

## ABSTRACT

The cultural beauty of the land of Assam, like the rest of India, has marked manifestations in the sphere of artistic creativity involving a range of disciplines. Performance-oriented forms directed at a live audience account for the most celebrated of the creative disciplines. *Ojāpālī* is one such highly regarded performing art characterized by a confluence of music, dance and drama-like matter where the latter two are subsidiary of the wide body of the first. With the roots being located in distant history, *Ojāpālī* has evolved as a definite art form through the centuries. The two most primary aspects of scriptural recitation and ritual indulgence qualify it to be accounted as very much a part of the Pan-Indian tradition of *Kathakatā* in which a ‘*Kathak*’ or narrator narrates tales from scriptural texts while following a firm set of artistic behaviour so as to satisfy the dual aim of entertaining and enlightening the rural mass. *Ojāpālī* in Assam exists in different types the categorisation of which is generally done on the kind of text adopted for recitation. Of the two categories – epic-based and non-epic based – *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālī* specific to the district of Darrang in Assam, which has been selected as the area for this study, belongs to the first category as it primarily confines its material for musical narrations to the epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

The present work intends to subject the musical unit of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālī* to a disciplined examination. It is believed that a systematic evaluation of the primary matter involved in defining the existing structure of the said art form could help in many ways in reviving, restoring and sustaining the specified elements contributing to its remarkable singularity which has been found under serious threat owing to many hostile socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Primarily a ritual accompaniment to the worship of *Lord Vāsudevā*, *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālī*, however, is typified by a sophisticated musical complex involving potent artistry that distinguishes it as a rich performing art and not merely an adjunct to a ritual. *Gondhcauparī Sabhā* or the main ritualistic event involving the worship of *Lord Vāsudevā* is found to be the principal platform showcasing an elaborate *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālī* recital.

Extensive field observation of unabridged *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpālī* performances has revealed not only interesting details regarding its musical richness defined in parts

by purely classical matter but also the obvious alterations in its performance owing to dire lack of attention to the preservation and sustenance of the unique musical system of the art form.

The main idea behind this research activity has been, thus, first to collect the scattered material of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music, a substantial part of which is either found to be fast absorbed and altered by other systems or facing obsolescence owing to non-practice. Second, to subject the gathered data to systematic analyses so as to frame out a near exact copy of the current musical structure of the art form. As a matter of fact, no previous work on *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* has been found attempting a comprehensive and thorough address of the musical design that actually establishes its individual performance identity. The scarce literature only make cursory remarks on the subject. Thus, the unexplored area of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music on one hand immediately signalled a research gap and on the other called for dedicated efforts on the field owing to extreme lack of written data.

A widespread institution, Neo-Vaishnavism is found deeply enrooted in the Assamese consciousness. Henceforth, its cultural products, *Sattriyā* dance and *Sattriyā Ojāpāli* among others, enjoy a privileged status. The national recognition of *Sattriya* dance as a classical form further denotes a vindication of the Neo-Vaishnavite school. Given the set of circumstances, the overpowering say of *Sattriyā* over others within the cultural construct of Assam is way too obvious. *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli*, which is believed to be an older form, has suffered setbacks in the Neo-Vaishnavite upsurge.

The present study “**Gīts of Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli: An expository study**” endeavours to track the continuing event of assimilations, transformations and subsequent corruptions of the artistic built of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* music while succumbing to the influential force of Neo-Vaishnavism and also others. It is to be noted that the *Gīts* (songs), varied in nature and presented within a tight sequential framework, that account for constructing the unique musical body of the art form, have been collected from current practitioners, placed in their respective positions within the performance sequence and then subjected to an organized evaluation in this work. That such an ordered study of the *Gīts* would contribute greatly to retaining the unique qualities of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as an

art form while simultaneously resisting the unmindful assimilations, has been the main driving force behind this study. It is true culture is dynamic and cultural products confront changes with passing time. However, the changes that threaten the very identity of an institution need to be addressed in time. Thus, what is attempted in the present work is to capture in all its authenticity the present-day status of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* by extensively dealing with a wide body of *Gīts* wherein lies the very pulse of the art form.

The present work is expository in nature. An explanatory discussion of the subject fits well with the performer-researcher's interest which is primarily capturing, restoring and safeguarding a neglected cultural product silently perishing. It is believed that such a descriptive treatment would also provide a good base for future research as very little work has been undertaken in this area. This study, for example, called for considerably long-term field surveys and scrupulous attention to detail as numerous *Gīts* had to be collected from different sources and the content, contexts and characteristics of these had to be defined and delineated in broad terms. It is noteworthy that the very few living octogenarian practitioners could be interviewed during the course of the study. A host of crucial data related to *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Gīts* could be successfully recovered from them. It has been seen that the new generation of performers has a relatively restricted scope of learning and performing the art form. It is quite obvious that with the loss of the old-school artists substantial significant material will cease to exist. As a matter of fact, some senior experts have been lost mid-way during this research. With this, the need for the descriptive nature of the work seems explained.

The research matter has been distributed within a plan of five chapters. The opening chapter aims to present a good introductory basis to the subject chosen for study. It comprises the elementary details required to frame well an understanding first of *Ojāpāli* as an art system in general and then of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* in particular. The second chapter contains a very detailed treatment of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Gīts* while meticulously dealing with all the essential factors related to *Gīts* - their content, contexts and characteristics. The anatomy of the *Gīts* have been discussed keeping in mind their sequential positions within the performance plan followed in a *Gondhcauparī sabhā*. A preliminary musicological approach to one *Gīt* representative of a category has also been

adopted. In the next chapter, the notational representation of each of the *Gīts* popularly sung in a *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* recital has been attempted. It is noteworthy that the musical scores have been listed in the chapter while following the strict sequence; as a matter of fact, the learner-performers could derive adequate help from the chapter to prepare themselves for an elaborate concert. The fourth chapter presents the transliteration of the notated *Gīts* to ease the understanding as the text is not in modern Assamese. Besides this, the chapter also looks into the subject of '*Tāla*' (rhythm) because the *Gīts* do not stand apart from the *Tāla* and without a basic knowledge of the rhythm, a thorough comprehension of the *Gīts* is not possible. The closing chapter concludes the work while highlighting the interesting findings of the study.

The methodology adopted includes field data collection done with the aid of taking down notes, audio-visual methods to record interviews and performances. Field documentation has been followed by the close examination of the collected data. Although minimal the already available literature on the subject has also been relied upon.

The given research work in hand, thus, endeavours to present an expository discussion of the *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli Gīts* in all their colours and forms by adopting such ways as attempting musicographical representations, transliteration of verses and systematising the untreated area of *Tālas* which have never been taken into hand by any previous researcher. The work is motivated throughout by the aim of holding tight the remnant material that represent the uniqueness of *Biyāh-gowā Ojāpāli* as a rich art form and also identifying the forces altering it and even threatening its very existence.