but differing totally in their style and tune for rendition. For example, the verses of the *Mālcī gīt* “*Janmilā dasbhujā*. According to *Ojā* Tirtha Nath the first line of the ninth *Puweli gīt* in late Durgeswar Nath’s book (Oja, D. N., 1989,92), “*Āju kadambar tale rai*

rai muralī bojāi ”is used by the *Suknānni Ojāpāli* as a *Diha* in their performance. This is probable since previously the same *Ojā* used to perform both the art forms and verses were sung with tunes specific to the art form performed within a specific ritual.

Though the popularity of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* on stage is gradually increasing it has been observed that only *Pada chanda Ākhyāns* and the *Viṣṇu pada* with the popular *Dihā* “*Gobindāi Gobindāi Hari mai*” are performed on stage. The rich variety of performances like the *Pātani gīt* specific to a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* recital is hardly showcased. The urban audience thus shall hardly get a chance to witness such enchanting pieces.

Overnight performances are decreasing and *Eporiā sabhās* ending in a day is becoming popular due to economic as well as changing social scenarios. Some of the *Ojāpāli* groups are seen to bargain their number of hours of performance in lieu of the cash reward offered to them instead of the requirement of a performance for the ritual of worship of *Lord Vāsudeva* within the norms of a *Gondhcauparī sabhā*.

The *Ojās* and mostly the *Dāināpālis* transition from a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* performer to one who sings the *Kirtana* or the *Bhagavata* in the *Nāmghar*. This they term as *Puṭhi-cowā*. They thereby begin to lose their grip over the art form and also bring in the essence, nuances and even verses from *Puṭhi-cowā* during their transition as has been observed during documentation from *Ojā Mahendra Nath*.

Chapter three is an extension of the previous chapter in the sense that it broadens and elongates the understanding of *Gīts* dealt extensively in the latter by putting to notation the most popular and finely representative piece of a category in each stage of a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* performance. Apart from the *Gīts* frequently encountered in practice and in available printed text, this chapter includes notated scripts of new pieces like the *Doṅuwā bānā* and the *Doṅuwā pada*. Skeletal framework for the *Gor bānā* was attempted for the first time with the hope that it can be revived in the future. The notation done following the norms of the prevalent Hindustani classical music helps in its own way not only to ease more the articulation of a technical perception of the musical matter but also to suffice a

structured layout basing on which an aspirant can learn and perform. Of course, certain performance materials such as those in non-metrical formats and those involving complex styles of note progressions proved problematic for accurate transcription. Opinions and suggestions were thus taken from music scholars in these circumstances.

Apart from this, inexpert treatment of certain aspects of some *Gīts* on the part of practitioners projecting a grammatically void approach also created hurdles on the way of preparing notational scripts. Nevertheless, painstaking efforts resulted in the preparation of decent specimens which can considerably guide one in acquiring a technical hold over the *Gīts*. The inclusion of this chapter has been deemed essential because such a step would definitely check to an extent the unmindful assimilation of foreign elements. Further, it can make clearer the deviation, loss or sustenance of the presently performed material and thus help to comprehend *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music as it exists today.

It is also to be noted that presenting the notated *Gīts* in the sequential order followed in a *Gondhcauparī sabhā* performance helps in re-emphasizing and in grasping more strongly what material follows what. The attempted notation in this chapter is a preliminary yet crucial work which can act as a good base for other researchers to carry forward the research centering the *Gīts*. It needs to be noticed that only one piece representing a category has been subjected to transcription. Hence, it is not an exhaustive inclusion of the body of *Gīts*. More research endeavours are needed to be directed towards notating as many *Gīts* as possible so as to capture and preserve the rich gamut of *Biyāh-gowā Gīts*.

Chapter four treated two other areas considered important to an intensive comprehension of the *Gīts* one of which had never been explored or handled in any previous work. These are the transliteration of the verses adopted for singing and the grammatical analyses of the cymballic language forming the different rhythms vital to *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music. Transliteration has been done with an eye to facilitate equally the readers and learners alike to master the pronunciation of the different words and syllables which are not in modern Assamese so that the lyrical text does not stand altered.

The *Tālas*, on the other hand, form an important area of study because a *Gīt* is incomplete without the *Tāla* and the negligence of the same would account for a

faulty performance or bring in unwanted corruption of the originally existing data. An exploration of the *Tālas* has also cleared certain misconceptions regarding the same and helped in comprehending the status of the body of rhythms as they are practised today by the current performers. This information would definitely act as a firm foundation for other researchers to elaborate on the subject more and derive more conclusions on it.

Field data and analyses provided the present work the much-needed ground to frame a disciplined understanding of the *Tālas* and a proper re-categorisation of the same. The *Tālas* were reclassified and divided into two categories. The first category comprises six *Tālas* namely *Cābtāla*, *Coutāla*, *Lecāri*, *Rupahi*, *Jikirī* and *Thokā*. The second category is found to include only one, namely *Heseni*. *Kuteni* is not understood as a properly developed rhythm and suggests only a definite style played at the background that could not be set into any melody-line of a composition. The *Bols* (*Khām*, *Tuk*, *Kut tum*, *Likiri likiri*) for the different *Tālas* as practiced by the performers were included as printed material for the first time. The notation of verses to demonstrate how a *Tāla* is incorporated has been given at the end of the fourth chapter for a better understanding of the rhythm section of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music in this study. A classification table has also been included to better demonstrate the various *Tālas* in their new categorisation.

It has been interesting to note that the present day young performers are more ready to adopt their learning from the printed text. During field work it was noticed that a young *Ojā* was trying to convince a seasoned performer regarding the division of the *Tālas* into five types as was mentioned in a book. However, the latter stubbornly resorted to stating that there is and always were seven *Tālas* in *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* (field note 21/13.05.18).

The present study has assiduously strived to form a concrete idea of the nature of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music by directing concentrated attention to the *Gīts* in particular. Field-data collection followed by systematic attempts at elaborating the diverse categories of songs has helped to unfold all the major aspects of the material in hand. For example, the explorative study succeeded in presenting systematized information on the content, contexts and characteristics of the *Gīts* thereby providing a considerably deep insight into the subject. What the studied matter has brought into immediate focus is that the sustainability of the singular

facets of the institution with regard primarily to the music is under serious threat because the working of external influences on the musical system poses considerable danger to the very identity of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*.

The most potent threat has been identified as the overpowering hold of the art forms within the Sattrā tradition central to the school of Neo-Vaishnavism, felt in almost all the primary phases constituting the *Gīts*. It needs to be mentioned that *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* is a kindred form of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*. In many respects, the former behaves in a manner quite similar to the latter. For example, both being different types of *Ojāpāli* they naturally contain similar elements. Secondly, both are deep-rooted in the cult of Vaishnavism and thirdly, both the types treat the textual content of the same epics besides following an almost similar performance sequence in their songs. These similarities coupled with other factors have facilitated Neo-Vaishnavism (particularly *Sattriyā Ojāpāli*) to easily seep into the territory of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* and has subsequently disturbed the latter's original build-up.

Among the other factors can be counted the initiation of *Biyāh-gowā Ojās* into Neo-Vaishnavism and the consequent assimilation, often done rather mindlessly, of *Sattriyā* elements into the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* system. Many *Ojās* are seen completely withdrawing from the *Biyāh-gowā* school once they have formally entered the *Sattriyā* organisation. This has further aggravated the gradual decrease in the number of *Biyāh-gowā* practitioners and has thereby prohibited in its own way the wide practice of the art form. An act like *Puṭhi cowā* is found often performed by *Biyāh-gowā Ojās* who are Neo-Vaishnavite followers. Because of this the *Ojās* end up incorporating *Sattriyā* tunes into the *Biyāh-gowā Gīts*.

One very important fact to be noticed is that after the recognition of *Sattriyā* as a classical art form of India, in the year 2000, the said institution has started to enjoy unprecedented attention and importance. The huge plethora of events and programmes catering to this art form has contributed to its making as the most celebrated artistic product of Assam. It is found to be more practised and performed on stage compared to *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* and such a situation has definitely proved to be a blow to the uninterrupted sustenance of the *Biyāh-gowā* system.

Following the current events, *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* now exists as a system which as we have seen, has been free-handedly manipulated at almost all the vital stages by the *Sattriyā* art form. Of course, an orally-transmitted art form tends to bring in material from parallel orders from time to time and gets reshaped with the passage of time. However, it is undeniable that amidst all changes it succeeds in retaining its singularity because of which it continues to stand as a separate artistic product. For instance, *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* too incorporated songs like *Kabirar gīts* into its order which has nothing to do with the ritual in hand. But such an inclusion could do nothing to adversely affect the main unique format of the art form.

On the other hand, thorough analyses of the present status of the *Biyāh-gowā* musical order has revealed that *Sattriyā* art form has entered and tried altering the vital factors contributing to the uniqueness of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*. This is a serious matter and deeming this crucial and important, under the given circumstances, the study and preservation of the unique characteristics of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Gīts*, including their transliteration and notation, is indispensable. Contributing to and upholding the basic identity of the institution, this research work has endeavoured to present close analyses of the *Gīts* aiming at their accurate perpetuation.

Since *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*, a unique art form and musical tradition is understood to be almost on the verge of losing its singular identity, a rigorous cultural documentation is what has been attempted by the researcher in a methodical and scientific manner. The conclusions are based on the significant changes that have been observed during the course of this study. As mentioned earlier, the varied changes have been brought upon this endangered art form by intercultural influences both global as well as local.

Conclusively, the present research product has thus sought and successfully framed an organised understanding of the current form of the musical complex of Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli while realizing the different factors continuously working on it and leading to transmutations and reformations. The present work can thus be considered both as a foundational yet critical study of the prevalent status of Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli music with special reference to the Gīts.

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Fieldwork Documentation

Photographs –

COSTUME, Pic 1 - Cādar as worn previously

COSTUME, Pic 2 - Cādar worn nowadays

COSTUME, Pic 3 - Cādar in Sattriyā Ojāpāli

PS, Pic 1a/b - Sarba Bhadra Mandal

Audios –

PS Aud 1 - Sadācār in Sabhā

PS Aud 2 - The Bhāgavat in Sabhā

PS I, Aud 1 - Gunjari rāga
PS II, Aud 1 - Bhanitā discussion 1
PS II, Aud 2 - Bhanitā discussion 2
PS III, Aud 1 - Kirtana verses in Viṣṇu pada
PS IV, Aud 1 - Guru Stuti
PS IV, Aud 2 - Guru Stuti discussion
PS IV, Aud 3 - Ghunni of Gor Bānā
PS IV, Aud 4 - Kirtana verses in Pātani dhāl pada
PS IV, Aud 5 - Orally transmitted Kholā Dihā
PS IV, Aud 6 - Kholā dihā discussion
PS IV, Aud 7 - Newly composed Kholā dihā
PS IV, Aud 8 - Rādhā-Rāma
PS IV, Aud 9 - Bandhā dihā discussion
PS V, Aud 1 - Purabi rāga DO
RITUAL, Aud 1 - Daśāvatāra verses in Pānitōlā
RITUAL, Aud 2 - Pānitōlā verses discussion

Videos –

COSTUME, Vid 1 - Cādar
COSTUME, Vid 2 - Jiban Kalita's muthi khāru
PS, Vid 1 - 4th Adhibāsar gīt
PS, Vid 2 - Bhāgavat jātrā
PS, Vid 3 - Bhāgavat in the altar

PS, Vid 4 - Ambience

PS, Vid 5 - Obeisance to the Bhāgavat 1.10mins

PS I, Vid 1 - Tā Ne Na in Sattriyā Ojāpāli

PS II, Vid 1 - Common Ghunni for Pātani gīts

PS III, Vid 1 - Viṣṇu Bhānani from Kirtana

PS IV, Vid 1 - Guru Stuti

PS IV, Vid 2 - Concise version sample

PS IV, Vid 3 - Ākhyāns discussion

PS IV, Vid 4 - Ākhyān from the Bhagawata

PS V, Vid 1 - Changes on stage