

THEATRE TRADITIONS OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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2016**

DECLARATION

I, *Anjan Konwar*, hereby declare that the thesis entitled *Theatre Traditions of North-East India* is a record of bonafide research done by me under the supervision of Dr. Nigamananda Das, in the Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus during the period of 2012-16 and that it has not been submitted either in full or in part to any other university or institute for the award of any other degree, diploma and title.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that thesis entitled *Theatre Traditions of North-East India* is a bonafide record of research work done by Mr. Anjan Konwar, Regn No. 508/2012, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema during 2012-16. Submitted to the Nagaland University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, this thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other title and that the thesis represents independent and original work on the part of the candidate under my supervision. This is again certified that the research has been undertaken as per UGC regulations 2009 and the candidate has fulfilled the criteria mentioned in the University Ordinances-OC-4, sub-section 5(i) of the section-9 for submission of the thesis.

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PREFACE

Theatre is a composite but pure art form. It is not considered as a pure form of literature since it not only involves reading and listening but also watching. It is because of this very combination of the three different art forms that the study of theatre becomes more arduous than the other forms. Theatre, as a form of art, involves the performance of human experiences with the help of various tools and with a set purpose to provide delight to both the performers as well as the spectators. Theatre has an indispensable relationship with the evolution of human civilization. Perhaps it emerged much before humans could make use of languages to exchange their thoughts and feelings. The gestures which human beings used in order to express the inner ideas were possibly the earliest lessons on drama that over the passage of time were attached with other forms of expressions resulting into a more complex yet delightful medium.

India has an enormously rich heritage of theatre traditions belonging to different cultural milieu. They are as varied as the cultures of India are and they function as the mouthpieces for the millions of people who have no other voices to speak in. Since these theatre traditions do not have any written form and are preserved by the people of the society, they are usually considered as folk art forms.

The North-East India, with a variegated conglomeration of people, is itself an enchanted region and is as diverse as the nation is. The region has a rich treasure of folk traditions and culture that is manifested through variety of styles of dance forms, music, rituals, and theatre traditions though in some areas the theatre traditions are not so vibrant.

Theatre has always been a medium through which the people of a society has sustained itself by depicting or sharing in a common platform the joys, anguishes, losses, upheavals etc. But of late it has faced tremendous challenges from the modern means of media and entertainment. The onslaught of television with multiple channels, internet, and films has in a way sapped the theatre traditions. It has greater

implications that are apparently visible. It is not only the theatre traditions that are in danger but the general creativity of the people which is at the risk as well.

The present work has been a humble attempt to study the different theatre traditions available in the North-Eastern region of India. Since only a few states from the region have prominent theatre traditions it has been very difficult to find out the other lesser known theatre traditions. The study further has sought to take a stock of the present status of the theatre traditions from the North-East in the wake of the electronic media and entertainment boom.

It is easily perceptible that theatre traditions are closely linked to the religion of a people and as such a more developed form of theatre is noticed wherever a particular religion has ingrained itself for long. In the North-East since Hinduism arrived much earlier than Christianity a stronger theatre tradition is noticed in places where it settled down profoundly.

But, like many other institutions theatre also has been faced with plenty of challenges particularly due to the onslaught of the electronic media. The availability of contents designed for the simple entertainment has taken away the interest of the people from theatre and consequently, hampered the growth and development of theatre.

The study was carried out through the collection of data by visiting libraries and institutions and also through conduction of personal interviews with people concerned with the sphere of theatre. During the process of documentation the APA citation methodology was followed. However, within the chapters wherever references are made the citations have been mentioned as foot notes with a certain deviation. It has been done solely for the convenience of reading and nothing else.

(Anjan Konwar)

Chapter I

I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what is to be a human being. – Oscar Wilde

1. Introduction:

1.1 Theatre: A brief idea

In *the Encyclopaedia of Knowledge* Grolier has described *Theatre* as a word derived from the Greek *Theastai* which means *to view* or *to see*, while its noun form *Theatron* refers to the *place of seeing*. It may be defined as not merely a form which entails dramatic performances alone but it refers to an all inclusive term that encompasses every other form required to produce a dramatic action such as acting, directing, lighting, stage design, theatre architecture, costume and make -up, machinery, special effects and dramaturgy or playwriting.¹

In *Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopaedia* theatre is defined as the live performance of dramatic actions in order to tell a story or create a spectacle. It is believed to have its origin in religious ritual; it often enacts myths or story central to the belief structure of a culture or creates comedy to the travesty of such narratives.²

In his reference to the indigenous theatre in Africa E. T. Kirby mentions of African theatre as simple performances at various levels such as ritual and ritualized enactments, storytelling performances, spirit-cult performances, masquerades and masquerade enactments, ceremonial performances and comedies – all of these submit to the idea

¹ Grolier. *Encyclopaedia of Knowledge*. Vol. 18: 1993, p. 209.

² Theodore, Pappas. *Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 9, 2005, p. 239

that drama in the accepted sense of situational interaction expressed in dialogue between characters subsists only in a few rudimentary forms that are rare exceptions.³

The observations referred to have all point to suggest that theatre is a genre that cannot be kept restricted to dramatic performances only. It rather can be treated as an umbrella term for all kinds of performances including rituals, songs, dances and of course, plays which necessitates *seeing* by people of all sections.

The term 'theatre' refers to a whole body of activities that are employed to perform out human experiences on the stage through dance, music, drama, light and other such artistic means with an aim to produce a feeling of completeness among all the parts of it, i.e. the audience, the actors, the producers and directors and the technicians. India has an enormously rich heritage of theatre traditions belonging to different cultural milieu. They are as varied as the cultures of India are and they function as the mouthpieces for the millions of people who have no other voices to speak in. Since these theatre traditions do not have any written form and are preserved by the people of the society, they are usually considered as folk art forms. In India there are many such forms among which the notables are Yatra in medieval Utkal/ Orissa, 'Yatra kirtanya' or 'Jatra' and 'Baol' in Bengal, Bhaona/ *Ankiya Nāt* in Assam, 'Mach' in Madhya Pradesh, in Kashmir 'Bhand Pathar', 'Bhavai' in Gujarat, "Nautanki, Ramleela and Rasleela' in Northern India, 'Tamasha' in Maharastra, Krishnattam, Koodiyaattam in Kerala, Yakshagaana in Karnataka, Desianata in tribal belt of Odisha, and the like.

The North-East India, with a mosaic of tribes and sub-tribes, is an India within India. It is a combination of eight states that constitute the region. Each of the states has unique tradition and culture that distinguishes one from the other. The region is very rich in folk culture with different styles of dance forms, music and theatre traditions. However, in some cultures of the region the theatre traditions are not so vivid. The traits of a theatre are embedded in the dance and other cultural forms.

³ Kirby, E.T. "Indigenous African Theatre." *The Drama Review*. 1974, 22-35, Quoted in *Rethinking Folk Drama*, Steve Tillis (ed), 1999, p. 128.

In the pre-colonial times the theatrical traditions were secure within the norms of the respective societies. But after the arrival of the British, western thoughts and ideas came to influence, along with other domains, the theatre traditions as well. However, though the theatre traditions of the North-East have not changed drastically due to its isolation, both of geographical and political, and also because of the traditionalist outlook that the people of the region generally uphold, yet it has not retained its significance in the public domain which it once used to enjoy.

Theatre has always been a medium through which the people of a society has sustained itself by depicting or sharing in a common platform the joys, anguishes, losses, upheavals, etc. But of late it has faced tremendous challenges from the modern means of media and entertainment. The onslaught of television with multiple channels, internet, and films has in a way sapped the theatre traditions. It has greater implications that are apparently visible. It is not only the theatre traditions that are in danger but the general creativity of the people which is at the risk as well.

1.2 Tradition: A cursory observation

Tradition is born out of the realization of discourse about folk and folk-life over the passage of time. In this respect it is essential to consider the intricate and indispensable relationship that exists between folk-life and folk-tradition. The relevance and importance of tradition in the context of folk studies can never be denied since folk-culture is always reliant on tradition. Utley Francis Lee observes, "In folklore 'tradition' is felt to be the operative word; without traditional link folklore cannot exist."⁴

The word *Tradition* has been derived "from the Latin word *traditio* meaning handing down from generation to generation. Tradition includes both process and the product."⁵ The term is more lucidly explained in *Lexicon Webster Dictionary*. Tradition means "the handing down of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites and customs from

⁴ Lee, Utley Francis. (1972). "A Definition of Folklore in American folklore." *Folklore and Folk life: An Introduction*. Richard M. Dorson (ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 13.

⁵ Srivastava, S.L. (1974). *Folk culture and Oral Tradition*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p.9.

father to son, or from ancestors to posterity by oral communication that which is handed down from age to age by oral by oral communication; a doctrine or statement of facts so handed down.”⁶

The term ‘tradition’ has been defined by many scholars also. It involves a body of the distinctive set of rules and regulations, behavioural patterns, attitude, life-style as observed by a society. Yogendra Singh explains tradition as “the cumulative heritage of a society which permeates through all levels of social organization for example the value system, the social structure and the structure of personality.”⁷ In similar way S.L. Srivastava in his *Folk Culture and Oral Tradition* refers to the term tradition as “cumulative social heritage in the form of habits, customs, attitude and ways of life which is transmitted from generation to generation either through written scriptures or through word of mouth. The tradition transmitted through word of mouth is called oral tradition.”⁸

Traditions are always subject to change since lives of people are never static. Just as the gradual transformations of the lifestyles take place with the passage of time the traditions of folk culture at the same time also undergoes changes. It is to be noted here that no pressure from any source is required for the changes to occur. Such transformations take place naturally just before everyone’s notice yet they remain unseen. In the process of change which happens naturally traditions do not get detached from the roots. In reality tradition is not an inert element; its changes are subject to time and context or situation.

Prior to the formation of a concrete idea about tradition on the basis of the definitions mentioned herein it may be assumed that with active traditions both change and innovations are natural tendencies. The change or transformation of a tradition does not suggest the end of that particular tradition. It rather points to the fact that the

⁶ The Lexicon Webster Dictionary, Encyclopaedic Edition, Vol-II, p. 1044. (1988).

⁷ Singh, Y. “Traditional Culture Pattern in India and industrial Change.” *Tradition and Modernity in India*. A.B. Shah and C. R. M. Rao (eds), p. 45.

⁸ Srivastava, S.L. (1974) *Folk culture and Oral Tradition*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 9.

tradition is still alive since only an active tradition has the capacity to display its vitality through its dynamic nature. Traditions are not mere replications of beliefs or acts that are followed blindly through generations. They are, more precisely, cumulative expressions of the acts that are absorbed carefully and consciously. From this perspective it may be insisted that tradition does not involve a sedentary process. On the contrary, certain changes or appropriate refinements of a particular tradition contribute towards making it stronger only.

As has already been mentioned tradition does not suggest sheer copy of the past. An alive tradition by keeping relevance with the past strengthens the present by means of acceptance and rejection of certain aspects concerning it. "The past should be altered by present as much as the present is directed by the past."⁹ Again Eliot also recommends the essence of a historical sense of the past. "The historical sense i.e. tradition involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence."¹⁰

Tradition can broadly be divided into two types- oral tradition and written tradition. The oral tradition moves on mouth to mouth from one person to another or from one generation to the next. On the other hand, in written tradition matters are presented in a written format. Although, both the traditions have their distinctive aspects that set them apart yet they are, at the same time, complementary to each other.

1.3 North-East: A brief note

North-East is strategically placed in an area straddling the plains of South Asia and waterways and the Hills South-East Asia. The region is ethnically diverse and economically underdeveloped. The colonial intervention of the nineteenth century introduced structures of taxation, revenue collection and control of resources that resulted in the isolation of the hills and the establishment of the 'plantation complex' in the foothills and plains. These events have a great bearing on the status of resources in

⁹ Eliot, T.S. (1972). "Tradition and Individual Talent" *The Sacred Wood*. Bombay: B I Publications. p. 20-28.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

the region today. Communities living in the region belong to an eclectic anthropological mix that reflects the geographical position of the Northeast.

The North Eastern region of India is the part of India which is situated on the eastern most corner of the country. It is linked with the main land of India on its western side through a small strip of land which is generally called 'chicken neck.' During the entire British colonial period in India, North East India occupies a very important strategic geo-political position due to its international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The region earlier comprised the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, popularly known as 'the Seven Sisters.' Lately, the state of Sikkim has also come under the umbrella of this region owing to its nearness to the area and somewhat similar type of developmental and other problems. "Though the North-East region reflects certain significant ecological and cultural adaptive contrasts between the hills and the plains region, there are also significant elements of continuity in the biological, cultural and social factors between the hills and the plains. Again, available ancient and medieval records indicate inter-dependence and interactions between the hills and the plains in the in the North-East."¹¹ Undoubtedly, these states constitute a heterogeneous natural region of the hills, plains, valleys, flora and fauna and other related geographical features.

The North-East India is a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups, customs and cultures, dialects and languages, and religious beliefs and practices. The primary occupation of the people of north east India is agriculture. The people living in the hills of the region have been facing shortage of cultivable land. The different geographical conditions in the hills are the main constraints for building the necessary infra-structure such as roads, markets, etc. for economic development of the people. Nature has bestowed upon the North-East with abundant natural resources in the form of oil, gas, coal and forest products. But, in spite of being so much rich the region is economically backward as compared to other regions of the country. As a result, the people of the North-East believe that they are neglected by the Centre which has led a lot of unrest in the region.

¹¹ Vidyarthi, L.P. (1993). *Art and Culture of North-East*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Govt. of India, p. 51.

1.4 Folk and Folk theatre

Of the three major branches of performing art folk drama, the other two being folk music and folk dance respectively, has been providing entertainment as well as education to the common people throughout the ages across racial, cultural and social diversities. It is for this very reason that it occupies a very important position in the domain of traditional mediums of public communication. Folk drama is a kind of theatre institution having its own distinctive qualities that sets it apart from the other regular theatre traditions. In this paper a humble attempt has been made to focus on some of the features of folk drama and discuss *Ojā-Pāli* as a form of folk drama.

Roger D. Abrahams in his essay *Folk Drama* in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (ed. Richard M. Dorson) maintains that folk drama refers to the “ traditional play activity that relies primarily on dialogue to establish its meanings and tells a story through the combination of dialogue and action, the outcome of which is known to the audience ahead of time.”¹²

Folk drama may be defined as an art form that centres on rural life with the texts primarily circulating in oral form and bearing some elements of drama per se. It is to be noted that it is not a division of a total dramatic art form but an independent one. In the ancient times people used to offer prayers to their deities through various social and religious practices. The chief attraction of such functions was on the performance of the art forms of songs and dance. Gradually, folk drama developed with the assimilation of the elements of drama with the traditional forms of music and dance.¹³ The form of drama everywhere in the world originates from religious practices. Folk drama as such is the preceding stage of the art form of drama. The *Natyashastra* of Bharatamuni is a proven document on the birth, development and expansion of drama in India.

¹² Dorson, Richard M. (1972) “Introduction: Concept of folklore and Folk-life Studies.” *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago, p. 37.

¹³ Shipley, J. T. (1970). *Dictionary of World Literary Terms, Forms, Technique, Criticism*. Boston.

The traces of the early folk drama are found in the great Indian epics i.e. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Patanjali's Mahabhasya or the literary texts of the ancient times. The influence of the traditional folk drama on the Sanskrit dramatists may be felt from their attempt to produce such works as Mahanataka. Mahanataka is the name of the genre which has at least ten acts, all the four Patakasthanas (intimation of episodic incidents) and all the recognised dramatic sentiments. The instructions which have been laid in connection to the performance of Sutradhara and Adhikari of *Ankiyā Nāt* and Yatra respectively, the same may be discovered in Mahanataka as well. The Bhakti Movement of the medieval period was also greatly influenced by the traditional folk dramaturgy. "By the fifteenth century, Vaishnavism or Bhagvata Dharma had become a powerful pan-Indian religio-cultural movement.... Great preachers and saint-poets sang of the *avatars* of Vishnu (mainly Krishna and Ram) in inspired songs... They conceived dramatic forms to give a vision of God in His incarnations in human form to preach the virtues of *bhakti* and great ideals of life."¹⁴ Thus, the emergence of Vaishnavism and its effort to utilize the potentialities of the folk drama to propagate its principles of faith raised it (folk drama) from the rudimentary to a more widely acceptable form.

From the 14th century onwards with the gradual decline of Sanskrit drama folk theatre began to wear a regional outlook. "Folk theatre as a typical theatre form gradually emerged as a regional form of drama based on the attributes of local religion, legends, art, vernacular history and mythology."¹⁵ In spite of the movement of folk theatre through various stages of change and interaction with other forms it has been able to retain its age old antiquity. Presently, India has several forms of folk drama prevalent in different states with its own distinctive features. In South India dance forms like *Kathakali*, *Krishnattam* and *Kuttiattam* of Kerala, *Yaksagana* of Karnataka, *Therukuttu* of Tamilnadu, *Bhagabata Mela* of Andhra Pradesh are still as much strong tradition as they were in the past. On the other hand, *Khyal* of Rajasthan, *Maach* of Madhyapradesh, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Jatra* of West Bengal, *Prahallad Natak* of Odhissa, *Ankiyā Nāt* and *Ojā-Pāli* of Assam, with their emphasis on the employment of music and acting, present a variegated display of the rich traditions of India. There may exist some features

¹⁴ Awasthi, Suresh. (2008). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust. pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ Mohanty, B. B. (2012). *Folk Theatre Beyond Boundaries* Guwahati: DVS Publications, p. 7.

that are common to all the forms of folk theatre even though they are graced with own distinctive qualities rooted in their local traditions and customs. Folk drama in India are characterized, as Kapila Vatsyayan mentions, by “staggering multiplicity of genres, forms, styles and techniques”¹⁶ and their differences lie only in their operation, dramatization, costume, make-up and style of acting.

However, considering folk drama as a storehouse of the rich culture of India and the diversity of both Indian culture as well as of its folk dramatic traditions, some of the basic features of it may be mentioned herein.

The first and foremost aspect of folk drama is that it is the outcome of a well harmonized combination of acting, songs and dance. These elements are the inseparable factors that give shape to folk drama and they should be so balanced that the resultant form does not lose its authenticity, naturalness and attachment with the world of the common people.

The subject matter of folk drama is usually religious and edifying in nature. The religious folk theatre developed out of its meditation on the aspects and tales of religion and myth. On the other hand, sometimes secular themes are also dealt with but it is primarily done for the purpose of providing entertainment only. However, under the influence of Vaishnavism or Bhagvata Dharma that emerged by the 15th century matters related to the birth of Lord Krsna, his childhood, his love with Radha , etc. were began to be used as themes of folk drama. The episodes on the heroic adventures of the important personalities of both the epics, i.e. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are still given important place in folk drama. But it may be asserted here that the actual subject of folk drama is based on the lives of the common people.

¹⁶ Vatsayan, K. (1980). *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 1.

As an institution of people the chief purpose of folk drama is to provide entertainment to them. But while doing so nothing extravagant is presented before the spectators. Whether it is the use of language, acting, dancing, singing or the overall execution of the total production in folk drama the principle of simplicity is maintained throughout all of them. The concept of stage in folk drama is, for example, very simple as the actors usually perform in the make-shift stage only. It comprises of an empty space which may be a sacred place or an ordinary one- it could either be a temple or a regular street.

Folk drama is a form of people centric performing art which is not confined to a particular community or religious belief. It is governed by the element of autonomy having its own distinctive qualities. It is participatory in nature and as such people can act, sing or dance freely overcoming all restrictions of narrowness. This attitude of the people helps them to consider folk drama as the common property of a people. From this point of view it may be argued that folk drama possesses the power to create a sense of belonging among people that is fast losing its ground and can form the basis of the much needed unity, harmony in the disturbed society of today.

Another important feature of folk drama is that it is a vastly dynamic art form and not a static one. It is characterised by its ability to change or to adopt. A greater part of the folk drama of the present day is the outcome of the efforts of the educated people that have, in turn, influenced the urban life to a large extent. As obvious consequence of such attempts folk drama is gradually losing its old simplicity and is now recognized as literary folk drama.

A very important and unique feature of folk drama is that it possess an autonomy that is manifested through the key elements like music, movement, gestures, dance, dramatic dialogues, story, narrative as each of these can be enjoyed separately.¹⁷

¹⁷ Awasthi, Suresh. (2008). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 100.

In traditional Indian folk theatre the use of gorgeous costume and ornaments apart from heavy colourful make-up are observed. In some situations masks are used too to enhance the effect of the performance. It is also characterised by the employment of loud music accompanied by dance movements and chorus.

In most of the Indian traditional folk drama the line of difference between the *Purvaranga* (Preliminaries) and *Prastavana* (Statement), practices of old classical tradition, are not very distinct even if they have now become a part of the folk tradition.

In addition to these, the employment of “the stock characters like *Sutradhar* and *Vidushak*, mixture of verse and prose passages in the text, ceremonial introduction of the characters with a *Pravesh Geet* (entry song), the use of half curtain to manipulate actors’ entrances and exits and to treat space and time, stylised gait, dance patterns fixed for various characters” mark the form of folk drama.¹⁸

The features considered so far from the essentials of folk theatre. However, there may be differences among the various folk theatre traditions as there are geographical, environmental, life style differences among the regions and peoples.

The North-East India is a heaven of folk culture as the entire region is inhabited by hundreds of tribes or communities and as each of them has continued to adhere to their respective culture and traditions in spite of the aggression of the modern civilization. Assam has a rich tradition of folk drama apart from some quasi-dramatic traditions that are still in practice. The *Natyashastra* mentions 4 types of *vrittis* or regional varieties: *Avanti*, *Dakshinatyā*, *Panchali* and *Odra Magadhi*.¹⁹ Of these four varieties the last one is spoken of as being in practice in ancient Pragjyotishpur. On the basis of several documents such as Hastchurveda, Hiuen-tsang’s accounts, copper plate of Banamala Barman, etc. it may be assumed that Assamese folk theatre emerged even before the first century B.C. As a result of the efforts to expedite the spread of Bhakti

¹⁸ Awasthi, Suresh. (2008). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 15.

¹⁹ Vatsayan, K. (1996). *Bharata: The Natyashastra*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p.49.

movement in Assam under the leadership of Sankardeva a new era of folk drama began. He, along with his most ardent disciple Madhavdeva, started to write plays that are known as *Ankiyā Nāt*. It must be acknowledged that such typical plays were produced keeping in mind the folk traditions that were still in practice at that point of time. The two Saints probably had borrowed a lot of material from them and used them to serve the desired purpose. The folk tradition may be classified broadly in to two kinds-one is complete or total folk drama while the other one is quasi-dramatic. In the former type all the four key elements of folk drama namely- songs, dance, music and acting are present where as in the latter these elements are present in a restricted form only. It is to be mentioned that a large number of folk art forms belong to the latter group only. In fact, in all the performing art forms of the tribes of the north-east region of India, practiced whether to celebrate some occasion or a religious belief, the element of acting is more or less evident in them. However, the types of folk drama are so numerous that such classifications cannot accommodate all of them. Some of the prominent folk theatre traditions are Puppet Dance, *Ojā-Pāli* , Dhulia Bhaona, Kushan Gaan, Pasati, etc.

1.5 Tradition of Theatre in India: Origin and development through Sanskrit drama

Theatre, as a major form of art, has always facilitated mankind with an expression through all times - present as well as past to allow the glimpses of the future. As a collaborative form of art theatre can never be performed alone but rather as a community which is constituted not only by a wide range of performers including the actors, directors, designers, musician, etc. but also by an equally diverse group of audience. It has assisted mankind to discover and comprehend its relationship with the world around where the central focus is laid on the human being with larger questions concerning his existence are attempted to answer/ raised for discussion.

The tradition of theatre in India is as varied as the nation itself is. It is always very hard to point out to an exact date from which the Indian theatre first originated. There are figure of dancing girls in the cave paintings in different places in India which speak volumes about the existence of dance dramas even in the pre-historic ages. The Indus

valley civilization brings to light the perspective of such dramatic entertainments.²⁰ Moreover, on the basis of the findings of the masks, it is assumed that India had a very rich tradition of dramatic activities even in the pre-historic period.

Just like all other things in India, it is strongly believed that the theatre has also descended from the Gods. The genesis of theatre in India is replete with different accounts each convincing as the other. In the earliest times after the Creation of the universe, the Golden Age of Innocence, as the age may be referred to, the need for the enactments of the emotions such as provided by theatre was not necessary since these were unknown to men of that time. However, with the collapse of the Golden Age and the gradual emergence of the contradictory passion as well as behaviour a necessity was perceived for the need for recreation and refreshments from the mundane cares of the worldly affairs. The thirst for knowledge and wisdom had already been filled by the four Vedas namely, Rgveda, Samveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. But, sadly enough these repositories remained accessible only to a certain section of people thus leaving out a greater number of people unattended.

Under such circumstances even the Gods were unhappy and they decided to approach the Originator under the leadership of Indra to apprise Him of the affairs and also to beg him to produce something new- a fifth veda which could be seen and heard by one and all irrespective of all classes or sections of the world. The Creator, accepting the justness in the request, accordingly took out the best portions from each of the four vedas. Thus, pāthya or the element of recitation was taken from Samaveda. On the other hand, from the Yajurveda, the art of acting (abhinaya) or representation was taken while the element of rasa or sentiment was taken from the Atharvaveda. This is how the Creator, the Brahma, produced the fifth veda- the Natyaveda and He handed it over to Indra so that performances could be arranged on the principles of it. However, Lord Indra expressed his inability to do so as he argued that drama, by virtue of it, is objective but the Gods, because of their aims and commitments and also their incessant struggles against evil forces are bound to be affected by partiality. As such it would be better if the

²⁰ Shekhar, Indu. (1977). "Introduction." *Sanskrit Drama- Its Origin and Decline*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, p. XIV.

responsibility for the enactment of plays is handed over to sages who are always driven by objectivity as well as wisdom of the world. The Creator after considering the validity of the argument agreed to hand over the veda to one Bharata who later produced the *Natyasastra*- the treatise on the ideas or concepts of Indian drama. The entire practice of drama was further made possible with the help of Vishwakarma who built the playhouse. Lord Shiva provided with the tandava dance while Goddess Parvati added the gentle and passionate element to it. Lord Vishnu, too, conceived of the four theatrical styles- the Verbal, the Grand, the Energetic and the Graceful. In this way the contribution of the three principal Gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, is accounted for the genesis of Indian drama.

Apart from this legend, there are two more myths recorded in the 'Bhavaprakasana'. In the first one, Maheswara, at the end of the Kalpa age, created Brahma and Vishnu among whom the former in turn created the world. The Natyaveda is taught to Brahma by Nandikeswara who approaches him and reveals to him that Bharata may be entrusted with the enactments of the Natyaveda. It paves the way for Bharata to undertake the responsibility of conceiving and realizing the spirit of theatre into practice.

The other account revolves around Manu who, being bored of ruling his kingdom, came up to Suryadeva for some advice. Suryadeva mentioned of a similar condition experienced by Brahma who, at one point of time, felt terribly disgusted with his work. The latter was advised to go to Lord Shiva for some relief who asked his pupil Nandikeswara teach the Natyaveda to Brahma. After receiving all the knowledge about Natyaveda from Nandikeswara, Brahma returned to his abode and contemplated over it and taught the same to a Muni and five of his disciples. They, too, received the blessings from Brahma after their successful presentation of the Natyaveda on the stage. Manu was advised to approach Brahma for relief from his mundane job. On his prayers Brahma asked Bharatamuni to go with Manu so that his troubles are eased to a certain degree.

These legends that are offered to explain the origin of drama in India or Bharatvarsha of the past have led to a quantum of debates or arguments. They may be

dispensed with the idea of unavailability of any concrete historical fact to verify. However, these legends have always helped to explain certain very important socio-religious conditions of ancient India.

With the arrival of the Aryans in India the scenario started to change as they continued to move ahead into the place where Dravidians had been living. They were driven as far as to the Southern parts of India, while the conquerors, in order to ensure their survival, provisioned for a caste system to maintain their propriety and prevent any blending between themselves and the Dravidians. The highlight of the new system was the emergence of a class of priest who subsequently occupied a prominent position not only in religious but in non-religious matters also. But such influence of the Brahmin class or the priestly class had very adverse effect on many aspects of life, particularly an art and culture.

Both religion and its protectors or guardians had become so influential that each and every matter of life required to have the endorsement of them. And anything which did not have such approval was considered tainted. On the other hand, the detestation of the priestly class for the art forms on the grounds that they are mean and bred evil forces, further lowered the importance of the forms of art and culture in the society. As the undisputed head of the society who assumed the responsibility of the society on its own shoulders, the Brahmins viewed the practice of the art forms not as their own but something that belonged to the people of lower strata such as the Shudras. Such an approach created hurdles towards the spread of theatre and other art forms since a section of the society would remain aloof from though voluntarily. Under such circumstances, it was wise on the part of Bharatamuni to endow the *Natyasastra* with the sanctity of divine blessings from the Gods and thereby, uphold its position to an honourable one- the Veda. With this aspect in mind legends involving different Gods were developed so that all of the people, irrespective of caste and class could accept it as their own and show allegiance to it.

The appearance of the *Natyasastra* in its entire entirety, precision, detailed descriptions about the art of theatre performance is sudden and is without any traces of its genesis and development. It may be assumed that the attitude of ancient India towards historical documentation is responsible for throwing no light on the aspect of growth and development of the concept of theatre as laid down in the *Natyasastra*. In the ancient India people were not at all concerned to keep records of the events in detail. Whatever history is available, it is the fruit of the meticulous explanations of materials found scattered in the form of epigraphy, archaeology and so on, combined with myth or legends of the common people. As a natural consequence to such exercises, there has been a lot of debate as well as confusion over the origin of drama in India and there is no consensus among scholars regarding it. In the light of the new discoveries of advanced civilization that pre-existed the advent of the Aryans, made through the findings at various excavation sites, it is arguable if the Aryans indeed were responsible for the birth of drama. It is so because the civilizations that existed prior to the arrival of the Aryans on Indian soil were no less advanced than that of the Aryans themselves. However, it may be accepted to a greater extent that the Aryans were the pioneers of Indian drama who possibly adopted some kind of prevalent form of drama and gave it a new identity.

In the Vedic period, the Aryans combined their myths and ritual while performing their sacrificial rites. Likewise the Greeks who during their performance of religious rites presented dramatic activities, the Aryans, too, had organized some kind of dramatic activities along with their sacrificial rituals. In the epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* also there are references to the presence of Nrtya, Bhata and to the institutions of drama which bear features of drama.

Again, the word *pakham* found in many Buddhist works actually refers to a theatrical performance. These texts also mention of dramatic arts and means of popular entertainments. The *Jataka* gives an idea of the theatre hall in ancient India. Theatrical performances were conducted generally in an open arena or in a structure with a dome. The entire place was beautifully decorated with colourful flags put up all around it. The

shape of the amphitheatre was square in shape and seats were arranged around the acting area. One side of it was reserved for royalty.²¹

Theatre has always been favourite with most of the royalties of India and the Mauryas were also no different in this regard. They offered patronage to various forms of performing arts and culture. Kautilya's Arthashastra which was written during reigns of the Maurya dynasty offers a detailed description of the artistes who took part in dramatic performances. According to Kautilya for the artistes the dramatic performances were not only the means of providing entertainment to people but also a source of earning money. For this purpose people who would come to see the shows had to pay a proper remuneration and those who defy it had to pay a huge amount of money as fine.²² On the other hand, these actors had received some remuneration from the government also.²³ It also tells that the actors moved from place to place to perform except for the summer season when they temporarily stopped their visits.²⁴

The text also throws light on the right of taking part in such activities. The women did not have the privilege to enjoy any performance without the permission from their authority. Violation of the restrictions resulted in the penalty in terms of payment of a huge amount of money. It further mentions that there were two kinds of dramatic practices- one for each of the sexes. The women were allowed to hold their performance only during the day time while the men could organize their shows at night.²⁵

This revelation makes an interesting statement that at a time when in most parts of the world the women were not allowed to witness dramatic presentations, in India women were allowed not only to watch a dramatic presentation but also to take active part in theatre activities although with some restrictions.

²¹ Varapande, M.L. (ed). (1979). *Traditions of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 4.

²² Kautilya's Arthashastra, Tr. R. Shamasastri.(1956). Third Part; Ch. 10. Mysore: Raghuvir Printing Press

²³ Ibid, Fifth Part; Ch. 3

²⁴ Ibid, Fourth Part; Ch. 1

²⁵ Ibid, Third Part; Ch. 3

The history of India also unveils another unique kind of theatre known as temple theatre. It is perceptible in various forms and in different parts of India bearing distinctive features that separates one from another. Forms like *the Bhagavata Mela*, *the Kuchipudi*, *the Yakshgana* and *the Leela plays* are some of the glaring examples which have been available for centuries till date. After the death of *Sri Sankardeva*, the *Ankiya Nat* of Assam, in spite of its religious origin, is no longer considered a true form of temple theatre. Many scholars argue that theatre forms which have become means of popular entertainments in later period should not be treated as forms of temple theatre in the strictest sense of the term.²⁶

Against the popular concept that the Indian theatre in the past was hugely deficient in many respects, it is to be pointed out that the earlier theatre had accomplished very dignified status in terms of variety and resources of the stage. The performances were held in the open arena in front of the caves or places of dwelling. However, gradually when drama began to receive the grant of the royalty, the stage moved to the temples which later on turned out to be centres of cultural activities. In keeping with the tradition the *Namghar* or the prayer hall in Assam was preferred for the presentation of theatrical performances. These places of worship are usually large in size which can accommodate a great number of people to watch over the proceedings that take place inside it.

It is believed that the Indian theatrical art depended and developed on the ancient folk cults and festivals.²⁷ India, being a country with substantial numbers of folk traditions still immensely alive, is responsible for the emergence of dramatic art. The festivals used to present some kind acts in the honour of respective deities through gestures and movements which later on translated into drama proper. From this point of view it can be assumed that perhaps the dramatic traditions of India have borne out of the local folk festivals. There is strong possibility that in the later period some of these practices had turned out become religion, particularly Hinduism and it is because of this

²⁶ Varapande, M.L. (1979). *Traditions of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 49.

²⁷ Vatsayan, Kapila.(1976). "Introduction." *Traditions of Indian Folk Dances*. New Delhi: India Library.

that it has been rightly concluded that the Indian theatre is as old as the Vedas.²⁸ The domain of theatre in India is very rich filled with enormous number of traditions and it would be prudent to have a view at some of the chief traditions that have shaped it.

Sanskrit Drama

As far as the origin of Sanskrit drama is concerned there is no consensus among scholars on it. However, there are two major opinions which try to explain the origin of Sanskrit drama. One of the views tries to assert that the drama had originated from religious faith where as the other view considers that drama has never come out of religious faith but rather of a secular or popular root foundation.

There is, apart from the divine origin as explained in the *Natyasastra* of Bharatamuni, another opinion which also gives an idea that Sanskrit drama originated from religion. The following remarks would the claim more evident:

“When we leave out of account the enigmatic dialogues of the Rgveda we can see that the Vedic ritual contained within itself the germs of drama, as is the case with practically every form of primitive worship. The ritual did not consist merely of the singing of songs or recitations in honour to the gods; it involved a complex round of ceremonies in some of which there was undoubtedly present the element of dramatic representation i.e., the performance of the rites assumed, for the time being, personalities other than their own.”²⁹

It is, however, undeniable that whatever be the origin of the Sanskrit theatrical performance in India it always had some sort of relationship with religion. Religion and religious institutions have always played key roles in affecting the lives of the Indian people as they are deeply connected to it. The Vedas, in particular, have been the sources of spirituality for the Indian people and from this perspective, the *Natyasastra*,

²⁸ Varapande, M.L. (1979). *Traditions of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 46.

²⁹ Rangacharya, Adya. (1967). *Drama in Sanskrit Literature*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p. 31.

being the fifth Veda, gives an impression that drama has a spiritual origin and it provides people with spiritual experiences.

Parallel to the attempts to confirm a linkage between the divine or religious importance and the origin of drama in India, there has been a contrary effort to show that Sanskrit drama has rather originated from the Greeks. In this connection Keith remarks: "It is impossible to deny the fact that the Sanskrit drama came into being during the period when Greek influence was present in India."³⁰ On the contrary, Som Benegal puts forward that "though many arguments were advanced in support of this view equally weighty reasons have been used to counter it. On balance it will probably be found that the Greeks had little or no influence on the Indians in the realm of theatre. The overwhelming argument is that their approach to the basic concept of drama was wholly divergent. The Greeks said the aim of drama was to imitate the action while the Indians view that it should imitate the state of condition."³¹

The debate over the origin of Sanskrit theatre has always persisted with each of the groups put forward their arguments. But in spite of all the differences that lies between the groups it is to be accepted that no art form can develop on its own without coming across with any influence. But with completely diverge objectives in view these traditions could not have greatly influenced each other to bring about huge modifications to their art but only to have enriched the same.

Theories on Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy

However, in actual postulation of the theories on dramaturgy, the dissemination of the knowledge and systematic presentation of the same was accomplished by Bharatamuni only. The treatise, *Natyasastra*, contains elaborate descriptions of the concept of theatre, music, dance, the dress, make-up, the scenery, the composition of a play and the subsequent production.

³⁰ Keith, A.B. (1992). *The Sanskrit Drama: Its Origin and Development, Theory and Practice*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 49.

³¹ Benegal, S. (1967). *A Panorama of Theatre in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p. 10.

Later on, many more commentaries were written broadly on the aspects raised in the *Natyasastra* at different point in time. Among them 'Abhinava Bharati' by Abhinava Gupta is an important work. Scholars have debated over the period in which he wrote his treatises who try place him between 10th century and 12th century.

Another writer who wrote in the 10th century A.D. was Dhananjaya. He wrote a treatise entitled 'Dasarupa' on the same subject i.e. dramaturgy.³² Besides these few writers there were a good many who wrote broadly on the same subject matter though at different point of time.

So far as the subject matter and the plot of a Sanskrit drama is concerned the dramatists, in the past also, had no restrictions to select them for a play. The dramatist had the choice to choose to determine the theme or the subject matter either from the historical facts or something that he conceive on his own. However, the dramatist, at the same time, had to work keeping in view two essential attributes- the *adhikārika*, the principle and the *prāsaṅgika*, the incidental, in order to assist and complement the core subject matter.

The *Natyasastra* divides the actions of a drama into five phases viz., a) *arambha* or the beginning, b) *prayatna* or the efforts, c) *prāpti-sambhava* or possibility of attainment, d) *mtyatā phala-prāpti* or the certainty of attainment and e) *phalā-yoga* or the attainment of results.³³ In connection with these stages of the action of a drama the text also focuses on the five key elements of a plot. They are *bija*, the germ; the prominent point, *bindu*; episode, *patākā*; dénouement, *kārya*.

³² Shekhar, Indu. (1977). *Sanskrit Drama- Its Origin and Decline*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt, p. 43.

³³ Ghosh, Manomohan. (1951). *The Natyasastra*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal. Chapter – XXI, pp. 380-82.

In addition to this the plot of a drama, according to the *Natyasastra*, should comprise of five divisions namely the Opening (mukha), the Progression (pratimukha), the Development (garbha), the Pause (vimaṁsa) and the Conclusion (nirvachana).³⁴

Character:

As a classical form Sanskrit drama always worked within certain principles and same rule was followed while determining the features of a character. The dramatist, as such, did not have the full freedom to deal with the character on his own terms.

The dramatist usually had the liberty to choose any kind of character that he found fit for the play. According to *Natyasastra* characters, whether male or female, in a play are of three types viz. superior (*uttama*), middling (*madhyama*) and inferior (*adhama*).³⁵ But, as far as the hero (nayaka) is concerned, he has to be a symbol of nobility, modesty and also ideal. He could either be a historical figure or a common man. In *Natyasastra* the hero is classified in four different ways. They are- the self-controlled and vehement (*dhiroddhata*), the self-controlled and the light hearted (*dhira-lalita*), the self-controlled and exalted (*dhiro-datta*) and self-controlled and calm (*dhira-prasanta*).³⁶

The heroine or the nāyikā, being the next important character, plays a vital role in the advancement of the plot. In the light of this the *Natyasastra* has mentioned about eight types of heroines. The type of a heroine is determined by her association with the hero which invariably, in most cases, is her lover also. The *Natyasastra* mentions of eight kinds of heroines- 'one dressed up for union' (*rasakasajja*), the heroine distressed by separation (*Virahotkanthita*), the heroine having her husband in subjection (*svadhinabharmtrka*), the heroine separated by quarrel (*kalahantarita*), the enraged

³⁴ Ghosh, Manomohan. (1951). *The Natyasastra*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal. Chapter – XXI, pp. 385-86.

³⁵ Ibid, Chapter- XXXIV, p. 527.

³⁶ Ibid, Chapter- XXXIV, p. 528.

heroine (*Khandita*), the deceived heroine (*Vipralabdha*), the heroine with a sojourning husband (*prositabhartaka*) and one who moves to her lover (*abhisarika*).³⁷

The character of the *Vidusaka*, invariably a brahmana by caste, in Sanskrit drama is very essential for the proper development of the plot. It is this character who plays the role of a confidant and loyal companion of the principal character, usually the hero-king. In some Sanskrit plays the character of *Vidusaka* is represented as a court-fool or court-jester. Even though, being a Brahman, he is assumed to be an intelligent person yet he is presented as a man bearing typical physical and mental depravity and his actions show him someone unworthy to the caste he belongs. However, in spite of his perversions, due to his high birth the *Vidusaka* has the freedom to move between the royal court and the ordinary life. He also is given the liberty to speak out on anything that interests him, even on the actions of the hero-king cum friend. His attempts at wit are often contrastively matched against the seriousness of the hero thereby produce a heightened interest of the plot and break the monotony of the same at once.

Apart from this there are few other characters such as the minister (*mantri*), the general (*senapati*), etc. who fulfil significant roles or function in a Sanskrit play. These characters must come from high births and, as such, are expected to display their intelligence and readiness to serve the hero-king.

The Sentiment:

The *Natyasastra* deals with yet another very important aspect of dramaturgy- the Sentiment (*bhava*), sometimes alternately referred to as *rasa* primarily meaning aesthetic sentiment. It is one of the four main points, the other being acting, dance and music, which Bharata discusses in his Veda. The *Natyasastra* has discussed this matter in such details that it has turned out to become a complete theory on aesthetics itself known as *rasa siddhanta*. The scope of sentiment broadly encompasses eight sentiments viz.- They are- erotic (*srngara*), comic (*hasya*), pathetic (*karuna*), furious (*raudra*), heroic

³⁷ Ghosh, Manomohan. (1951). *The Natyasastra*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal. Chapter- XXIV, p. 457.

(vira), terrible (bhayanaka), odious (bibhatsa) and marvellous (adbhuta).³⁸ But Bharatamuni mentions of many other varieties of sentiments classifying it basically into two- dominant or basic mental states (*sthayi bhavas*) and transitory emotion (*vyabhichari bhava*). There is, however, an additional sentiment which sometimes is called as Temperamental (Sattvika bhava). According to the *Natyasastra* there are eight *sthayi bhavas*. These eight sentiments or *bhavas* are love (rati), mirth (hasya), sorrow (shoka), wrath (krodha), energy (utsaha), terror (bhaya), disgust (jugupsa) and astonishment (vismaya).³⁹ On the other hand, there are thirty three sentiments or *bhavas* under the class of transitory emotion (*vyabhichari bhava*) and eight tempermental states.

Language and Dramatic styles of Sanskrit drama:

Along with the discussion on the theories related to acting, sentiments, stage, characters, etc. the *Natyasastra* focuses on the use of language and the dramatic styles in Sanskrit drama as well. In this context Bharata prescribes four kinds of styles- the Verbal (*bhāratī*), the Grand (*Sattavati*), Energetic (*ārabhati*) and Graceful (*Kaisiki*).⁴⁰ Except the first one which is based on sound, all other styles based on senses.

In Sanskrit drama the use of language has been perceived to very interesting as well as notable. The principles of Sanskrit drama allowed the use of different languages in a single play. As such different languages like Sanskrit, Suraseni-Prakrit and Magadhi could be employed in a drama. In practice, Sanskrit language was used by the privileged section of the society of the past while for women and other people of inferior rank varieties of prakrit were used.

³⁸ Ghosh, Manomohan. (1951). *The Natyasastra*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal. Chapter –VI, p. 102.

³⁹ Ibid, Chapter –VI, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Chapter – I, p. 7.

Role of dance, song and music:

The association of music, songs and dance with the Indian drama is indispensable; it is like the soul in a living form. In Sanskrit drama music plays a very significant role as it includes within it a combination of song, instrument and action. Just the way a sketch does not look complete without colour so is a drama without music and songs. The form of drama is always assisted by music- vocal as well as instrumental. "An elaborate orchestra sat behind and the strings and the drums accentuated the moods and the feelings.So far as singing went, there were the songs called Dhruvas which were fitted on to the play by stage musicians. There were five of these- the Dhruvas of entrance and exit, which informed the audience of the identity of the character entering or going out and the details of the situation, and also the condition at his entry or exit; the three other Dhruvas which were used while the character was on the stage..."⁴¹

On the other hand, dance and drama are also interwoven and deeply integrated to one another. The art of theatre itself is a combination of three key elements- *natya*, *nritya* and *nritta*. The form of *natya* points out to the importance of dramatic element in dance performed with the support of language where as *nritya* is aimed at giving proper expression to an idea or theme without the use of language. The last of the three denotes a kind of dance pattern that is pure in form and in which no thrust is put either on the expression of a sentiment or providing some kind of meaning. From the text of *Natyasastra* it is learnt that Sanskrit drama always is concerned about presenting scenes as realistically as possible. Bharata repeatedly mentions that the *Loka* or the real physical world is the foundation of reference. But at the same time he was also aware of the fact that the art of drama has certain limitations in presenting everything on the stage. In view of this Bharata prescribes techniques to reproduce natural conditions through the stage properties and technicalities. Sanskrit drama is so well equipped with techniques that it can, even without using any scenic trappings, suggest a realistic scene through dialogues, songs and more importantly through dance movements referred to as *angika-abhinaya* and *chitra-abhinaya*. Through the correct presentation of these movements

⁴¹ Raghavan, V. (2007). "Sanskrit drama and performance." *Indian Drama in Retrospect*. New Delhi: Hope India Publications, p. 28.

the actors can achieve the desired effect and as such they can ride horses or chariots, move in a boat, use a weapon, etc. It is evident from this that what cannot be physically achieved on the stage becomes possible only through dance and music which further points out the prominence it holds over Sanskrit drama.

Decay of Sanskrit drama

In spite of being a highly artistic and an influential means of entertainment Sanskrit drama could not retain its supremacy in the later period. The language as well as the form of drama has ceased to enjoy the popularity which it once did. As a matter of fact the first and foremost reason for its gradual decay could be the growth of middle-Aryan and the later-Aryan languages. These languages with their capacity to accommodate cultural varieties were able to attract the creative talents towards them and subsequently produce works of art.

In a simultaneous process it also paved the way for the regional theatres to grow although they made use of the same subject matters that Sanskrit drama did. The Sanskrit dramas worked within a restricted circle of people which barred the common people to interact with it. In contrast to this, the regional theatre was free from such rigidity allowing the larger mass to operate in these dramas. The participation of the general mass in the regional dramas became even more easy, enjoyable and accessible for the reason that they could use their own languages instead of Sanskrit.

Apart from this another cause for the decay of the Sanskrit drama and the rise of the regional drama could be the formality involved in the staging of a play. Whereas the Sanskrit drama requires a proper stage or place for the performance to take place, the regional theatres which are basically expressions of people's spontaneous reactions needed no such formal arrangements.

Nonetheless, it is usually alleged that Sanskrit drama could not continue its journey as powerfully as it did in the past because of its failure to reflect the

contemporary society. But, it may not be a valid argument since it is found that even at the time of its decay no other theatre was able to overtake its dramatic supremacy. Still, many strongly believe that there has hardly been any drama in any other language which has surpassed the glorious achievements of the Sanskrit drama. More importantly, although Sanskrit drama is questioned over its relevance in the present context yet the dramas and the theories it propounds through the Natysastra have always been the ideals for all the major forms of Indian drama.

The scenario of Indian drama witnessed drastic transformation with the emergence of Bhakti movement. It was also a time when the regional theatres were attaining maturity endowed with their own distinctive identity. The Bhakti movement was a sort of religious movement which had enormous impact on a greater part of India. The theatre that grew out of the movement served two primary purposes- to entertain and to educate. In other words it can be said that it was a drama with a purpose. The chief purpose of such drama was to generate religious sentiment among the common people. Although the regional dramas were equipped with their unique characteristics yet the sources for them were the same as Sanskrit drama. The regional dramas, inspired by Bhakti movement, adopted the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas for the themes of the plays. Despite the similarities of themes and purpose these dramatic forms were able to maintain their distinctive characteristics in respect to their form and structure. There are several forms of such dramas that still are very much alive in many parts of India. But, in the following section a cursory review of only a few of the major forms would be made.

1.6 Major Theatre Traditions in India

a) Yaksagāna:

The Yaksagāna is a traditional dramatic form that belongs to Karnataka. It is one of the major dance drama forms of India which has preserved and practiced its rich

heritage over centuries. The themes for the Yaksagāna are taken from the epics or legends with having no prescribed structure of its own.

There has been no certain explanation as regards the origin of this form of art. Scholars are of the opinion that Yaksagāna might have originated in the rural areas and sustained till date only because of the encouragement of the local people. It was earlier known as *Bhagavata ata*, referring to the leader of the troupe of performers. The *Bhagavata ata* is the one who holds a complete sway the entire performance through his multiple roles within the play. He initiates the actions on the stage by introducing the story and the characters to the spectators. Acting like a mediator he bridges the gaps in the dialogues among the actors. It is not known whether this particular form of dance received royal patronage or not.⁴² The characters in Yaksagāna through the use of their costumes embody different personalities, ages and also ranks. The use of colours of the dresses also indicates the status/rank of a personality. As for example, Yudhisthir, the eldest and the most honest of the Pandavas, wears a green coloured jacket while two of his brothers, Bhim and Arjuna put on red coloured jackets. Even the length of the jackets also point to the age of the characters. Similarly, various other physical aspects of a character are associated with certain representative patterns, such as the moustache, the head dress, the hair colour, the beard etc- all may refer to certain specific traits like age, status and so on.

As a form of dance drama, Yaksagāna's main attraction lies in the sophisticated movements of the dancers. The performance involves elegant steps that vary from character to character. There are, again, distinctive steps to point out to the entries and departure for different characters that carry within them movements suggestive of vanity, valour and courage. "the most common patterns are circles , circles within circles, complete semi-circles, zig-zags, figure-eights, and straight lines in various directions. There are also leaps and jumps, pirouettes, and a particular type of pirouetting on the

⁴² Ashton, Martha Bush and Bruce Christic. (1977). *Yaksagana*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 5.

knees, all of which add vigour to the dance and heighten the heroic sentiment of Yaksagāna plays.”⁴³

In the Yaksagāna as the *Bhagavata* begins to sing a song to narrate the story concerned the character present on the stage would try to give an expression to the meaning of the song through dance or movements. It is again followed by the *Bhagavata* who now undertakes the responsibility of explaining the meaning of the song by himself either through speech or dialogues. This process then continues throughout the play where the *Bhagavata* would sing, the characters dance followed by the elaboration of the songs. The make-up of Yaksagāna also is another key aspect of the form. It is very colourful with complex patterns of colours used by the actors themselves. The colours used on the face actually speak about the inner psychology of the characters with each type of characters having its own scheme of colours. They use to paint their faces, wear jewelleries and head-gears (*mukuta*) sitting in the green room (*chowki*). “The *mukuta* is used by the main male characters, the hero and his son or by the King and his minister or by a Prince. Characters like Jatayo invariably use masks.”⁴⁴ Of all the characters the make-up of the one who represents a ferocious demon looks most amazing with his multi-coloured make-up, head-gear, the jewelleries and costume.

Just like many other traditional theatre forms in India the Yaksagāna also has faced with several challenges that threat the very existence of the form. The interest on producing realism on the stage is one of the threats. On the other hand, the growing lack of interest of the new generation and want for patronage are also raising questions over its survival. However, against such fears, there are people who are actively trying to rejuvenate the art form, of course through its blending with the modern concepts of theatre.

⁴³ Awasthi, Suresh. (2008). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Kuppuswami, Gauri and H. Hariharan. (1979). *Readings on Music and Dance*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing, p. 7.

b) **Bhāgavata Mela Natakam:**

The *Bhāgavata Mela Natakam* is another very popular folk theatre form that is predominantly marked by music, songs and dance. An art form that comes from Melattur (Tamilnadu), *Bhāgavata Mela Natakam* bears some affinities with the Kathakali, yet another popular form of dance drama. Likewise Yaksagāna the primary objective of this dramatic form is to stir religious sentiment among the common people and as such the convention of holding its presentation only before temples became a norm. It was performed on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti festival held every year during the months of May and June. As a means of popular entertainment the performance of the *Bhāgavata Mela* included themes such as Usā-parinayam, Rukmini-Kalyanam, Sita-Kalyanam, Hariscandram, Dhruva caritam, Prahlada caritam, etc.

There has been no certainty about the date of origin of this form of drama. It usually accepted that this dance drama tradition is more than 2000 years old which was modelled on the principles as laid by Bharata in his *Natyasastra*. However, as has been noted that the chief purpose of this kind of drama was to kindle religious feelings among people, it may be assumed, on the basis of it, that it was born out of some sort of religious conditions. With this perspective in view it may be presumed that the *Bhāgavata Mela Natakam* emerged at a time when the Neo-Vaisnava movement gained its ground during the 14th and 15th centuries which influenced the socio-cultural and religious lives of the people living in the greater part of the Indian sub-continent.

The dialogues of this form of dance drama are delivered in the manner of poetic speeches. The speeches are said to be full of dramatic actions.⁴⁵ The language used for the communication is Tamil language as it was the language of the court from the times of Vijaynagara Kings to the time of the Maratha Princes of Tanjavur.

One of very interesting facts about *Bhagavata Mela* is that since this tradition has survived in one village in Melattur only, “the character roles in these dramas became the

⁴⁵ Kuppaswami, Gauri and H. Hariharan. (1979). *Readings on Music and Dance*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing, p. 78.

properties of particular families inherited from generation to generation. In this way, the art has been a part of the lives of the people in the villages.”⁴⁶

The roles of the female characters are performed by male actors as women were not allowed to take part in it. As a form of dance drama it resembles the Kathakali of Kerala that is held at night and without stage settings of modern dramas. The music of these plays belongs to the classical Carnatic tradition while the delivery of the action follows the style of Bharatnatya.

c) **Kuchipudi:**

The form of Kuchipudi draws its name from the name of a village Kuchelapuram of Andhra Pradesh. It is the earliest form of dance drama of Andhra Pradesh which also has a religious origin. Kuchipudi, like the *Bhagavata Mela* and *Yaksāgana*, has its genesis in the Vaisnavism and as a product of this religious movement it was used to expand the base of the faith.

Though this dance-drama form began as early as 7th century A.D yet it was only in the early sixteenth century that Yogi Siddhendra, an extraordinarily gifted sage like person, refined the crude form and created the form of Kuchipudi in the pattern of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition. It is created around the stories of Krishna and Siva. In the same way as in *Yaksāgana* of Karnataka or Bhagavata Mela dance drama of Tamilnadu or the *Ankiyā Nāt* of Assam, the sole objective of Kuchipudi also was to infuse religious passion in the people of Andhra Pradesh.

In Kuchipudi a balanced combination of pure dance, mime and speech is seen. As a dance-drama form with a religious background, Kuchipudi is performed in the courtyard of a temple. The dance form employed in Kuchipudi is called Desiattam but the dramatic postures have in them the elements of Kathak. Most of the Kuchipudi compositions are done in the mellifluous language of Telegu while proper Carnatic music

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 78.

is used in the performances. Traditionally, women were not allowed to take part in the Kuchipudi performances and men were engaged to play both the male and female roles. It was thought that women, if allowed, would be unable to restrain their emotions during the performances and would consequently spoil the entire objectives of such a performance, i.e. to provide the spectators with entertainment as well as devotional feeling.

The male characters wear 'dhoti' with a jacket while the female characters today wear 'sari' and 'choti'. Both the male and female dancers wear jewellery to match with their respective dresses. In general masks were not used in Kuchipudi though in some inevitable contexts it was used to give the entire performance an intense feeling. For example, during the presentation of the story of Narasimha (Lion-man) the use of the mask becomes highly essential.

The dance form of Kuchipudi has undergone a lot of changes over the ages. The greatest of them is the freedom for the women to take part in the performance. But, gradually their inclusion became a norm, particularly after late Guru Lakshmi Narayana Sastry who for the first time introduced women into the field of Kuchipudi. In addition to that the themes for the Kuchipudi now also include, apart from the mythological themes, social themes thereby opening up to the acceptance of a larger audience.

d) **Kathākali**

It is a very popular form of dance drama of the Indian state Kerala. The word 'Kathā' means a tale or story and the literal translation of the word Kathākali suggests the telling of a story through a play.

There have been debates over the origin of this form of dance drama as well. One of the explanations in this regard mentions of a King who dreams of Gods teaching him a new kind of dance which later turned out to be the Kathākali of the present times. There is another belief which claims that it has emerged from 'Krishananttam', a type of dance

drama revolving around the stories of Lord Krishna. According to it is believed that once the King Kottarakkara of Thampuran was so much impressed by the Krishananattam, created by Zamorin of Calicut that he requested the latter for give him a group of performers temporarily. But it was rejected by Zamorin on the pretext of political rivalry between them. In response to this the King decided to create a new type of dance which later on took the form of Kathākali. This form has continuously undergone changes but from the eighteenth century onwards it has so far kept its form vastly unchanged.

The dance-drama of Kathākali consists of five different types of art forms- Acting (Natyam), Dance (Nritam), Enactment (Nrityam), Music (Sangeet) and Instrumental accompaniment (Vadyam). Each of the forms can operate independently in other contexts but in Kathākali they join together to produce the immersive 'story-play.' As is evident in other forms of drama, in Kathākali also both the male and female roles are played by male actors. It is usually staged in an open place with themes adopted from the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' and also from other sacred texts of Hindu religion. The plays are performed during nights only and the stories are chosen in such a manner that they can be performed within that time frame. However, due to the want of time there has been a call for the shorter version of the plays. There are more than hundred stories that the Kathākali uses to stage before an audience. But among them the 'Nala Caritam' (story of Nala and Damayanti from the Mahabharata), 'Duryodhana Vadha' (the killing of Duryodhana from the Mahabharata), 'Keechaka Vadha' (the killing of Kichaka by Bhima) and 'Karna Shapadham' (story of Karna) are the most popular ones.

The make-up of the Kathākali is yet another very interesting feature with its elaborate method of putting paints on to the faces of the actors. The entire procedure to make-up usually takes hours to complete. The colours are freshly prepared so that they remain new for a longer time. "Masks are painted and moulded on the faces of the actors, each mask design and the combination of colours symbolizing a character-type. Divine beings, kings and heroes are classified as *Satvika*; those having vices such as greed, arrogance, envy, deceit and lust, are *Rajasa*; destructive demons and she-demons

are *Tamasa* characters. The mask designs that transform actors into symbolic characters have the advantage of the *plastic action* in expressing moods and passions.”⁴⁷

Since the actors on the stage do not talk it is important that the costumes and the make-up of these actors are properly maintained. It is very essential to do so because both the make-up and the costumes bear inherent significance as they help to identify and at the same time differentiate one character from another. Along with it the gestures and the movements of hands, eyes also carry a lot of meanings. They are used to give an impression of objects, scenes and feelings for which one has to have dexterity in this aspect.

There are five types of veshams or make-up with costumes viz. Pacha (Green), Kathi (Knife), Thadi (Beard), Kari (Black) and Minukku (Prettying up or rub). The Pacha type of make-up is applied to *Satvik* characters like Gods, heroes or Kings. Light green colour is used to decorate the face with black and crimson colour for the eye brows and lips respectively. Kathi (knife) prescribes the intense application of pea-green colour along with white and red colours meant primarily for the *Rajasa* characters representing demonic or villainous figures such as the Ravana or Duryodhana. The Thadi (Beard) make-up is again divided into three types- Veluppu Thadi (White Beard), Karuppa Thadi (Black Thadi) and Chokanna Thadi (Red Beard), each of them is portray different personalities. The white beard is identified with higher type of monkey characters like Hanumana having a black, red and white make-up. On the other hand, the black beard is put on to the character of a hunter as exemplified by Lord Siva assuming the role of a hunter in disguise to test the capacity of Arjuna. It is put predominantly with black make-up combined with patterns in red and white colour. The third type of beard of red colour is used for the main character playing the role of a demon. The make-up of the demon is characterized by black colour on the upper part of his face while the lower part of it is painted in red. The following type of make-up called Kari or Black is used to symbolize evil and is put to a she-demon. In this case also the entire face is mainly coloured in black with touches of red and white. The last of the five types of make-up focuses on prettying

⁴⁷ Devi, Ragini. (1972). *Dance Dialects of India*. New Delhi: Banarsidass Publisher, p. 87.

up of a character, particularly female characters playing the roles a nymph, goddess or even disguised she-devils. The face is painted with buff colour to give it pretty look which further decorated with mica flakes dusted over it to enhance the beauty of the character.

e) **Ramalila**

The art form of Ramalila is a very popular art folk art of the Northern India. It is also a form of dance-drama that centres around either with the epic of the Ramayana or Ram Carit Manas of Tulsi Das which was written in Avadhi language. It is usually performed during the Dussahera celebrations. Likewise the other forms of dance-drama in Ramlila also the female role are performed by male characters. The dialogues are presented maintaining rhythm but at the same time make use of the colloquial language only. Usually, the performance Ramlila continues for ten days yet sometimes it held for 7, 14 or 31 days also. Whatever the time period one chooses to perform for it normally is timed to conclude on the festival of Dusshera. On the penultimate day of the presentation the effigies of Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Ravana's son Meghnad are burnt to mark the end of all evils from the world.

Just as the others, with Ramlila too, it is very difficult to refer to a point in time from when the tradition began. It is believed by many that the tradition started by one Megha Bhagat, a disciple of Tulsi Das. But there is another viewpoint which maintains that Ramlila appeared for the first time around 1200 to 1500 A.D.

However, it may be more prudent to consider that the tradition had already been present but it became more popular only after the Ram Carit Manas was written in a language that could be understood by the common people against the Sanskrit language spoken by a only a limited section of the society.

The manners of presenting the performances vary from place to place. The way it is staged in Varanasi is different from the one held at Ayodha. In Varanasi Ramlila is

conducted for 10-15 days during which episodes covering the entire life and struggles of Lord Rama are presented. Stages at various points throughout the city of Varanasi are built in order to present different episodes of the Ramayana- if one part is defined as Ayodha another may be considered as Mithila and so on. During the presentation of Ramlila the city no longer remains a modern place but transforms into a place of the past.

There are specific directives in selecting actors for the Ramlila also. Although any Hindu person, irrespective of caste or creed, can play a role in the performance yet it is certain that while playing the roles of hero- heroine, particularly of Rama, Laksmana or Sita, the actors must be boys under 14 years. For these characters usually individuals are fixed who for a few years continue to play the same roles. This tradition can be seen in other parts of the world where the tradition of Ramlila prevails. For the other characters actors are selected on the ability of the actors to deliver dialogue, to recite, to dance or sing , etc. It is noteworthy that in Ramlila actors playing characters other than Rama, Laksmana or Sita may change every year but not vice-versa.

Another important feature of Ramlila is that the entire presentation is made under the guidance of the Vyasa which is an extension of the great Indian tradition of Kathakara. It is he who undertakes the responsibility of recitations and announcements as well. He must be extremely careful in his deliberations so that the episodes performed at different points are not overlapped or missed.

In Ramlila due to the importance of recitation of the texts through dialogue the element of songs is very less to be found in it. Usually there is either a single singer or a group who provide the musical flavour in the presentation. But, there is remarkable synchronization between the singers, actors and the Vyasa that makes the performance appealing.

The use of masks is seen in Ramlila. The costumes of characters like Rama, Laksmana and Sita are primarily simple and none of them has the requirement to wear a

mask. But, characters like Ravana need to put on masks which are made out of clothes not of clay or wood. In case of Hanumana the mask is made of metal which is unique since nowhere else a metal mask for Hanumana can be found. It indicates the possibility of Hanumana of being alleviated to the status of a deity during the times of Tulsidas.⁴⁸

f) **Bhavai**

The dramatic form of *Bhavai* is an interesting traditional art form of Gujrat which evolved during the 14th century. It is derived from the traditional religious rites performed before the Goddess, *Amba*. There are different interpretations to the term of *Bhavai*. Some argue that the term is composed of two words- Bhava and Aai; the former of the two means the universe while the latter refers to a mother. Together, the term *Bhavai* signifies the mother of the Universe i.e. *Amba*. On the other hand, taking a similar note, another interpretation asserts that the word is constituted by two words- *bhava* meaning emotions or sentiments and *aai* meaning to give expression. Thus, the word actually refers to a kind of art form which gives expression to one's feelings or emotions.

Whatever be the source of origin of *Bhavai*, the diverse interpretations indicate two important aspects about it. The first of them is that the people who are associated with the practice of *Bhavai* represent an inferior stream of movement and secondly, it points out to the fact that all of the practitioners are devotees of either *Amba* or Shitala. *Bhavai* is a form of dance drama which is participated by people from all walks of life.

A poet named Asaita Thakur who emerged and prospered as a *Kathakara* (narrator of Puranic stories) in the 14th century is regarded as the father of *Bhavai*. A total of 360 play lets, commonly known as *veshas* (meaning costume and make-up) of *Bhavai* have been written by him. The language of these performances is the Gujrati that was used in the ancient past. A *Bhavai* performance comprises of a sequence of *veshas* built upon a very slender storyline. The presentation is fused together with narration,

⁴⁸ Vatsayan, K. (1980). *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 120.

recitation, songs and dances. The laxity of the structure of the *Bhavai* provides ample liberty to the performers to improvise situations and dialogues bringing in materials from even the current events. In this way a specific incident could be transformed into a *vesha* and the *Bhavai* acts like a mirror of the prevailing society and reflect upon it the true picture of it.

Bhavai is an art form used to provide entertainment to rural people. A troupe of *Bhavai* is consisted of around 15 to 20 members and they travel from one place to another to perform. The leader of the group is called *Nayak* who assumes the role of a producer and director at the same time. When there is no raised square stage is built for him as is done sometimes, he makes a circle of 20 feet in diameter within which he performs. The musicians occupy their position on one side while the spectators surround the entire space for acting to enjoy the show.

The show begins with the singing of *vandana* by the *Nayaka*, actors (known as *Bhavaiyas*) and the accompanists as well and after it is over the actors move back to the green room. It is followed by the singing of *avanu* or *avani* to mark the entry of the actors on to the performing arena. At this moment a wind instrument called *Bhungal* is also played to announce the entry of the actors. The instrument is a long metal horn of around four feet long that produces a shrill sound with one or two variations. The next phase of the performance is invocation of Lord Ganesha. Here, the Ganesha does not wear any mask unlike in other traditions. The actor instead holds a bell metal platter to his face and during the time of his presence on the stage he continuously to moves it. Once the invocation song of Ganesha and the accompanying dance comes to an end the actor swiftly moves off to the green room and is replaced by the entry of another very important character the *Brhamana* in a scene called *brahmanavesha*. This is followed by another scene called 'the Kaba and his wife Jatadi'. These three are essential preludes to the presentation of a story or a number of stories.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Vatsayan, K. (1980). *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 149.

Once the preliminaries are over the actual dramatic scenes both short and long are introduced. These scenes known as *vesha* denote themes that may include diverse issues prevalent in the society such as polygamy, hypocrisy of the banias, etc. Some of the *veshas* deal with social characters like Maniharin (Bangle seller), Kumhar (Potter), Baniya (Merchant), Darzee (tailor), etc. while some other *veshas* deal with historical figures like Ram Dev, Hameer, Siddha Raj, Maniba Sati, etc.

As in most other traditional theatre forms in *Bhavai* also female roles are performed by the males. They are dressed in varieties of costumes meant for women but the distinctive Gujarati *Odhini* is mandatorily put on to them. In order to distinguish the entry of the female characters a different kind of dance is presented with lighted lamps. The actors in female disposition enter the stage with small marshals held between two fingers. The actors while dancing moves the lamp in vigorous ways and through these movements symbolically pays homage to the goddess *Amba* and the guru, the Nayaka.

g) **Yātrā or Jatra**

The *Yātrā* (pronounced as *Jatra*), the simple yet the most vital and popular form of folk tradition, primarily belongs to both Bengal and Orissa though traces of it can be found in Bihar and Assam as well.

The *Jatra* in Bengal is assumed to have begun in the 14th century out of the great religious movement- Vaishnavism. It started off as a religious procession which was brought out to propagate the belief with the accompaniment of music and dance. Although it deals with themes concerning Krishna and Radhe yet from the early 60's onwards there have changes in the treatment of subject matters for this kind of theatre. "In the 19th century, with the impact of British education and the rise of the national movement, two parallel developments took place, one relating to the growth of the modern theatre based on Western models and the other desire to use the medium of the traditional theatre for social reform and political protest.....Thus while Shakespeare and other English playwrights were translated into Indian languages and presented on

the proscenium stage, national concerns and political themes were adapted for the *Yātrā*.⁵⁰ The progress of the *Jatra* empowered it to adopt various social issues in addition to the mythological and historical themes that are commonly dealt with in *Jatra*. From the early 70's the trend again started to change with the coming of the leftist government into power. The themes of the *Jatras* were influenced by political philosophies mostly by communist ideology. However, there were plays on other political personalities of India like Khudi Ram Bose, Bhagat Singh, Netaji Subhas Ch. Bose, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, etc.

The form of *Jatra* is not restricted to one class of people to take part in it as can be seen with Ramlilia or Bhagavatmela and some other forms where characters are specifically reserved for actors from the Brahminical caste. *Jatra* accommodates people from all sections of the society. Irrespective of caste and class there can be peasants, zamindars, officials all participating together in the same form. Today, it has turned out to be one of the most popular form of entertainment for people of middle class and nouveau rich of the rural as well as urban regions. The form of *Jatra* has become so popular that it has even attracted the attention of the urban theatre actors.

The stage for the presentation of *Jatra* performance, known as *asara*, is usually a raised platform of about sixteen square feet with two ramps on either side of it. These ramps are meant for the percussion players and also for the other instrumentalists. A passage of nearly sixty feet is created from one corner of the stage connecting it to the green room. This passage, apart from serving as a way for the characters to enter and exit the stage, also fulfils several other purposes. Sometimes it is used as a highway, a venue for procession or a place for the assemblage for an army, etc. The audience sits on all sides except one which kept reserved for the women. In the past, light was provided with the help of oil lamps that were mounted onto stands installed for this purpose. But today, modern techniques for lighting are employed.

⁵⁰ Vatsayan, K. (1980). *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 139.

Just like the other major forms of theatre in India, the *Jatra* also begins with some preliminary performances. But, unlike *Yashagana* or *Ankiya Nat* they are neither observed in the green room nor behind a curtain. These preliminaries take place out on the stage through rendition of a melody and playing of several instruments followed by dance movements performed in group. The next point that tags along is the presentation of the episodes from the life of Krishna, Siva or Durga. The actual play begins only when these preliminaries come to an end.

There is another very important convention which stands apart from the other traditional Indian theatres- the absence of the narrator-actor who is commonly called as the *Sutradhara* or *Bhagavatar*. There was no presence of this character in *Jatra* until 20th century when Mathur Shah for the first time introduced a distinctive character called *Viveka* on the principles of the *Sutradhara* and the *Vidusaka* of Sanskrit drama. He has the freedom to interfere, act, comment on the action of the play. He assumes the role of the omnipresent, present in all times- present, past and future. He can also interact with the characters of the play by answering the questions that arise within it and in this way acts like the moral conscience.

In *Jatra* tradition the male actors act out the female roles and they are chosen on the ability of an actor to perform the female role aptly. In order to mark out the actors from the others the suffix *Rani* is added to their names. The make-up of the actors is remarkable yet not very urbane and highly polished as is seen with Yaksagana or Kathakali.

In comparison to the other prominent dance-drama traditions in Indian theatre the *Jatra* with all its dance and music stands out more as a form of drama and theatre than simple dance-drama. Due to its inherent plasticity in handling subject matters and manner of presentation it has been exceptionally successful in retaining the interest of people in general and at the same time has become an integral part of the great Indian theatre tradition.

h) **Tamasa**

The *Tamasa* as a form of secular theatre provides entertainment mainly to the people from the rural areas of Maharashtra. The origin of this form is traced to the old practices of 'khadi gammat' (meaning entertainment given by standing performers) presented by the Mangs and Mahars- communities belonging to lower caste of the society. However, considering the fact the *Tamasa* came into being in the 18th century, it is to be kept in mind that it is not the outcome of a particular movement or tradition alone, it rather borrows its form from various other folk art forms. Unlike many traditional theatre forms of India such as Ramlila, *Ankiyā Nāt* which manifests facets of the spiritual movement of Bhaktism and bear close connections with their respective literatures, the *Tamasa* displays a diversion from such practices. Instead of looking into the medieval Marathi literature for the origin of *Tamasa* one needs to have a look at the contemporary traditions of Kirtaniya, the Pauranika prevalent in the medieval Maharashtra. The political history of Maharashtra too contains within it some information on this as the Marathi Kingdom in the early 19th century expanded up to include few southern states.

On the other hand, the *Tamasa* is influenced by different traditions like Lavani, Jagaran, Gondhal, Povadas, Dasavatara , etc.also. The Gondhal is a kind of religious discourse while the Lavani is characterised by question and answer type of dialogues along with music and dance. It is argued by many that *Tamasa* has derived its origin from the ancient tradition of Gondhal. The term Gondhal itself is believed to have derived from *Gana-Dal* referring to a group of devotees, chiefly of Ganesha or Siva but later on it included the deity of Saktism as well. In Maharashtra presence of both Saivite and Saktism were very strong. There were two types of Gondhals performed before the deities- one was of devotional singing while the other was associated with the dramatic presentation of an episode from the Puranas. The equally powerful form of Lavani, on the other hand, is predominantly a singing form that shares commonalities with the Gondhals in terms of delivery of dialogues. This association between the two apparently different forms has given the *Tamasa* its distinctive flavour.

The performance of Tamasa can be presented anywhere whether an open space or a proper proscenium stage. Although the plays were performed by the Mangs and the Maharas in the past, with the changing of times it has now participated by people from all communities. As part of the preliminaries it offers prayers to the Goddess Amba just like it is done in *Bhavai*. As in other traditional forms a Tamasha performance broadly has two divisions- *Poorvaranga* followed by the main drama, in this case known as *Vaga Natya* the show of Tamasa. The *Poorvaranga* mainly has three stages. It begins with the musicians playing upon *dholok* and *halgi* (an instrument similar to that of a tambourine). Both the musicians play rhythmic music on their respective instruments to the point of counter-pointing. They are joined by two other instrumentalists who play on the *manjira* (cymbals) and the *tuntune* (a single stringed instrument) respectively and towards the later part they perform as co-singers also. The last of the performers who joins the musicians is the singer. When the singer begins to sing the *manjira* and the *tuntune* players also accompany him.

This step is followed by the invocation to Lord Ganesha but sometimes offered to Siva and Parvati also, is sung by the male members of the group. This invocation is called as *gana* and the complete exercise of the invocation is called *avahana*. The main singer of the troupe acts as a director or the *Sutradhara* as he is the one who guides the entire performance. There is another character who enters during the proceedings of the *gana*-the *Songadya* or the Clown. The invocation is followed by the presentation of episodes from the life of Krishna popularly known as the *gavalan* or the *gaulani*. But unlike in other forms here the mood is not of solemn in kind but of everyday love, teasing and so on. In this stage a *gavalan* (gopi) or milk-maid enters the stage and she is, unlike in other forms, not a man in the guise of a female but a female actor performing the role of the heroine. The lady dancer enters into a conversation with the *Sutradhara* (called *Sardar*) with her face hidden temporarily from the audience to create more excitement among them. The conversation taken in the form of question-answer type of Lavani is further extended to include the *Songadya*, the *manjira* player as well as the *tuntune* player. The notable aspect of the conversation lies in the change of tone from the witty, humorous and playfulness to a more serious, philosophical one.

The last of three stages of *Poorvaranga* includes a farce called the *Ranga Baji* which focuses on a social issue of any kind. It could either be a love affair of girl or a case of robbery at a woman's place, etc. With the presentation of the *Ranga Baji* the entire stage of *Poorvaranga* comes to completion. The most interesting aspect of this phase of the presentation is the amalgamation of three apparently separate discourses – invocation, philosophical and the ordinary - into one.

The completion of the preliminaries marks the beginning of the actual play called the *Vag*. The *Vag* can be centred on a mythological, historical figures or events and also on subject matters related to the society. The dialogues of the *Vag* are delivered in prose form where the actors have the freedom to produce them instantaneously and to improvise upon. The responsibility of the main singer is to introduce the characters and also to give an idea of the main plot of the play through the first *Lavani*. In the subsequent *Lavanis* the story is taken further through dance provided by either the heroine or other female characters. Even though the *Sardar* usually takes up the role of the director guiding the play through different stages yet it is the heroine who really occupies the centre stage with her dance movements and active participation in discourses that gives the performance its totality.

The costume of the Tamasa actors are not very varied as is seen with other forms. To a greater extent they wear dresses that are commonly used by people on everyday basis. The male members wear dhotis and kurtas with a turban called *pheta* and a red waistband. On the other hand, the female actors wear the usual saris worn by any common lady.

Just like many other forms it is also facing challenges from the various corners. Today, it has become more commercial than it was in yester years. But, in spite of the reducing number of registered groups of *Tamasa* the younger generation has been trying hard to keep it alive through various other means.

i) **Chhau**

The form of Chhau is a kind of Indian tribal dance of martial arts origin which is very popular in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. Till the thirties this form of dance was not esteemed as a part of the Indian dance tradition. But with the passing of time its true worth has now been established through proper studies. The form has three different versions – the Mayurbhanj, Saraikala and Purulia, spread over a closely knit geographical location. However, this separation is a development of post 1947 only. Otherwise, they belong to the same origin sharing a similar culture and tradition.

The Chhau dance represent the folk art of *Parikhanda* (Pari- shield, khanda=sword), a form of martial arts. Although the form of Chhau has made huge development as an independent form of dance yet the link between it and *parikhanda* is still very evident as even now the young aspirants receiving training in Chhau need to receive But at the same time it also carries within it the folk element found in Indian artistic tradition. The fundamental aspects of the form have been influenced by the spiritual and cultural conventions. Being close to nature and concerned with the mundane living of people, the movements of Chhau dance are prompted by animals, birds, trees and also by the usual household activities of the common people. The most significant aspect about Chhau is the use of masks in the performances. Of all the theatre traditions found in India it is the only tradition where all the characters wear masks. However, at the same time it must be kept in view that of the three versions of Chhau, the Mayurbhanj style does not use masks. The masks are highly stylized with arch-like eyebrows and extended half-closed eyes. These masks are made out of clay following preparation of the model for it in several phases, each of them having passed through elaborate processes. After the masks are prepared in clay they are decorated depending upon the characters that these masks represent. The masks of gods or goddesses are attached with highly decorated headdresses. On the other hand, the masks of the demons do not have the headdresses and their faces are only roughly prepared in order to produce disgust or fear among the audience.

The themes of Chhau dance are not very complicated and being attached to nature they adopt themes related to animals, birds or trees. As such there are performances on the hunter, fisherman and so on. In addition to this the Chhau performance also takes up episodes from the two epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and other myths and legends. However, with the passage of time new and varied themes like national integration, different social issues, important incidents from the past are also included in its repertoire. The performances of the Chhau dances continue only for five to seven minutes as the masks worn by the actors have very small holes in the nostrils making it difficult for them to breath.

Unlike the classical dances which have an air of solemnity and remain firmly grounded with their movements of dance, the Chhau dance has upward thrust movements, extension of legs and utilizes the space available for the performance to the maximum. The coiled dance movements that imitate the body movements of life and the actions of the natural world of animals, birds, etc. bring the stage come to life. In Chhau dance there is predominance of non-verbal mode of communication than the vice-versa. The gestures of the hands, the movements of the feet and the body in itself create a unique language that helps to establish a communication between the audience and the performers.

Though stemmed out from the same source the three styles of Chhau have subtle variations in them. The Seraikela Chhau dance is characterised by “swinging, gliding and startling movements, sudden turns and twists of the body, slow conversation and abrupt release of energy, and trance-like ecstasy.”⁵¹ On the other hand ‘bent-knee foot stepping, short vertical jumps and full circle of spins, quivering and twisting of the upper torso, and violent wriggling of the shoulders the style of Purulia Chhau dance.’⁵² The Mayurbhanj style of Chhau is classified by the “gradual development of dance, well-knit phrasing, and controlled movements filled with explosive energy.”⁵³

⁵¹ Awasthi, Suresh. (2008). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 59.

⁵² Ibid, p. 59.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 59.

The music of Chhau is employed to match the thematic demand of the presentation. The beats produced by the huge drum, particularly in Mayurbhanj and Purulia style, bear the stamp of martial arts. The chief of the musicians sitting by the Chhau dancers recite the *Talas* while the dancer tries to produce the same *talas* or beats through their footsteps. In Chhau dance it is very much important for the dancer to have adequate knowledge about music because without the knowledge of it the dancer may not be able to read the beats correctly and consequently produce wrong steps and spoil the entire performance. In Purulia Chhau the player on the drums vigorously move about the stage and stir up the dancers to take on the stage with their dancing.

j) **Nautanki**

The form of Nautanki is found in Northern India that provides the audience with often vulgar and uncivil stories. A form basically belonging to the peasant society of the pre-modern India, this form of theatre throbs with vigorous dancing, energetic drumbeats and loud singing. It has emerged out of several other traditions such as Bhagat, Swaang, etc. It is a secular form of theatre and with its broad and all inclusive outlook it is able to incorporate people from various castes and communities. The history of Nautanki becomes more evident in the nineteenth century with the appearance of the printing technology in India and the subsequent publications of Nautanki pieces in the form of chapbooks.⁵⁴

By the late 19th century the form of Nautanki developed and many sub-schools emerged in places like Hathras and Mathura in western Uttar Pradesh, Kanpur and Lucknow in central Uttar Pradesh where the form were performed and taught as well. Although both the schools practice the same form of theatre yet in terms of their treatment they differ from one another. In Hathras style of performance emphasis is given more on singing that manifest a pure operatic form. On the other hand, the school of Kanpur stresses on the dialogues in prose and a blending of music. The Kanpuri style which mainly developed in the 19th and early 20th century draws its inspiration from the

⁵⁴ Hansen. (1992). *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 86.

European theatre traditions as exemplified by its use of prose dialogues. The form of Nautanki made tremendous development in the early phase of the 20th century as a number of troupes that performed Nautanki appeared on the scene. The troupes known as *mandalis* (meaning group) and *akharas* (meaning wrestling arenas) were mainly responsible for the rapid growth of the form. The Nautanki group is called *akhara* due to the particular style of singing that requires a lot of physical power.

The themes for the Nautanki theatre are ranged from mythology and folklores to contemporary events. It includes stories from the epics –the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as love stories like the famous Laila-Majnu of Persian origin. During the rule of the British it even echoed the sentiments of resentment, anger of the common people against the rulers. The Nautanki operas bear great influences upon the audience and it is for this reason that the form is employed to spread numerous educational messages to the masses.

Chapter –II

The Land of Red River and Blue Hills: Theatre from Assam

2. Tradition and Transition: Assamese Theatre

The tradition of Assamese theatre conversely drama is found to be evident only from the late 15th century. There have been hardly any written documents on either any form of drama or a text of a play and as such it is generally acknowledged that Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) is the first Assamese playwright and his Chihnajatra is the first play in the history of Assamese theatre. However, there must have been a tradition of practice of music, dance or drama in the court of gifted and art loving King like Bhaskarvarma of ancient Kamrupa. There is an opinion that Avantivarma, the patron to Vishakhadutta who wrote Mudrarakshasha was actually a king of old Kamrupa. In the edict of land grant by Indrapala to Purandarpala he has been described as a fine poet and in another such statute by Dharmapala the same poet has been praised as a supreme poet and a jewel in the crown. These references indicate the presence and practice of drama in the ancient Assam.

It is only from the late 14th century that the presence of some kind of mass entertainment carrying elements of drama is found in literature of that period. In the works of Madhava Kandali and Harivaravipra frequent references are found of Nata and Bhata. In Harivaravipra's, a poet in the court of Durlabhanarayana, Babrubahana episode Arjuna jeers at Babrubahana as a son of a danseuse. The prevalence of the tradition of temple dancers practicing music and dance in the honour of Gods was there in many temples of Assam. All of these indicate that there had been a strong routine of theatrical performances as well as practices in ancient Assam even before Srimanta Sankardeva developed his form of theatre.

However, it is well accepted that theatre did not appear all of a sudden in the hands of Sankardeva. Many forms of drama had already been prevalent and popular as well, among the people of Assam even before the arrival of Sankardeva. These indigenous theatre traditions surely influenced Sankardeva in developing his own form of theatre. In this regard Kaliram Medhi mentions four kinds of folk theatre institutions viz., *Ojā Pāli*, Dhulia, Putala Nāc and Pacati.⁵⁵ “...the ultimate source of the Assamese drama ... is in all its possibility the choral performance of the Assamese *Ojā -Pāli* . Sankardeva appears to have improved this kind of performance and to have given birth to the Assamese drama.”⁵⁶ Apart from these there are many other forms still popular among the common people of Assam which contain within them the elements of traditional folk drama. They have always occupied an important place in the traditional folk culture of Assam as medium of entertainment.

2.1 Putala Nac

Of the various forms of folk drama puppetry or Putala Nac is the most ancient one which can not only fulfil the requirements of a folk drama but at the same time satisfy the necessities of a classical theatre as well.

The English word ‘Puppet’ is derived from the Latin word ‘Pupa’ or the French word ‘Poupee’ both meaning ‘a doll’. In Sanskrit three words- ‘Puttalika’ or ‘Putrika’ or ‘Putraka’ derived from the root ‘Putra’ are alternately used as synonyms which refer to ‘little son’. Apparently considered puppets are attributed with life to give an impression of human situation. Philosophically viewed also, human beings are seen as mere puppets while some unknown force manipulates them over which they do not have any control but only to follow. A puppet is an inert object. People tell the audience a story or an incident conducting these puppets with the help of threads or ropes and sticks. The birth of puppetry is assumed to be the extension of masks and as such it is compared to human body. In this context Jiwan Pani mentions “the human body is like a mask. Life

⁵⁵ Medhi, Kaliram (ed.). (1997). “Introduction.” *Ankāvali*. Guwahati: Lawyers’ Book Stall.

⁵⁶ Kakati, Dr. B.K. (ed.). (1953). *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p.190.

wears it as it acts. When death pulls down the final curtain, life stops acting and discards the mask. Then it lies revealed.”⁵⁷

Putala Nac or Putala Bhaona or Putala Bhaoria is a performance of an act through the medium of puppets. The birth of puppets occurs at the yearning of mankind. It may be maintained that most of the dramatic forms existing in society have emanated from the puppets. An actor casts off his real identity to the background after he/she assumes a personality different from himself/herself, thus becoming a dual personality in the process whereas in case of puppetry there is hardly any scope for the actors (puppets) to possess a dual personality. The utmost important aspect of puppetry is its impersonality. It cannot speak on its own yet as a dramatic character it articulates through the *Sutradhara*, the one who holds and breathes life into the puppets with the help of threads, ropes and sticks. Structurally viewed puppetry can be categorised into four kinds-a) Stringed Puppets, b) shadow puppets, c) puppets controlled with a pole and d) Hands or glove puppet.

Just like the other parts of the world there is hardly any written document on the origin and development of puppet theatre in India and as such it is extremely difficult to ascertain from when exactly puppet theatre began. But considering the fact that Bharatamuni composed the *Natyasashtra* relying on the already established concept of a total theatre in Sanskrit drama it may be conceived that the tradition of a total theatre in Sanskrit drama was itself a deep-rooted one. The concept of a total drama in turn is derived from an improved and a refined extension of the folk theatre tradition and it is perhaps for the same reason that the German scholar Richard Pischell holds puppetry as the origin of Sanskrit drama.⁵⁸ In the *Natyasashtra* the term ‘*Sutradhara*’ meaning ‘one who holds a thread’ is used. It is believed that while considering the term Bharatamuni might have drawn on the model of the puppeteer. From this it can be strongly contended that the tradition of puppet theatre was very much in vogue prior to the composition of the *Natyasashtra*. In *Mahabhashya* of Patanjali also it is mentioned that

⁵⁷ Pani, J. (1986). *World of other faces: Indian Masks*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Sarma, Dr. S.N. (1991). *Asomiya Natya Sahitya*. Guwahati: Saumar Prakash, p.23.

the episode of Kamsavadha (Slaying of Kamsa) was performed through the means of puppet theatre. On the basis of this it may be asserted that the convention of puppet theatre in India was very common in fifth century B.C. or even before that. In the opinion of Pischel puppetry is the oldest form of dramatic performances and India is the place of origin for puppets and from here only it has spread to the other parts of the world. He formed his conclusion on the ground that puppeteers were referred to as Sutradhara in Rajasekhara's 10th century work Balaramayana while in the same text the character of Ravana was portrayed through puppet. These two points of reference have served as testimony to the validity of the fact of India being the land of birth of puppetry as well as puppets. After the breakdown of the classical theatre in 10th century puppet theatre with its all inclusive element of entertainment became very popular by the medieval period though not admired by all. However,

“Since the puppets were considered as icons representing gods and heroes, they enjoyed special position among the medieval entertainers when the streets were full of festivity and fairs and festivals generated great performance activity.”⁵⁹

The puppeteers as wandering artists used to visit the fairs organized on various occasions, public or individual, and were always greeted by one and all irrespective of class or caste. The most significant feature of puppetry is its adaptability. It has the capacity to absorb different themes and materials drawn from the common life, traditions and outlook of the people that the puppeteers come across. From this perspective it serves as an important document on the socio-cultural life of the people concerned. Apart from this puppet theatre entices the audience also for the capability of the puppeteer to play the role of a most effective communicator who is well versed not only with the traditional knowledge but present state of affairs as well. Since antiquity puppet theatre has continued to enthral spectators through its performances sharing the growth of human theatre alongside. But from the beginning of the 20th century its popularity has declined due to the arrival of electronic media such as T.V. or cinema compelling those involved to move on to look for other avenues. Nonetheless, in India, in

⁵⁹ Awasthi, Suresh. (2001). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 38.

spite of its relapse, the tradition of puppet theatre still constitutes an integral part of contemporary theatre.

Assam has a very rich tradition of puppetry that has immensely contributed to its survival even in the midst of the difficulties it is facing in the present times. Like elsewhere in India there is also no means through which the origin of puppet theatre of Assam can be traced out. However, in Kalikapurana, a 10th-11th century B.C. text on Shaktism, it is written that on the third lunar day of pushya, the eight lunar mansion as per astrology, along with Mahadeva, Chandi should also be prayed. In this context it is urged that they be implored through 'Panchalika vihara' and 'Sishukautuka', the former term refers to the presentation of puppet dance.⁶⁰ From this it may be understood that the tradition of puppet theatre existed in Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa even before 10th or 11th century B.C.

From Sankardeva's reference to shadow puppets in his Adidasam it becomes quite evident that the practices of holding performances of shadow puppets were quite common even in the medieval Assam of Sankardeva.

The performance of *Putala Nac* or bhaona is noticed in different parts of Assam and carries diverse names for it. In the undivided Kamrupa district it is known as *Batris Putala* or *Bati Putala*. The name may have derived from the Sanskrit dramatist Bararuchi's *Dwattringsat Puttalika* where in the word *Dwattringsat* means *Batris* or thirty two. In this text legend about king *Vikramaditya* being told as many stories by thirty two puppets are described. The stories are meant to advise the king on various issues. The custom of *Dwattringsat Puttalika* may have entered Assam but at the same time this particular kind of puppetry has been given the name for the reason that as a convention it must always has a total number of thirty two puppets.

⁶⁰ Tarkaratna, Panchanan (ed.). (1977-78). *Kalika Purana*. Calcutta: Navabharat Publishers. P. 86, line 133-136.

Again, in this kind of puppet theatre or acting, the puppets are managed by strings tied to them. Such strings, in turn, are prepared by taking several threads (*Batiā* in Assamese) together and as such it may have been named as *Bati Putala*. In some parts of Darrang district of Assam puppet theatre is also referred to as *Jāl Putala*. The word *Jāl* in Assamese language carries several meanings and one of them is fake or duplicate or the act of copying a particular object or action. In the context of puppet theatre the term *Jāl* may point to the performance done not by actual people but by duplicates or imitations of real persons in the form of puppets only. The puppets cannot act or move on their own but on the fancy of the human beings in the same as human beings are mastered and managed by some unknown force.

The tradition of puppetry in Assam

Putala Nac or Puppetry is a popular folk tradition of Assam wherein the lifeless puppets or dolls are bestowed with life by the gifted hands of a human being. As per the oral myths Goddess Parvati is believed to be the originator of puppetry. Once she built a very charming doll and had hid it in a cave from others so that no evil force can have an effect on it. However, impressed upon by the beauty of the doll Lord Shiva instilled life into it and it began to dance. Later on, Lord Shiva sent the puppet to this earth for the purpose of providing entertainment to the common people. Myths of this kind point out to the ancientness of puppetry.⁶¹

The use of puppets in the day to day life of people has been since times of yore. In the past some, as part of belief, used to tie up a piece of bone of a dead person to a rod while going out in order to keep the evil spirits away from them.

Earlier, the peasants, either in order to get rid from the foul omens or to threaten a trouble creator or to pronounce one's right over a piece of property a doll of the particular person was installed in the field with ashes from crematory put around the

⁶¹ Parmar, Vijay. (1978). *The Message Through Puppet Plays*. New Delhi: Communication Publications, p. 38.

same. Even now puppets or images of different kinds are seen to be put up in a field in many societies.

In Hindu custom if a piece of bone cannot be collected after cremation then small figures are prepared out of *Kusha* (a variety of thatch considered sacred) at the time of offering *Dashapinda* (a ritual of ancestor worship).

Such practices invariably refer to the importance and influence of puppets in the lives of the common people from the earliest of times.

The tradition of Puppet's marriage of the Bodos of Assam

The tradition of puppet marriage among the Bodo people of Assam has been in practice since olden times. It is arranged usually to invoke the rain God praying for shower during the season of drought so that the farmers can till their land and produce crops and in this context it may primarily considered a custom of the farmers although it is now practised by others as well. This form of tradition is known as 'haba Phuthuli' in Bodo language. The term 'haba' in Bodo means to marry off while 'Phuthuli' refers to a raft made out of banana plant.

The marriage is performed mainly by women only as some are given the responsibilities of making the puppets out of fine thatch. They prepare the bridegroom and the bride called as Rauna and Rauni respectively corresponding to Lord Indra and his wife Sachi in two separate rooms. Women even assume the role a priest in such a marriage who are addressed as Deuri.

The marriage lasts for two to three days. On the first day the pair of puppets is bathed in sacred water sprinkled on them by holy basil leaves. It is followed by the marriage amidst songs and dance chiefly put on by a male who is called Barlampha. On the second day, both the bridegroom and the bride are put onto a raft of banana plant

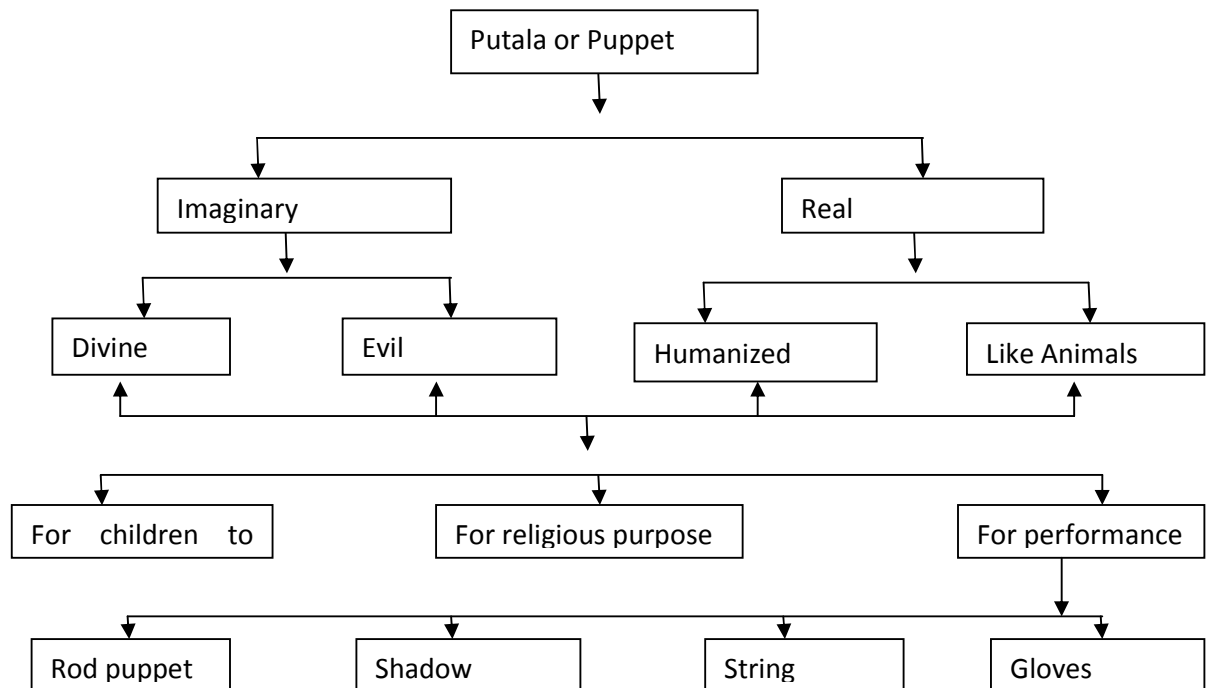
and they are left to travel by water. At the end of the marriage the Barlampha is offered a pair of cocks which is feasted upon by the people of the village.

Marriage of frogs

In many different parts of Assam the tradition of marriage of frogs is observed specially when there is scanty rainfall during the summer season. In some areas small puppets are made out the spadix of banana plant and kept along with the pair of frogs in a palanquin. In some other areas the marriage is followed by a puppet dance at night.

In addition to these puppets are also used by children at play. Some of the puppets are made of clothes while some are of burnt clay. For most of the puppets are figures of either animals or mothers and children.

Classification of Putala Naac



Even though there are several kinds of puppets the primary focus in this study would be on the ones that are connected with the performance through acting i.e. rod puppet, shadow puppet, string puppet and gloves puppet.

Rod puppet

In this kind of puppet show figures of puppet are manipulated from below. They are usually of full size in scale and are supported by a rod that runs through the body to the head. Sometimes separate rods are used to facilitate the figures with greater movements. It is believed to be an extension of early Eastern shadow puppets. Such form of puppetry is noticed in Java and Bali of Indonesia traditionally known as Wayang Golek. But this form of puppetry is followed in various parts of the Europe also. In countries like Poland, Austria or in Russia rod puppets have occupied a particular value. Similarly, in the United States also, inspired by the growth in European countries, this form has been advanced to allow the puppeteer to pass the hand inside the puppet's body to hold a short rod to the head while the arms are manoeuvred in the familiar way.

In India rod puppets are spotted in Odisha and West Bengal. The form of Odhissa is commonly known as *Kathikundhei- nach* in which the puppets are 12 to 18 inch in height with their heads carved out of wood and painted with colours. The performance of this puppetry is primarily based on the stories and episodes from the great epic of the Ramayana and the popular narrative of Mahishasurmardini, the saga of Goddess Durga killing Mahisha. The puppets in this type of theatre are manipulated from below.

In West Bengal the tradition rod puppetry dates back to last quarter of the 14th century. It is usually known as Putul-nach wherein the importance is laid on the singing acting out of a folk play usually based on the episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. Even though the term Putul Nach denotes doll dance it, in reality, is more a drama than a simple dance show with dolls. There is another form of puppetry in the southern region of West Bengal popularly known as Danger Putul in which the rod puppets are made of wood and clay. The puppets bigger in size that can

range from $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet to 4 feet in height and 5 kg to 15 kg in weight. The face of the puppet is prepared with a layer of clay and cloth and is painted while the body is painted on the wood using primary colours. The puppets usually do not have any joints on its left hand while the right arm is joined at the elbow. It is to be noted that except the Krishna puppet who has just the right leg to be placed invariantly on the head of the serpent god Kalia, the other puppets do not have legs at all. The unique feature that the puppets of this kind have is that there are several heads for one body and by changing the head and the appropriate costume the same puppet-body can be used to play multiple roles. It is also accompanied by an ensemble of musicians who begins the show with a concert to draw attention of crowds. It is followed by a small performance of Krishna and Balaram puppets and a dance sequence by Bhanumati only to be followed by the final act of the day. The stories are mostly built on the popular myths and legends, nonetheless contemporary relevant issues are also taken up as subject matter of such performances. In the states of Tamilnadu and Karnataka sometimes a mixture of string and rod puppets are seen. In Odisha, too, the rod puppets are made of wood and attached to a piece of rod and controlled from below. Unlike the puppets of West Bengal, the Puppets of Odisha have legs that can be moved along with the heads and hands. They have joints at the shoulders and are connected with strings from the upper body. The puppets are 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet long adorned with costumes and ornaments that match the kind used in Jatra. The performance is based on the themes from the epics as well as folk tales and dialogues are mostly delivered with the help of music.

Karnataka has its own tradition of rod puppetry in which the puppets are made of wood with joints. These are small in size each measuring 1 feet only. The most unique feature of this puppet tradition is its inclusion of diverse characters such as the barber, landlord, wrestler, dancing woman, warrior, king, washerman, traders, etc. that represent actual life with the mundane issues.

There has been very little of the tradition of rod puppet in Assam. Of late only in some areas like Kalaigaon performances with the help of life sized rod puppets have started to take place. In Silchar also, a mixture of rod puppets and string puppets is

in practice. In this arrangement the puppets are put on to a wheel cart with the strings fastened to their limbs. The puppets are controlled from below with the manipulators sitting on the ground.

Shadow Puppet

Of all the forms of Puppets the shadow puppet is the oldest one, probably as ancient as human civilization is. In India it is believed to have derived from various sources like the Chitrakatha of the South India; the Jadano Pat of West Bengal; the Chitrakathi of Maharashtra, and the Yampat of Bihar. According to Awasthi “here are six recognizable traditions (*in India*). These are Odisha, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala.”⁶² The puppets of this tradition, which have grown out of ancient people’s purpose to entertain fellows through the dramatisations given to cut out figures, are primarily made of leather and only occasionally of hard paper. The tradition of Shadow puppets as observed in various parts of the world like Turkey and Bali bears close resemblance to that of India. It is possible that the Turks who during 14th and 15th century migrated from the northern India to the southern India under the Sultans of Bahmani to spread Islam and again in 17th century under the Mughals in order to extend its rule had come into contacts with the puppet tradition of the south. In another context the there seems to be a lot more common between the shadow puppet tradition of Bali and India. Some images as shown in the shadow puppet theatre of Bali greatly resemble to those found in the temples of both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Apart from this there are similarities between them in their use of the clown tradition, epic traditions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, adherence to the Purbaranga tradition. On the basis of these parallels it may be maintained that the shadow puppet reached the islands of Bali from India through its Silk Route.

The puppet tradition of Odisha is known as Ravana Chhaya as it is derived from the belief that only the evil Ravana not Rama, the radiant soul, emits a shadow. The puppets are small in size that ranges between 4 inches to 2 feet and are without any

⁶² Awasthi, Suresh. (2001). *Performance Tradition in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 44.

joints. Deerskin is used to make the puppets that impart coarseness to their look. They are perforated to define the outlines of the figures, costumes and jewellery and no colour is applied to them.

The shadow puppets in Tamilnadu are called Tol Bommalatam. The puppets are small varying from 30 inches to 2 feet made of leather though sometimes brown paper is also used. The puppets have moveable heads and arms adorned with costumes that are inspired by Tamil theatre and cinema.

The shadow plays in Andhra Pradesh are called Tholu Bommalatam (Tholu meaning leather). The origin of this puppet tradition dates back to the 3rd century BC during the rule of the Maurya dynasty. In the later periods also the Pallava Kings, the Kakatiya Kings, the Chola Kings took great care of this form to flourish not only in the other parts of India but outside it as well. The puppets are of different sizes, some are between 1 feet to 3 feet while some have 6 X 4 feet sizes. The Nellore puppets having joints in hands and legs are more than 7 feet in size and are known to be the largest in the world. Different costumes and colours are used for different characters. The puppet of Rama may not be in blue while Sita would wear the costumes of Bharatanatyam. Ravana is painted red and Hanumana is coloured either in black or red with the name of Rama written in yellow. The influence of the Mughal can also be perceived as the puppets of Rama and Lakshmana are given moustaches. The performance is assisted by three musicians and they play raga based music with instruments like the mridanga, harmonium, ankle-bells, table, conch, cymbals, etc. Episodes mainly from the Mahabharata are chosen as themes of the performances.

In Karnataka the puppets are called Togalu Gombatta (Togalu meaning leather). The puppeteers received royal grants from Kings belonging to various dynasties like the Rashtrakutas, Pallavas, Kadambas, Chalukyas and Hoysalas. There are basically two varieties of puppets. In the puppets from the north influence of the Mughal era is clearly evident in their dress design, jewellery of that period. Under the influence of the Mughal Empire these puppets are shown to have triangular face, long beards, slim body or eyes

like fish. On the other hand the puppets of the Southeast part of the region bear the influence of Chalukyas, Hoysala and Vijayanagara dynasties. While the puppets of the north are of 35 inches tall, the ones of the southeast are between 20 to 24 inches in height. They, under the influence of the Hindu rulers, display heavier body with a round face. The puppets that are small in size are called Chikka Togalu Gombeatta and the large ones are called Dodda Togalu Gombeatta. The former of the two is manipulated by standing while the latter one is controlled by standing. The musicians usually sit behind the screen and they play on various instruments harmonium, table, maddalam, mukhaveri etc to provide raga based verse recitation in the production.

The form of puppetry seen in Kerala is known as Thol Pava Koothu (Thol means leather while Pava Koothu means puppet dance). This tradition was originally brought from Tamilnadu. It is important to note here that the puppeteers speak either Tamil or Malayalam at home but during performance the songs and recitations are done in Tamil while the elucidation is made in Malayalam. For the purpose of the presentation the Kamba Ramayana is adopted as it provides condensation suitable for a puppet play. Two types of puppets are seen- a) figures that are coloured on both sides, translucent and having perforations, and b) figures that perforated, coloured only on one side. The minimum size of a puppet is 6 × 5 inches and the maximum size is 30 × 25 inches. The puppets sport ornaments like the Kathakali dancers.

However, this tradition of puppetry is not available in Assam and other parts of the North-East India.

Glove Puppet

The glove or hand puppet is the simplest of all the types as it can be performed in even in an open space without the need for any particular setting. In the past it was originally practiced by the nomads and for the same reason it does not have a proper history of its own as the nomads were not keen to keep records of the events. However, it is observed that most of the practitioners of this form of puppetry were poor

and that they belong to various communities and religion. The glove puppets are made either of wood or paper and sometimes clay, and they do not have legs. The lower portion of the puppets is covered with a costume specific to the local community.

The form of glove puppet found in Kerala is called Pavakathakali or Pavakoothu (Pava meaning doll and Koothu meaning dance). The term Pavakathakali itself suggests that this form is influenced by the traditional Kathakali dance. Usually, the key episodes from the Mahabharata are taken up for performance. The puppets, anywhere between 12 to 18 inches high, are delicately carved out of wood and coloured beautifully in such a manner so that typicality of each of the characters are brought out vividly. They are further decorated with gilded tin, peacock feathers and translucent coral. Traditional musical instruments like the chenda, maddalam, conch shell, chenglia etc are played while songs from the Puranas are sung during the course of the play.

The traditional glove puppet of West Bengal is known as Bener Putul. In this the puppets were earlier made of wood, but now clay is used to make them. The head part is bigger in size than the rest of the body. The puppets are one and half foot high and have wooden arms. While playing with drums and cymbals the puppeteers sing both Hindi and Bengali songs full of humour and sarcasm. Unlike most of the puppet performances elsewhere the bener puppetry is not based on the epics, rather on the myriad of usual social events like adventures of lover-couples, misunderstandings arising out of social, cultural or linguistic differences, etc.

In Odisha also the glove puppet is widely popular which is known by two names i.e. Gopa Lila Kundhei and Sakhi Kundhei. The former of the two refers to the plays concerning Lord Krishna and Radha whose puppets are modelled on the figures from the sculptures of temples while the later deals with the love of a common boy and a girl prototypical of the Radha-Krishna theme.

Similar tradition of glove puppet is evident in state like Rajasthan which is called Lalua. It has two arms, two legs and a wooden head that are manipulated by different

fingers centring the story of the child Lalua who always wails and needs food. In Uttar Pradesh the glove puppetry is performed around the storyline of the quarrel between two women – Gulabo, the helpless wife and Sitabo, the beautiful mistress of the same man. The narrative is mingled with vulgar jokes and sarcastic humour. Some traces of glove puppetry are seen in Tamilnadu as well. The form of Tamilnadu is known as Pava Koothu that centres on a beautiful girl named Vali and her beloved Subrahmaniam.

In Assam such tradition of glove puppetry is not seen even though it was in practice in its neighbour states.

String Puppet

It is observed that there has been only one form of puppetry prevalent in Assam and that is String Puppet. The string puppet is probably the most popular and common of all the forms of puppetry not only in India but in the entire world. It is for this reason that it is found in many states of India such as Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam and Kerela.

The string puppet form of Rajasthan known as Kathputli is believed to be more than thousand years old though there is no written document to establish the claim. Puppet theatre in Rajasthan has been able to get patronage from various kings like Prithviraj Chauhan, Amar Singh Rathore until the arrival of the Mughals who in spite of their likeness for the performances of puppet did not patronize the puppeteers. Later on the puppeteers had to rely on the zaminders who either had no money or taste for the art.

The Rajasthani puppets are made out of mango wood having no legs and with the bodies and limbs filled with cotton. Because of the lightness of the material used in the making of the puppets a slightest jerk in the rope that is tied to the head and to the waist creates movements of the puppet's hands, neck and shoulder. The puppeteers manoeuvre the puppets with a buzz and a whistling sound assisted by a narrator who

maintains the rhythms. There are more physical movements in the plays than dialogues and so the puppets are given jerks in such a way that they make them quickly move upward and downward to express the emotions of indifference, contempt or anger. At some moments the puppets are moved speedily towards each other with swords to suggest a fierce fight. It is interesting to note here that unlike many other states where puppetry is found, the Rajasthani puppets do not make use of the epics. Stories from the Rajasthani folklore concerning kings, queens or lovers are adopted for the themes. Earlier, such performances were done in a tent but now they create a stage with two vertically placed cots and securing them to bamboo. In addition to this two curtains are used – one black to be put up at the backstage and another, a colourful one, at the front.

The puppetry of Karnataka is based on Yakshagana, the other famous traditional theatre form of the same state. It is, however, known variously as Gombeatta in the north, Sutrada Gombeatta in Mysore area and simply Yakshagana in the coastal Karnataka. This form is believed to be prevalent since 9th century but has become popular only from the 19th century when it was refined on the principles followed by the Yakshagana theatre proper. It is now a highly meticulous art form since all conventions relating to the make-up, dress and ornaments as followed in Yakshagana are firmly obeyed. In spite of the rigidity of the principles that governs it, the puppet-master known as Bhagavathar, through his capacity as a gifted musician, a highly efficient storyteller makes the entire presentation a lively one. In such an act the Bhagavathar sings as well as supplies the music while other puppeteers control the puppets keeping with the rhythm of the dialogues as well as the music. The dialogues are usually delivered in prose form by the assistants of the Bhagavathar. The subject matters of the Yakshagana puppet show are mainly adopted from the epics and also from the Bhagavat Puran.

This puppet show is presented on a stage with a nearly 12 feet long and 42 inches high wooden stand covered with black cloth to be used as a backdrop. The manipulators of the puppet stand behind the backdrop making the puppets enter and exit from the two sides of the stage.

The puppets, 2-3 feet in height, are made out of light wood and basically have three parts- head, body and legs although no legs are seen in the puppets from the southern Karnataka. Since the form of Yakshgana is a highly decorative and sophisticated in its outlook, the puppet form also follows the same tradition. Like the original form its characters also have beautifully carved out wooden faces, hands or feet all painted in gorgeous colours. The body, though roughly carved, is given proper shape as it is covered with costume. The puppets in general are attached to six strings but sometimes it may go up to seven if a particular character enters the stage with a prop like the sword.

The string puppets of West Bengal are called as Tarer Putul or Suto Putul. The people involved in this art form are basically poor who had come from the erstwhile East Pakistan but have settled down here with the land allotted to them by the government. A group of Tarer Putul comprises six to twelve persons and are owned by either one individual or by the puppeteers themselves jointly.

In a group there is one Sur Master who would sing all the songs and dialogues. He would be assisted by two others. There would be one main puppeteer and at least one assistant in a group. The Sur Master is a professional artist but with meagre salary for his job he, like others, has to rely on other jobs. All the members of group are also paid with a fixed salary but for only eight months in a year since the troupes do not perform in the rainy season.

Every year the groups are sold or new groups are formed. The groups are mobile in nature and are adoptive to the needs of the audience. They even use Hindi and Bhojpuri languages when they visit areas of Hindi speaking people. Their puppets are made from Solapith, a light aquatic weed, which range between 2 to 3 feet in height and are painted beautifully. They have joints at shoulders, elbows and sometimes wrists. Except the female acrobat puppet, called Bhanumati, other puppets do not have legs. The groups usually have their tents along with a stage and a printed curtain. They also make use of a number of backdrops during the shows.

The themes of the acts are primarily based on the successful Jatra plays. But, it is interesting to note here that very often themes from the hit Bengali and Hindi films are also adopted for the presentations although changes are made in them according to the taste of the audience. Many musical instruments like harmonium, table, clarinet, flute dotara, dhol , etc. are used while accompanying with the songs and the dialogues. The Sur Master, as a self trained person, knows very well how to change his voice according to the character in the play.

Apart from this form of string puppetry there are few varieties prevalent in West Bengal. One of them is known as Chhau puppet form in which traditional Chhau dance form predominant in Purulia district is taken as a model for the overall design of such plays. In this form masks worn in the performances of Chhau dance as well as acrobatic movements involving a lot of summersaults are also incorporated. Sometimes in order to put on proper acrobatic movements rod puppets are also used since it is difficult to do the same with string puppets due to its fluid body structure. As for the themes Chhau puppet theatre adopts episodes from the Puranas such as Abhimanyu Badh, Parashurama Guru Darshan. There is another type of puppet theatre seen in the Sagar island area known well for the Ganga Sagar Mela of Makar Sankranti. In this form a puppet is prepared and adorned as Goddess Manasa (the Snake Goddess) who is offered prayers before the show. The head of the puppet is made of terracotta while the body and hands are made of straw and paper respectively. The animal puppets are also made of straw with joints at neck and shoulders. Each group comprises 10 to 12 people with one as main puppeteer and others to assist him.

Of the wonderful world of major folk art forms puppet theatre perhaps occupies an important place and Assam also has a strong tradition of puppet dance. The existence of it has been referred to in many ancient texts. Scholars on many occasions have traced its history back to the times of living in the caves. The texts belonging to the Neo-Vaishnavite literature have also stressed upon the antiquity of the art form. In Katha-guru-carita it is mentioned that on the 22nd day of Sri Sankardeva's birth a presentation

of shadow puppet play took place in the home of Kusumbar Bhuyan, the father of Sankardeva.⁶³

Many scholars have expressed the view that Sankardeva had brought the model of puppet theatre from Odisha to Assam. On the other hand, there is another opinion that Sri Sankardeva first made use of the masks and only later on he introduced the form of puppet dance in to Assam.⁶⁴

The string puppet form in Assam is known by various names such as Putala Nac, Putala Bhaona, Bati Putala, Jal Putala, etc. The different body parts of the puppets seen in Assam are usually made of paper pulp, water hyacinth, pith plant, the central rib of the banana leaf, light wood of Madar and they are joined by pieces of clothes to give them proper shapes. Sometimes other than these materials light thatch, very light wood, the dried club gourd, coconut shell are also used. There are puppets not only of human shape but also of many animals.

The lower parts of the puppets are usually covered with clothes although sometimes puppets with distinctive feet are also seen with shoes being put on to them. The puppets are normally of one foot to three-four feet high. But modern puppets are found to of even five feet high. In the past the puppets were coloured with vermilion, yellow arsenic but today due to the uneasy availability of these products modern readymade colours are used to paint the puppets. Keeping with the tradition the figures of the God puppets of Rama, Krishna are coloured in blue while the demons, fiends are painted with black colour. When they are not in use they are properly kept in boxes or almirahs.

In a puppet theatre group there could be members anywhere between five to twenty numbers. The chief artist of the entire troupe is called Sutradhara or *Ojā* who assumes multiple roles of a producer, director as well as the intermediary. The

⁶³ Lekharu, Upendra Chandra (ed). (1964). *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari: Dutta Barua & Sons, p. 785.

⁶⁴ Ghosh, Sampa and Utpal K. Banerjee. (2005). *Indian Puppet*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p. 85.

Sutradhara is assisted by a few assistants and also by a band of musicians who play on khol, dhol and cymbals, etc. The group of musicians has one singer in it known as gayan and other instrumentalists commonly known as bayans who keep on playing the musical instruments in keeping with the rhythm of the play. In some performances the Sutradhara himself not only manipulates the puppets but also delivers the dialogues. The Bayans by playing with khol and cymbals perform as the main assistants to the Sutradhara in a play while the Gayan complements to create a conducive atmosphere to the totality of the act. In the earlier times a technique called Ariya made of bamboo split with ragas wrapped on the top end of the split and dipped in mustard oil was used to produce light needed for the performances. But today modern electrical lights are used to do the same.

Although stories or episodes from the Epics and Puranas are adopted for the enactments of puppet theatre yet in the present times even contemporary subjects are also taken up for such purposes.

The shows are usually held on stages for which bamboo poles, screen and ropes are used. A black screen is hung as a backdrop and the Sutradhara standing behind the screen sometimes delivers dialogues himself or with the help of the Gayan. He even manipulates the puppets on occasions so efficiently that it seems as if the puppets themselves are actually delivering the dialogues.

The puppet theatre of Assam is not directly related to any religious rituals though sometimes performance of it is arranged in religious functions or gatherings and for this aspect it may be assumed that it is not entirely free from religious influences. Many of the stories of the puppet theatre are taken from the religious texts and moreover, they are presented on occasions like Janmastami (the birthday of Lord Krishna). Reference to the presentation of puppet dance during the religious functions even before 10th -11th century in the ancient Pragjyotishpur Kamrupa has been made in the Kalika Purana.⁶⁵ However, in the changing contexts of the present times there have been a lot of

⁶⁵ Bhattacharya, Devendra Nath (tr). (2008). *Kalika Purana*. Guwahati: Bani Mandir, p. 1163.

transformations in the performance of this form of art and with the ever increasing expansion of the electronic media the popularity of puppet theatre has markedly come down.

Puppet dance or Putala Nac of Assam is characterised by certain key aspects. The first of them is its subject matter of the themes. Generally, the themes of any folk theatre form are influenced by religion. The stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas were adopted and combined with dance and music to make it suitable for the enactment of the traditional theatre forms. Such performances had always two very important objectives ahead- to provide entertainment and to rouse religious sentiment. To a great extent both the objectives were fulfilled.⁶⁶ However, secular themes were also selected for the performances. In this category the traditional popular stories, historical events, mythical tales were treated for the puppet theatre. Such themes have some advantages in comparison to the religious themes as it allows a story to include sringara rasa (the love or erotic rasa) and hasya rasa (Joy or comic rasa) which a religious theme would not. In a religious theme there might be employment of these rasas but it would not be allowed to cross a certain limit. On the other hand, while performing on a popular theme importance is laid on the liberal creation of the sringara and hasya rasa. However, the aspect of moral education/learning from these stories cannot be ruled out.⁶⁷

Folk theatres are not bound by the rules and regulations involved with the presentation of the classical drama. As against it the folk theatre very easily presented the scenes of death, bathing, eating food, dressing up, war, etc. on the stage. Such scenes rather than producing any apathy, disgust or hatred in the minds of the common people of the society helped to generate a sense of satisfaction due to their representation on the stage as part of regular human experiences.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Sarma, S. N. (2007). *Paramparagata Prachya Natyabhinay*. Guwahati: Bina Library, p. 52.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p. 52.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 53.

The stories or themes taken for the presentation of puppet theatre are usually found to be laden with religious sentiment. The chief purposes of Putala Nac or Putala Bhaona are not only limited to providing pleasure or entertainment and rousing religious feeling but also to impart moral wisdom. Just like most other folk art forms the subject matters of puppet dance are also acquired from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Puranas and modified with the introduction of music, dance, acting to make them apt for the production. Stories such as Sita Harana (abduction of Sita), Balivadha (The assassination of Bali), Data Karna (Karna, the benefactor), Ram Vanabas (The Exile of Rama into Forest), Khatasur Vadha (The assassination of Khatasur), Virata Parva (The episode of Virata), etc. These stories used for the puppet drama in Assam, in the beginning, were in oral form. The Sutrah-dara or the *Ojā* of a puppet dance used to spontaneously create while presenting a performance of the same. But as time passed on, the practice of the plays in written form began and at present only the written plays are adopted for the puppet theatre.

The plays taken up for the performances of puppet theatre have themes of secular in nature which not only provide amusement but uphold high ideals as well. Among them are Beula-Lakhinder's Story, Bhakta Prahlad, Usha-Aniruddha etc. In addition to this, there are plays that are based on history of Assam such as Sati Joymati, Kanaklata, The uprising of Patharughat, etc. Moreover, plays have also been composed on many traditional verses, ballads or tales. Tejimala, Champawati, etc. can be cited as examples of such plays. Today, under the changing circumstances, plays have been written dealing with the contemporary issues that affect the people of the society. Many a time, even government agencies in order to create awareness on certain important matters like AIDS awareness campaign, Population control, Anti-Tobacco campaign, etc. make use the form of puppet drama.

In a puppet theatre group there could be around ten to thirty numbers of puppets depending on the requirement of the stories. On the other hand, to manipulate the puppets a puppet theatre usually comprises of four to five members but sometimes it may go up to twenty five also. It is observed that the chief manipulator commonly

known as the Sutradhara or Bajikar or *Ojā* is assisted by 2-3 persons in his job. They help the *Ojā* either by singing or by accompanying the *Ojā* with their musical instruments. In some groups he is also helped by five to six persons to arrange light on the stage, to make the puppets dance, to deliver the dialogues, etc.

Music instils life to any act of dance, acting and it does the same to puppet dance as well. The musical instruments as mentioned in the *Natyashastra* in chapter 28 and 29 could be of four kinds – *Tata Vadya* (String Instruments), *Avanaddha Vadya* (Instruments covered with membrane), *Sushira Vadya* (Wind Instruments) and *Ghana Vadya* (Solid or Musical instruments which are stuck against one another). In *Putala Nac* all of these kinds of musical instruments are played. *Khol*, *Dhol* and *Nagara* of *Avanaddha* kind are used in it. Among the instruments that fall in the category of *Ghana Vadya* Cymbals, Bells, *Taka* (a bamboo clapper), *Gagana* (an instrument made of bamboo which is played during the performance of *Bihu*), etc. are used in the Puppet dance. Instruments like *Tokari* (a single string instrument), *Dotara* (a double string instrument) which belong to the *Tata Vadya* class and *Banhi* (the flute), *Penpa* (a wind instrument), *Sankha* (conch shell), etc. that come in the class of *Sushira Vadya* are played, too, in puppet dance. The cadenced music produced with the help of these instruments adds flavour to the overall splendour of the puppet dance. The musical instruments assist the *Bajikar* or the *Ojā* in his efforts and liven up the acting of the puppets. However, in recent times along with the traditional musical instruments modern instruments like *tabla*, *harmonium* or even electronic instruments are employed because of which the natural taste, which the audience used to get out of such performances, has gradually decreased.

Putala Nac is an ancient institution of theatre in which music, songs and dance, and acting predominate. Traditionally, the dialogues are orally transmitted from one generation to another but with the passage of time they have lost, to a great extent, the original exuberance. It is because of the changes in language itself which have caused changes in the style of dialogues of puppet dance. Earlier the plays were based on the two Epics and the puppet theatre groups were using the verses of these texts as dialogues. The dialogues delivered in rhythmic verse did not have any written form per

se. The puppets were brought on to the stage and keeping in view of the context of the story the dialogues were delivered.

But later on when the plays gradually were began to be written the groups of puppet dance replaced the versified language of the plays with the modern prose language as found in Assamese literature. The popularity of the modern jatra party witnessed during the middle of the 20th century also contributed to the increased use of prosaic language in the puppet plays.

Sometimes in order to evoke comic element in a puppet play certain scenes with a potentiality to serve the purpose or a particular character known as Chengra or Bahua, both of inferior quality, are introduced. Such scenes or actions of the Bahua do not have any direct connection with the central theme of the play. In the scenes which are presented either through inferior scenes or character to create a funny world the dialogues are in prose format while the songs are in rhymes. The language in such contexts is never the standard form of language.

The costume and jewellery of the puppets were designed in the medieval period by keeping in view certain important aspects. Attempts are made to demonstrate the temperament of a character in a play through proper costume to the greatest extent possible. Certain specific costumes such as the ten headed mask of Ravana, the mask of Jatayu, the Crown of King, the typical complexion of Krishna and Rama belong to the imitative type of costume design. Again, costumes are also designed to denote the traits of a character. For example, in order to refer to the horror of a fiend black colour is used while white colour and long flowing beard is used to point out the sanctity and wisdom of a sage. In *Natyasastra*, the costume of male characters has been categorised into three divisions- white, red and variegated.⁶⁹ In Putala Nac performance the puppets are dressed according to the characters they represent on the stage, a dancer is put on variegated dress just like the Bahua to match the kind of temperament they display in the act. Similarly, saffron coloured dress is given to the Sanyasis (Monks).

⁶⁹ Ghosh, Manmohan. (1951). *Natyasastra*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal. Chapter XXIII.111, p. 427.

In addition to this a variety of ornaments are also used to give the puppets a suitable disposition. According to the *Natyasastra* there are four different types of ornaments- that to be fixed by piercing the limbs (*avedhya*), that to be tied up (*bandhniya*), that to be worn (*prakhepya*), and that to be put around (*aropya*).⁷⁰ Ear rings and nose rings fall in the category of *avedhya* ornaments. In Assam there are a number of such rings known as *kundal*, *phuti*, *keru*, *naksanda*, *thiyophul*, etc. and the puppets are adorned with some of these ornaments. In the *bandhaniya* class comes the *kambarbandhani* (around the waist), *bahubandhani* (around the arms). *Muthi kahru* and *Gam kharu* of Assam are used on the puppets to embellish them. In some of the puppets anklets or *nupura* are put on that belong to *prakhepya* type of ornaments. In simple terms the golden neck-chains and necklaces of different kinds come in the last category, i.e. the *aropya*. *Galpata*, *Chandrahara*, *Dhol madali*, *Junmadali*, *Dugdugi*, etc. are such ornaments. The puppets, as per the type they portray, are decorated with these ornaments.

As far as stage for the presentation of puppet theatre is concerned it is noticed that there had been no proper and permanent stage for it in the past. Many a times, the front yard of a temple was chosen to be the place of performance for the puppets. Even in the big temples where *Devdasi* dance was prevalent, arrangements were made for the enactments of plays with religious themes. The practice of folk drama of this kind took place only in these theatre temples. The *Namghars* in Assam, too, have been used as theatre halls since 16th century.⁷¹

In folk theatre the stages are not much elevated and there is very little difference in terms of height between the audience and the stage. Although the stage is covered to protect it from sun and rains, it is never permanent in nature. As and when required the overhead cover can be removed. The audience sits on the three sides of the stage, sometimes on all sides. Often, just like in *Ankiyā* drama a canopy is hung over the place where the action of the play takes place. However, sometimes it is not done so. A small passage is left clear to facilitate the actors enter and exit from the green room to the

⁷⁰ Ibid, Chapter XXIII.12, p. 411.

⁷¹ Sarma, Dr. S. N. (2007). *Paramparagata Prachya Natyabhinay*. Guwahati: Bina Library, p. 44.

main stage. Usually, the green room is located either at the rear of the audience or on one side of the stage.⁷² The stage for puppet dance is usually kept very simple though under the influence of the western stage design the proscenium stage is also used at present. The usually simple design of the stage for the puppet theatre involves the construction of a raised platform of around 6 feet in breadth and 7 feet in length made with the help of bamboo poles. A piece of black cloth is hung at the rear of the platform or the stage which functions as a backdrop and the Bajikar or the puppeteers manipulate the puppets by standing behind the screen. From this perspective it can be said that there are actually two stages- one for the puppets and the other for the puppeteers who also in an indirect way assume the roles of various actors through their participation in the whole act. As a form of folk art it has the liberty to perform even without a proper stage or with makeshift stage.

In the past certain indigenous methods of providing light in the folk theatre performances such as ariya, jor, mahata, etc. were used. In these programmes cotton seeds or pieces of clothes were dipped in mustard oil and burnt to produce light. Sometimes, ariyas were fixed onto banana trunks installed at certain points around the stage. Since these were fixed they could not be taken to other places for use. However, to serve this purpose ariyas that could be taken here and there were also used. But gradually because of the presence of technologies modern day lights are being used. Sometimes, even colourful lights are used which help to create a conducive atmosphere for the enactment of a play apart from the fact that when used properly it may hide the threads attached to the puppets.

The Performers of Putala Nac

Putala Nac is an ancient form of performing art that takes place in a social set up as it is deeply related to the society and its people. Performance itself is an internal act of cultural behaviour and as such the practitioners of the any performing art bear great responsibilities on their shoulders. It is only through the truthful performance of the

⁷² *ibid*, p. 46.

practitioners that an art form can be safely preserved and transmitted to the next generation and its true worth for a society can be realized. Traditions of any kind cannot exist on their own, they have to be practised and cultured properly to make them live for the times to come. The practitioners of puppet theatre in Assam are also taking up a lot of responsibilities to promulgate and to keep the tradition alive. Just like many other traditional art forms the Putala Nac is also living because of the individual creative talent and obligation only. These artists engage themselves with the playing of musical instruments, recitations of verses and singing songs. The Bajikar or the Sutradhara, during the performance of the play, manipulates the puppets and guides them to the meaningful completion of the same. At present it is observed that the dialogues and songs for a puppet drama are pre-recorded and played while the puppets are put to act as per the script by the manipulators.

The person who assumes the principal role in making the puppets dance known as the *Ojā*, Bajikar or Sutradhara is usually considered the leader of the troupe. The entire programme is directed by him. Under the direction of the Sutradhara the puppets are made to act who also should be equally expert in playing instruments, singing songs as well as acting. He must possess certain very important qualities. It is very important for him to have a natural flow of speaking, sweetness of voice, expertise in music and dance, a good sense of humour, depth of knowledge of the sacred texts, etc. - qualities that would make him self dependent. In addition to that the person should also have excellent memory power because it is he who might have to narrate the events of most of the plays through songs and verses with help of the accompanists. The Sutradhara sings the hymn to God before the start of a play followed by the delivery of the dialogues in consonance with the action on the stage. For all these to take place simultaneously without any difficulty it is very important that the chief of the group has a mastery over the various aspects of the art.

The next vital part that influences Putala Nac is the role of the Bayans (the musicians). The musicians play different types of musical instruments like the dotara, flute, harmonium, drums, conch, khol, etc. as per the direction of the Sutradhara. The

success of puppet theatre depends largely upon the expertise and efficiency of the Bayans. If the Bayans fail to play the accurate strokes on the specific instruments then the movements of the dance might lose its true effects. For this purpose the Bayans need to know the art of singing also because a musician who plays on the khol has to utter the beats verbally prior to his playing them on the instrument. Similarly, a cymbalist continues to play in accordance with the beats of the Khol or Mridanga. The other musicians also accompany rhythmically to the tune of the music to make the entire presentation a pleasant experience. It is the job of a Bayan to see that the puppets, under no circumstances, do not miss out on the rhythm of the beats and they dance in such a way that the sentiment of the characters are portrayed truthfully.

The closest associate that a Bayan has is a Gayan, a singer of calibre who initiates a puppet dance show usually with a hymn. The Gayans or the singers take a cue of the course of events while the Sutradhara, under his leadership, guides the puppets to act out the incidents. However, on many occasions the task of the Gayan is performed by the Sutradhara himself. The Gayan must have a very good voice to be effective and with the help of appropriate kind of musical instruments they infuse life to the actions of the play.

The nature of music in puppet dance

The word music commonly denotes or refers to a blend of songs, instruments and dance. The pundits of music have divided music into two categories- *margiya*, known as classical and *desea* or non-classical. The former is approved by distinctive schools which is guided by rules or grammar while the latter, a kind of light but popular among the masses and associated with the traditional rituals or culture, is not bound by any rigid principles. It is observed that in usual discussions on music it is the classical kind of music which occupies the focus of attention but not the *desea* music. However, it would be proper to say that the classical music alone would not be able to account for the history of a nation or its people. It has to be done along with the in depth study of folk music

since the former has always enriched itself by receiving materials from the latter and by giving the same a systematic and refined presentation.

The music in Putala Nac of Assam is largely dependent on the tala (scale), swara (note), pada and different kinds of musical instruments. The songs and verses of puppet dance belong to the class of *desea* or folk music and as such there is no precise rules for this of kind of music. It is predominantly influenced by both songs and dance. Songs are used not only to express the feelings of a character in a play but also to give description to a place or a situation. In puppet dance two types of songs- descriptive and evocative are used. Unlike today, as per the tradition in the past, dialogues were communicated through songs and verses only. The Sutradhara makes use of songs and verses to announce the entry and exit of the characters although sometimes this is done by the Gayans. There are several kinds of songs or verses that are employed in puppet dance of Assam- salutatory songs, narrative dramatic songs, war songs, dirge, comic songs and closing songs or epilogue.

The Sutradhara, before the beginning of a show, and just after the initial play of musical instruments sings the salutatory song. It may vary from one another depending upon the content of the play as well as the troupes. The song is basically an invocation to the God or Goddesses for their blessings required for the enactment of the same.

The chief *Ojā* or the Sutradhara or the Gayans with the help of the Bayans continues to explain or narrate the incidents of a play through songs and verses in a puppet show. These songs serve to give clear ideas of the plot of the play and at the same time help to throw some light on the characters also.

In many puppet plays there are references to wars or battles and they are told to the spectators through songs. It is to be noted here that while the war songs are being sung the characters keep on dancing to the tune of the music played and they also inform the spectators about the characters who would become victorious in the war fought.

During the course of the enactment of a puppet play many a times songs are used to give adequate expression to a character's psychological disturbances arising out of a sorrowful situation. The puppets are made to act out through dance by the Sutradhara in concordance to the tunes of the mournful songs which become so realistic that it seems as if the puppet characters are indeed wailing and singing themselves.

One of the main components of a puppet play is the comic character commonly known as Bahuwa or Chengra. The comic songs are used in between the various incidents in a puppet play to provide the audience with humour and laughter. The subject matters of such songs are diverse in nature as anything that has the potentiality of attracting the attention of the gatherings is treated as one. It could be an ordinary quarrel between a couple, a conversation among friends or teasing someone.

At the end of a performance of a puppet play the Sutradhara or the *Ojā* along with the Gayans and Bayans together sing out a prayer expressing the greatness of the Almighty and also for the welfare of the people at large.

The art form of Putala Nac, like several other traditional theatre forms of Assam, in spite of its intrinsic relationship with religious ideology and the mass of the society, has been facing degeneration over the passage of time. Puppet dance, as an extension of masks, is the most ancient form of theatre. From the use of the term Sutradhara as mentioned in Bharata's *Natyashastra* it is assumed that the tradition of puppet dance had been prevalent in India even before the writing down of the *Natyashastra*.⁷³ On the other hand, it is learnt from the *Kalikapurana* that Assam also has a tradition of Puppet dance or Putala Bhaona since 11th century. But due to various political, social, economic reasons the folk tradition of puppet dance has been facing the challenges of its decline.

⁷³ Sarma, N.C. (2000). *Asomor Sanskritik Itihas*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, p. 516.

The impact of the Muslim invaders:

It was not only Assam but the whole of India that faced the wrath of the Muslim invaders in the medieval period leaving the nation unstable. These attacks on India had posed tremendous threat to the existence of various folk traditions including those of Assam. The Muslim invaders had attacked Assam for 19 times within the period from 1206 to 1682 which had caused extensive political as well as socio-cultural and religious damages. Although Ibanbakhtiar or Ikhtiaruddin, the first invader on Assam in 1206, died in the attempt, he tarnished the image of the famous temple of Lord Shiva of Hajo. In the subsequent attacks also the invaders were successful in creating an atmosphere of instability in every sphere including its culture. Under the circumstances that prevailed, the form of puppet dance failed to receive any kind of patronization that it deserved without which it was difficult for these traditions to survive.

The attacks of the Burmese army at various points in time due to different reasons is also another very important factors that contributed to the decay of puppet theatre. The first of these attacks was carried out in 1817. It was followed by two other attacks- in 1819 and 1821 respectively. The Burmese army had even occupied Gargaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, and thereby the whole of Assam from 1819 to 1821. During the period the atrocities of the foreign rulers had made the lives of the common people unbearable. It is mentioned that never in the history of Assam has occurred a disaster like the rule of the Burmese army. There was a total anarchy in the state as no one, rich-poor, innocent, boys and girls, men and women could escape the inhuman brutality of the Burmese. They raped young girls and forcibly made them their wives. They threw up small babies to pluck fruit from trees, took pleasure in murdering pregnant women. They also burnt people of all ages alive by keeping them enclosed in a thatched house with more thatch dumped all around it. In totality it could be said that the whole of Assam turned into a graveyard as a result of the cruelty of the Burmese.

Many of the people of Assam had to flee to other places like Khasia, Jayantia and Kachar districts in order to get rid of the ruthlessness of the Burmese army.⁷⁴

There was another very important event that occurred prior to the attack of the Burmese army. It was a civil war known as Moamoriya rebellion that took place between the Ahom Kings and the rebels belonging to the Moran and Mattak community. The rebellion, beginning in 1786, continued for over a period of 17 years which resulted in fleeing of King Gaurinath Singha from the capital at Rangpur to Guwahati. As a result of the political instability arising out of the rebellion a temporary halt came to the services in the religious institutions as well as the cultural activities.

The political situation of the Assam after the treaty of Yandabu in 1826 which paved the way for the British Empire to expand its territory also complicated the scenario for the growth and expansion of the folk traditions of Assam. The entry of the British simultaneously ensured the arrival of the Missionaries to further strengthen the Western system of belief through religion and education. Rather than giving importance to the growth of these art forms the Empire focussed on the development of their own. On the other hand, the parallel resistance of the Indian people against the British rule under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi, the numerous movements – all added up to the volatile situation of Assam. These in turn had greatly affected the growth and development of the art of puppet dance.

The aspirations and hopes, behaviour, culture, social and spiritual outlook of a people or a nation get truly reflected in the folk art forms of that particular people or society. The collective consciousness and the cultural heritage of a society can be estimated from the different folk art forms practised by that society. Being a vital part of a society culture also transforms over the passage of time along with the evolution of

⁷⁴ Devi, Lakshmi. (1987). *Asom Desar Buranji*. Guwahati: L. B. S. Publication, pp. 333-334.

society itself. Tradition is a process and hence, it is momentum specific. Where there is movement, there would naturally be transformation, progress and growth.⁷⁵

Putala dance is a people's institution and being so it has an indispensable connection with the society. It has survived so far by performing on various occasions related to common people's lives. However, due to various reasons the traditions have undergone vast changes and have even faced threat of extinction.

After the arrival of the British in Assam as a consequence of the treaty of Yandabu in 1826 the culture and traditions of the West also set its foot in order to maintain the dominance of the Empire. The new generation of people became attracted to the ideals of foreign culture and education as it gave people a new taste of things hitherto unknown. Some of the energetic Assamese youths who received Western education at Calcutta formed an organization known as Asomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha (1888) and brought out its mouthpiece named Jonaki with a purpose to serve and enrich Assamese language and literature. Simultaneously, few educated youths, inspired by the Western dramaturgy, tried to produce plays by establishing stages in the western style. Soon, towards the end of the 19th century many such Western proscenium stages were built at different places in Assam. Gradually, instead of practicing the ancient form of drama more and more people got attracted to the new found style of drama since a favourable atmosphere had already emerged. As a result of these developments the traditional folk forms of art failed to keep pace with the counterpart and remained confined to a limited number of practitioners. There was another form of traditional drama brought from Bengal – the jatra which, though initially performed in localities where Bengali people dominated, later on went on to present plays in other parts of Assam also. It had influenced the Assamese people so much that it may be considered as one of the hindrances to the popularity of puppet theatre. After the independence of India the current of change has continued to bear impact on the tradition and culture of India and Assam. The influence of the West can be perceived in the rural areas also. With the advancement of science and technology industries and factories have been

⁷⁵ Rajbongshi, P (ed). (2008). *Asomiya Natak: Parampara aru Parivartan*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, p. 15.

established in different places and as a natural resultant of this development rush of people from the villages to the towns or places where these factories are set up can be observed. As the urban areas became more appealing with better life style and modes of entertainment majority of the people, being drawn to the sophisticated life, tended to overlook the traditional art forms.

Further, with the betterment of the means of communication, mode of transport the gap between the cities and villages has decreased, public is fascinated by the set up of a luxurious stage and films.⁷⁶ It resulted in the people's loss of love and worth for Puppet dance which it used enjoy in the past. Since the earliest times puppet dance has occupied a significant role in providing entertaining to the people of the society, particularly those belonging to the villages engaged in farming. Unlike the people living in the comfort of the cities the farmers did not have any means of entertainment after the day's hard work in the fields was over.

However, under the impact of the modern western culture the winds of change have touched the people living in the remote villages also as various means of spending leisure hours are at the disposal of these people. They have access to new kinds of theatre, films and the internet too. As a result, the lack of responsibility to preserve and practice the traditional art forms among the new generation has become rather evident.

Putala Nac plays quite a significant role in imparting informal education, particularly moral, ethical and spiritual education. This theatre form through its stories helps the audience to have a better knowledge about human nature and human values. Whatever it shows on the stage to educate the spectators they remain fresh in the minds of the people for a longer period of time since it is presented before them through audio-visual method. But again, because of the emergence of new means of communication like the T.V. or computers the need for the puppet drama or dance to serve the purpose of teaching people has decreased.

⁷⁶ Bharali, Sailen. (2000). *Asomiya Loka Natya Parampara*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, p. 9.

The growth of scientific temperament brought in a conflict between the old and the new as a result of which there was an inclination towards a sense of new life, new society and a new consciousness for art in place of the traditional patterns. The earlier kinds of historical or Purana based plays were replaced by the realistic social plays with themes that the common people can immediately relate to.

One of the major causes responsible for the decline of the tradition of puppet dance in Assam is the economic crisis that persistently looms large on those involved with puppet dance. A lot of money is needed to prepare the puppets, their dresses, the stage, the light and sound, etc. The artists of puppet dance have gradually given up following the tradition as they have difficulty in managing the amount required. Due to the increased population, unemployment, lack of proper infrastructure, unavailability of efficient labourer, natural calamities, lack of capital, etc. have contributed to the underdeveloped economy of Assam.

For the artists it is the shortage of capital which poses as the greatest threat to the preservation and practice a particular tradition. Because of the lack of capital as savings, sometimes the artists have to borrow money from others at a very steep rate of interest which they, on many occasions, fail to return. It makes them disheartened and they lose interest in continuing the tradition on and because of the financial difficulties involved with it the new generation of people do not the desire to take up this art form. In recent times the government has adopted some measures to preserve and to propagate various threatened art forms including that of Putala dance. It has organized meets, seminars and festivals to create awareness among people and also to encourage those who are directly involved with these art forms.

2.2 Ojā-Pāli

Ojā-Pāli is a quasi-dramatic performing art form. It is one of the most ancient and important folk art forms of Assam. The *Natyashastra* mentions 4 types of *vrittis* or regional varieties: *Avanti*, *Dakshinatyā*, *Panchali* and *Odra Magadhi*. (Vatsyayan 1997:

49) Of these four varieties the last one is spoken of as being in practice in ancient Pragjyotishpur. On the basis of several documents such as Hastchurveda, Hiuen-tsang's accounts, copper plate of Banamala Barman, etc. it may be assumed that Assamese folk theatre emerged even before the first century B.C. With its resemblance to the Odra-Magadhi mode *Ojā-Pāli* is considered to be born out of Indian classical music tradition. The term *Ojā-Pāli* has two parts- *Ojā* or *Ojha* and *Pāli*. Etymologically, the word *Ojā* has various connotations. An *Ojā* could refer to a teacher, a head artisan, the leader of a group of singers, an expert in hypnotism, magic, a traditional health practitioner, a priest or a leading person in a religious congregation or a specialist in Sattriya dance or music.

The *Ojā* of *Ojā-Pāli* usually possesses several of the traits mentioned already. In Assam the term *Ojā* refers to a headman of the leader of *Ojā-Pāli* group. In another sense he is a teacher of the art of music, dance, *mudras*, and other essential things related to his *Pālis*. He is the chief singer or recite of the group.

On the other hand, the word *Pāli* may have derived from the Sanskrit words like *Pālita* or *Pāli*. In Assamese language the word carries the following meanings-

- a) One of several persons who work on rotations
- b) An assistant or subordinate artisan
- c) One of the subordinates of *Ojā-Pāli* and
- d) A dose of medicine

However, within the limited reference to the art of *Ojā-Pāli* the *Pālis* perform their roles as assistants to the chief singer, i.e. the *Ojā*. Among the *Pālis*, the chief is called as *daina-pāli*. The *daina-pāli* holds a very important position as he acts like the right hand person of the *Ojā*. He needs to be equally efficient in singing, dancing and acting. The job of a *daina-pāli* includes the repeating the refrains of the songs that the *Ojā* would initiate. Apart from this he would very often explain in simple terms the meanings of the verses if those are considered to be difficult for the spectators to

comprehend. The drama form of *Ojā-Pāli* is made even livelier through the occasional dialogues that take place between the *Ojā* and the *daina-pāli*.

Although the words *Ojā* and *Pāli* are two separate words bearing different meanings, yet the words are fused in such a manner that they seem to be one and the same with a single meaning, i.e. the living traditional art form of *Ojā-Pāli*. This performing art usually comprises with three to seven members. The *Ojā* recites the themes from the mythological stories to the accompaniment of music, *mudras* and dance while the *Pālis* would repeat the song playing the cymbals along and stamping their feet on the ground to produce a beating sound.

There are several popular beliefs and legends regarding the origin of *Ojā-Pāli*. One such theory is the theory of Divine Origin. According to this theory, Indra, the King of the Gods, being pleased with Arjuna for his victory over the demons, the arch enemy of the Gods, called upon Urvasi, the dancer nymph and epitome of grace and beauty, to present of a performance of music and dance to amuse Arjuna. But, while doing so Urvasi fell in love with Arjuna and she told Indra about it. The latter requested Arjuna to marry Urvasi but he politely expressed his inability to comply with the proposal. This made Urvasi insulted and out of her rage cursed Arjuna that the third of the Pandavas would be a eunuch for a year in his life. Arjuna returned to earth and remained eunuch for a year as Vrihanalla in the court of King Virata during the period of hiding in exile. In that period Arjuna got himself engaged to the craft of dance and music which he had learnt during his stay with Lord Indra as a gandharva. This illustrates the point that it was Arjuna who brought the gandharva vidya i.e. the form of *Ojā-Pāli* from the heaven. Under the perception of the theory it is claimed that Arjuna was the originator of the *Ojā-Pāli* art form.

Another theory related to the Biyahar *Ojā-Pāli* circle of *Ojā-Pāli* explains that Parijati, an uncommon woman was instructed in her dream by a divine power to sing and

dance.⁷⁷ While she was busy weaving at her loom she suddenly heard some songs that came from the heaven. She immediately moved away from the loom and as soon as she looked up to the heaven she began to dance and sing various ragas and perform the mudras. It is believed that in her dream she got the ideas for all the dresses and instruments like the nupur (anklet), jama (gown), chapkan (a tight long coat) and paguri (turban) which are required for the performance. Later on, she taught the divinely received art form to her disciples. The art form learnt by Parijati in dream and taught to her disciples was known as *Biyahar Ojā-Pāli*.⁷⁸

Traditionally Vyasa Kalai , who was a disciple of Parijat, is regarded as the father of *Biyahar Ojā-Pāli*. A Vyasa Kalai is a person well versed in musicology. Vyasa Kalai is supposed to be the gurus of music and dance. In another view, a Purana Pathaka is also known as a Vyasa. In this sense a Vyasa is to be the gurus of music and dance. In this sense a Vyasa is nothing but a title. A Vyasa acquiring authority in the art of music particularly in the Mahabharata or the Purana was known as Vyasa Kalai.

In the Katha Guru Carita mention has been made of Vyasa Kalai as a devotee of Sankardeva.⁷⁹ However, it does not refer to his expertise in the art of *Ojā-Pāli*. As such it is possible that there was no person with a name of Vyasa Kalai as claimed. However, in spite of the uncertainty over the actual identity of the Vyasa Kalai, the name itself gained a lot of popularity among people. The *Biyahar Ojā-Pāli* circle assumes that Vyasa Kalai learnt the art of *Ojā-Pāl* form Parijati and in this way the performing artform of *Ojā-Pāli* came in vogue.

There is, still, another view regarding the origin of *Ojā-Pāli* that it has emerged from the great Indian tradition of *Kathakata*, a practice in which a performance is made by Kathaka. A Kathaka could be formed either by a single individual or a group of individuals. The Kathaka recites and acts out before an audience the stories or episodes

⁷⁷ Sarma, N.C. (ed). (1996). *Asomor Pariveshya Kala Ojapali*. Guwahati: Bani Prakash, p. 37.

⁷⁸ Barua, B. K. (1964). *History of Assamese Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁹ Lekharu, Upendra Chandra (ed). (1964). *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari: Dutta Barua & Sons, p. 143.

from the principal epics of Indian tradition- the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas with the help of songs, dance and musical instruments. He assumes the role of a narrator, examiner and interpreter. Usually, such performances are presented on certain religious festivals or occasions. The element of acting is also involved with the performance of Kathaka. In Kathakata programmes the Kathaka used to explain the epics and the Puranas both in verse form and prose form. The Kathaka has two distinctive constituents- Pathaka and Dharaka. The former of the two recites out the main subject matter while the latter explains in details the inherent content of the subject matter dealt with. It is noticed that both *Ojā-Pāli* and the tradition of Kathakata bear very close affinities between them.

In Kathakata tradition the Kathaka recites stories adopted from the Epics and the Puranas in verse as well as prose modes. Similarly, the *Ojā* s and *Pāli* s of *Ojā-Pāli* form also take up stories from the same texts and deliberates them also in the same manner. As a dharaka in Kathakata explains in simple terms the stories presented by the Pathaka, the daina *Pāli* of *Ojā-Pāli* also the expounded upon the matters put up by the *Ojā* to the audience in easy language. While reciting out episodes from the Epics or the Puranas the Kathaka takes help of music and dance. Likewise, the *Ojā-Pāli* also employs music and dance to enhance the overall appeal and impact of the performance. During the performance of Kathakata, the Kathaka is helped by few assistants and similarly the *Ojā* of *Ojā-Pāli* is also supported by a number of companions. The two major components of Pathaka and Dharaka as included within the scope of the Kathakata tradition bear similarities to the *Ojā* and *Pāli* of the tradition of *Ojā-Pāli*. Kathakata as a mode of performing art perform live before an audience or spectators. In the same way, *Ojā-Pāli* also performs in front of a gathering. Again, both the traditions of Kathakata and *Ojā-Pāli* are intensely attached to religious faiths.

It is evident that the form of *Ojā-Pāli* has very strong closeness with the Indian tradition of Kathakata and on this basis it may be ardently opined that the performing art

of *Ojā-Pāli* has been derived out of Kathakata. There is no doubt that the artform of *Ojā-Pāli* is derived out of the great Indian tradition of Kathakata.⁸⁰

It is observed that not only in Assam or India but everywhere in the world the audio-visual or performing art forms are almost invariably associated with at least one kind of religious discourse. "The connection between dance and religion is deep, particularly in Hinduism where Siva is supposed to have created the very world by setting its first rhythm in motion by dance. Mythology abounds in descriptions of the gods dancing under a variety of circumstances."⁸¹

The way in which the temples of Greece played a significant role in developing theatre in Europe, a similar role was played by the temples of India also in the birth, development and expansion of dance, songs and theatre in India. Bowers while throwing on this aspect of theatre in India comments, "Temple festivals were until recently inseparable from dance. Tamil preoccupation with religion led the people to dot their checkered patches of growing paddy fields with temples and gates (gopura). No temple is without sculptures of dancers both and outside."⁸² In Assam also the impact of religion on the emergence, development and expansion of *Ojā-Pāli* could be seen vividly. The contribution or role of temples towards the growth of this ritualistic art form is well accepted. In the Indian context it is easier to please the deity through music and dance rather than by offering pujas. "The offering of dance to the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music assures the merit of sacrifice performed...It not only fulfils all desires but also assures liberation (*moksha*) for the devotees."⁸³ The people of the areas where this particular art form is practiced strongly believe that the prayers and rituals are not complete without the performance of dance, songs and acting through *Ojā-Pāli* in the honour of the deities.

⁸⁰ Sarma, N.C. (2009). *Bharatar Uttar Purvanchalar Pariveshya Kala*. Guwahati: Banalata, p.82.

⁸¹ Bowers, Faubin. (1953). *The Dance in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.15.

⁸² *ibid*, p.16.

⁸³ Sivaramamurti, C. (1977). "Introduction." *Yaksagana*, Martha Bush Ashton and Bruce Christic. New Delhi: Abhinav Publication, p. XI.

The Vedas have basically two characters, viz., the *Upasthapaka* and *Udgata*. The chief purpose of the former is to explain the mantras or to teach the mantras. On the other hand, the function of the latter is to chant out the hymns of the Samaveda. Similarly, mention may be made of the term Upadhyaya from which the term *Ojā* or *Ojha* is derived.

The function of the Upadhyaya has been described in the Manusmriti.⁸⁴ According to it the Upadhyaya is a sub-teacher who instructs for wages and is inferior to the Acarya. In this sense the Assamese *Ojā* is a teacher who teaches the art of music, dance, mudra and other related things to his *Pāli* s. Likewise the Upadhyaya, the *Ojā* of Assam also performs for wages but unlike him (Upadhyaya) the *Ojā* never has to teach the Vedas although he has proficiency in many different arts concerning *Ojā-Pāli* .

The performance of *Ojā-Pāli* may be linked to the tradition of epic recitation and *abhinaya* which involves the recitations of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata and the other Puranas. These manners of recitations are always associated with some kinds of abhinaya. As a good orator the Kathaka performs the act of recitation and abhinaya through the liberal use of gestures in order to impress the spectators. In the same manner, the *Ojā* of *Ojā-Pāli* also recites the epic poems based on the Assamese versions of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata and the Puranas which are generally held on the religious festivals. The major objective of *Ojā-Pāli* is to tell stories and also to recite verses or songs.

The *Ojā-Pāli* of Assam can be categorized into two main divisions; each again can be sub-categorized into several other divisions. These classifications can be on the basis of themes as well as structure. The broad divisions of *Ojā-Pāli* are –

- a) Epic-based *Ojā-Pāli*
- b) Non-epic based *Ojā-Pāli*

⁸⁴ Bṛhlar, G. (1996). *The Laws of Manu*. New Delhi: Banarsidass. Ch.2. 141/145 & 5. 91, pp. 27 & 104

The epic-based *Ojā-Pāli* can again be classified into seven types. They are-

- i) *Vyasa Sangita or Biyahar Ojā-Pāli or Biyah-Gowa Ojā-Pāli*
- ii) *Raymana Sangita or Ramayana-Gowa Ojā-Pāli*
- iii) *Bhaura or Bhauriya Ojā-Pāli*
- iv) *Durgavari Ojā-Pāli*
- v) *Sattriya Ojā-Pāli*
- vi) *Pancali Ojā-Pāli*
- vii) *Duladi Ojā-Pāli*

Further, the Non-Epic based *Ojā-Pāli* may also be sub-divided into few categories on the basis of thematic and structural differences visible in the form of performance.

- i) *Sukananni Ojā-Pāli or Rang-Gowa Ojā-Pāli*
- ii) *Bisaharir Ojā-Pāli*
- iii) *Mare Gaan*
- iv) *Padmapuranar Gaan*

The Epic Based Ojā-Pāli

The *Ojā-Pāli* which generally recites stories or episodes based on the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Purana is considered as Epic Based *Ojā-Pāli*. The primary objective of this form of *Ojā-Pāli* is to artistically present the songs and verses related to Lord Vishnu or Lord Krishna. However, sometimes there is a tendency to recite verses concerned with Shaktism also.

i) Vyasa Sangita or Biyahar Ojā-Pāli or Biyah-Gowa Ojā-Pāli

The Biyahar *Ojā-Pāli* is a form of *Ojā-Pāli* based on the epics, primarily on the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The tradition of Biyahar *Ojā-Pāli* goes

back to Vyasa Sangita which begins with the recitation of the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The Sangita begins with the reference to the great sage Vyasdeva and for this reason it is known as Vyasa-Sangita. The name conveys various meanings and one of them is a Brahmin who recites the Puranas in public. The term Vyasa over the ages of usage has changed into Byaha or Biyah in Assamse. The Assamese Biyah, as in Sanskrit tradition, recites and explains the epics and the Puranas in taken into consideration. The person who attains the mastery over art of Vyasa-Sangita may be called Biyahar *Ojā* and the ones who assist the *Ojā* are known as Biyahar *Ojā-Pāli*. Biyah *Ojā-Pāli* is sometimes addressed as Vaishnava *Ojā-Pāli* also since it performs on occasions of the worship of Lord Vishnu and Vashudev apart from the public assemblages.

As per the tradition of Sanskrit dramaturgy a Vyasa must always be a Brahmin and the same is followed in the performance of Biyahar *Ojā-Pāli* also. The *Ojās* of this form are supposed to be the descendants the Brahmins. In the opinion of Dineswar Sarma the manner of Biyah Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* originated in ancient Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa and was handed down through the ages and is limited to Darrang district only.

This form of *Ojā-Pāli* was originally restricted to the temples of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu in Kamrupa. There was a reputed *Ojā* of Biyah Gowa form named Sagara Daivajna who was later established at Dhumuhagrama in Darrang with lands and paiks by the Ahom King Lakshmi Singha by issuing a copper inscription. The village gradually came to be known as Vyaspara alias Biyahhas, later became famous for Biyah singers.

The form of *Ojā-Pāli*, as a part of the gandharva tradition, is laden with distinctive kind of music and dance. It is characterized by the five key components of music, viz., Alap, Guruvandana, Vishnu-Pada, Sangitalaap and Jhuna or Juna.

Traditionally, Indian classical music begins with the singing of Alap which introduces and develops a particular raga. It is sung in a slow pace and generally without the accompaniment of any instrument.

The next element of the music Vyasasangita is Sangitalap. It is also known as Chabarbana or Gaankar raag. It is called Chabarbana probably for the different kind of rhythm or beat used for the expressing the raga. On the other hand, the term Gaankar, meaning an ideal form, is given possibly because it falls in ideal position of the order of the swar (musical sound or tone), matra (beats, i.e. unit to measure time) in the raga used for this purpose.

The final phase of the music of Vyasasangit is Jhuna or Juna or Puweli git. These songs are playful in nature suggestive of erotic taste. The presentation of the Jhuna songs depends on the *Ojā* or on the request of the audience and sometimes on the place of performance also.

The Alap is followed by Guruvandana, an offering of prayers to the Ganesha, Shiva, Krishna, Mahamaya or Gandharva, the Gurus of music and dance. It is recited prior to the beginning of the performance of *Ojā-Pāli* so that the performers as well as the entire performance receive the blessings of the Gods or Goddesses. Music is an art that cannot be followed without the blessings of the Guru and as such the *Ojā-Pāli*, being a Guru focussed artform, begins with the presentation of the Guruvandana.

The component that follows next is Vishnupada, a stage governed chiefly by dance. It is based on Vishnu-raga. As per the tradition of *Ojā-Pāli* the Vishnupada should be concluded with the rendition of verse on the Dashavatar (The Ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu) as mentioned in the Geet-Govinda composed by Jayadev which was in Sanskrit language. But, at present instead of Jayadeva's Sanskrit version of the Dashavatar, Sriamanta Sankardev's version of the same as found in Kirtana Ghosa is used for the purpose.

ii) Raymana Sangita or Ramayana-Gowa Ojā-Pāli

Even though Biyah Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* or Vyasa Sangita *Ojā-Pāli* also performs on the stories from the Ramayana, yet there are some *Ojā-Pālis* who remain confined to the

presentation of the themes adopted solely from the Ramayana only. These *Ojā-Pālis* completely avoid stories or themes from the other epics or the puranas. It is for this reason that such *Ojā* plis are called Ramayana Gowa *Ojā-Pālis* who perform in different Vaishnava Pujas. Basically, the Assamese versions of the Ramayana composed by Madhava Kandali and Ananta Kandali are taken up for the songs to be sung during the performance.

There is close resemblances between the Biyahar Sangit and the Ramayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* with regard to structure and performance. The deviation is only in terms of the themes adopted because while in Ramayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* only the Ramayana is followed, in case of the Biyahar Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* apart from the Ramayana, the other epic i.e., the Mahabharata and the Puranas. In some parts of Kamrup this type of *Ojā-Pāli* is also known as Rayman *Ojā-Pāli*.

iii) Bhaura or Bhauriya *Ojā-Pāli*

There is another kind of *Ojā-Pāli* that bears close similarities with the Vyasa Sangit *Ojā-Pāli* and Ramayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* but which gives more importance to acting is Bhaura or Bhauriya *Ojā-Pāli*. The only difference between Rayman or Ramayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* and Bhauriyha *Ojā-Pāli* lies in the extent of interest that the latter puts into acting. The Ramayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli* gives greater emphasis to music. On the other hand, that variety of Rayman *Ojā-Pāli* which emphasizes on giving expression to sentiments through acting is known as Bhauriya *Ojā-Pāli*. However, it is to be noted that although Bhauriya *Ojā-Pāli* lays importance on acting yet it is not without any characteristic music. The kind of music that is employed in Bhauriya *Ojā-Pāli* follows a certain pattern beginning with the prayer to the mother earth, called as Bhumi Puja, and offered by the *Ojā* and *Pāli* on their entry to the area meant for performance. The performance moves ahead through other phases such as Sur Sadhana, Guru Vandana, Swar Sadhana, Pada, and finally concluding with Samarani where the *Ojā* and the *Pāli* sing a prayer soliciting forgiveness for any kind of mistakes made during the course of the presentation.

Bhaura or Bhauriya Ojā-Pāli sings songs adopted from the traditional Assamese Ramayana and is performed at various religious or public functions. The *daina pali* of *Bhaura or Bhauriya Ojā-Pāli* is called *bhaira*. It is this *bhaira* who during the recitation of songs or verses also plays out the roles of Lord Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanumana and even Ravana. However, in midst of such performances the *bhaira*, out of his privilege assigned to him, makes satirical comments upon the contemporary issues that affect the society at large.

iv) Durgavari Ojā-Pāli

The form of *Durgavari Ojā-Pāli* is born out of the attempts of Durgabar Kayastha, a renowned *Ojā*, to present the Vyasa Sangita *Ojā-Pāli* in a different form. He composed his Giti Ramayana by fusing together the traditional stories from the Ramayana as written by Madhav Kandali with the stories of Rama which had been prevalent in society. In reality the songs, traditionally and the customarily recited by the Raamayan Gowa *Ojā-Pāli*, have been given a written form in the Giti Ramayana of Durgabar *Ojā*. It is a variety of the Vyasa Sangita *Ojā-Pāli* and as such a lot of similarities are noticed between Vyasa *Ojā-Pāli* and Durgabari *Ojā-Pāli* in terms of the music used.

At one point of time in the undivided Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam the *Durgavari Ojā-Pāli* was one of the most popular performing arts. But in due course of time it gradually disappeared from Darrang district and its practice is now limited to the area of Hajo of Kamrup district only. However, unlike the past when the performances were done in standing position resembling to that of *Biyah-Gowa Ojapali*, it is now presented in a sitting position. The troupe of a *Durgavari Ojā-Pāli* is consisted of an *Ojā* or *Gital* and a few numbers of *Pālis*.

v) Sattriya Ojā-Pāli

The Sattriya *Ojā-Pāli* is the form of the *Ojā-Pāli* prevalent in the Sattras (Vaishnava monasteries) of Assam. The source for this kind of *Ojā-Pāli* lies in the Vyasa

Ojā-Pāli which began possibly during the times of Sankardeva. He took help of the form Vyasa *Ojā-Pāli*, a very popular folk art form at that point in time, in order to propagate the Vaishnava faith in Assam. In this context Dr. Maheswar Neog has mentioned, “The *Ojā-Pāli* performance has thus the preponderating elements of the Vaishnava drama-choral songs and dancing. The *Ojā-Pāli* chorus is the precursor of the orchestral band of *gāyana-vāyanas* of the later dramatic performances, while Sankara’s Sutradhara, who persists all through the representation, has his prototype in the *ojā* or *ojā-pāli*.⁸⁵ In most of the prominent Sattras of Assam such as the Patbaushi, Auniati, Kamalabari, Dakshinpat, etc. the tradition of *Ojā-Pāli* is still practiced with little variation in the use of music in the performances.

vi) **Pancali Ojā-Pāli**

The term Pancali is conceived out of two words- pancha meaning five and chali referring to movements which suggest basic ways of walking to cover a certain space. From this perspective it may be maintained that the *Ojā-Pāli* which is formed by the combination of five different types of movements or chali involving the feet, the shanks, the thigh, and the waist is called the *Pancali Ojā-Pāli*. The music of *Pancali Ojā-Pāli* is again divided into five stages- the alap, dhura or ghosha, mool ghosha, pada and upasanghar.

vii) **Duladi Ojā-Pāli**

The *Duladi Ojā-Pāli* is variously known as *Duladi Gaan* also. It is performed in standing position and without the accompaniment with a *khol*. The songs are sung either with khuti taal or manjira (a pair tiny plain cymbals). In *Duladi Ojā-Pāli* verses from the Epics or the Puranas translated into Assamese language are taken up for presentation. The Ojā sings out verse from one of the texts and the Pālis repeat them while playing on the small cymbals.

⁸⁵ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 25.

Non-Epic based Ojā-Pāli

This form of *ojā-pāli* can be differentiated from the *epic based ojā-pāli* in terms of content, structure and context as it relies chiefly on the themes related to Goddess Manasa, the Goddess of Snakes. The *non epic based ojā-pāli* is also called *Manasa sangita* since it is associated with the worship of Goddess Manasa. Apart from this there are few other names such as Bisahari, Padma and Brahmani that are alternatively used for the same kind of *ojā-pāli*.

i) Sukanani Ojā-Pāli or Rang-Gowa Ojā-Pāli

The artform of *Ojā-pāli* that involves the recitation of the songs of Goddess Manasa taken from the Padma Purana and composed by Sukavi Narayandeva is called the *Sukanani ojā-pāli* or *Rang Gowa Ojā-Pāli* or *Marai Gowa Ojā-Pāli*. The significance of this form lies in the fact that the pujas or rituals relating to Manasa Devi cannot be completed until and unless the *Ojā-pāli* offers the prayers. The worship of Goddess Manasa also known as Rang puja is hold for either a day or two. If it is completed within a day it is called *ek- pariya rang puja* and if the completion of the ritual takes two days then it is called *gota-rang puja* or *jogowa puja*. Dr. Maheswar Neog in his book titled *Sankardeva and His Times* writes “The *Ojā-Pāli* institution, performing ritualistic dances on the occasion of the worship of the serpent goddess, Manasa or Marai, is known as marai gowa, rang-gowa or Sukananni *Ojā-Pāli* (Sukananni= Sukavi Narayani or Sukavi Narayana, a poet of the Manasa saga, 17th century).”⁸⁶

The worship of *Manasa Devi* is defined as *rang (pleasure, happiness or colour) puja* since it is believed that the Goddess is highly pleased only when such *pujas* are offered to her. This particular *ojā-pāli* performed in the honour of the snake Goddess is believed to provide happiness to her and, therefore, it is called the *rang-gowa ojā-pāli*. It involves dancing, singing and also acting.

⁸⁶ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 293.

The *Sukanani ojā-pāli* is based on *Padma Puranas* which traditionally seem to have transmitted from one generation to another orally. The songs pertaining to the tradition of Manasa cult took the written form only in the 17th century later called the Padma Purana. The term *Sukanani* is derived from the shortened version of the name *Su Kavi Narayandev Nidagati*, the person who undertook the responsibility of giving the oral songs of *Manasa Devi* a written form. A portion from each of the words is taken i.e. Su (Su)-Ka(Kavi)-Na(Narayandev)-Ni(Nidagati) to form the term Sukanani. In this context Dimbeswar Neog writes, “The songs of Narayanadeva are known also as Sukananni, probably an abbreviation of Sukavi Narayana.”⁸⁷

The singing of *vandana* is the chief assignment of *Sukanani Ojā-pāli*. The troupe usually, while in a sitting position, begins to sing out the *vandana* at the time of offering of the *puja* to the goddess by the priest. The rendering of the *vandana* continues till the completion of the *puja*. Once the worship is over both the *Ojā* and the *Pālis* may, at the request of the audience present there, stand up to continue the performance further. Under this perspective, it is noticed that the *Manasa Sangit* is divided into two categories- a) *Pujar Geet* or *Baheni Geet* referring to the singing of songs in a sitting position and b) *Utheni Geet* indicating to the singing of the verses from the *Padma Purans* in standing position. In the *Utheni Geet* phase the *Ojā-Pāli* sing lores of Beula-Lakhinder and Shiva-Manasa. While describing the stories from these episodes both the *Ojā* and the *Pālis* make attempts to present a visualization of the same through different dance movements. The *Ojā*, with the assistance of the *Pālis*, offer easy explanations of the verses they present before the audience which provide them with crude humour also.

The *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*, prevalent in Darrang district of Assam, is to a great extent influenced by the *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli* particularly in respect to the music used in it. But, in addition to this there are several other similarities and differences between them. Both *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* and *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli* do not have any special dress and make up to follow. Just like the *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli*, the *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* is also comprised of

⁸⁷ Neog, Dimbeswar. (1982). *New Light on History of Asamiya Literature*. Gauhati: Suwani Prakash, p. 219.

one *Ojā*, one *dainapāli*, two *gor pālis* (back *pālis*) and two *ag pālis* (front *pālis*). As far as musical instruments are concerned both the forms of *Ojā-Pāli* use cymbals though of slightly different in sizes with the cymbals used by the *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli* bigger than those of the *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*.

Likewise *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli*, the *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*, too, has different varieties of music in it. Both of the major types of *Ojā-Pāli* sing the *Pujar Geet* in sitting position. The *pujar geet* itself has several layers of presentation. It begins with the *alapa* and *jagani* aimed at awakening of all gods and goddesses and the *mandapa* and so on. It is followed by the singing of the aetiological verses of cymbals and jute. The next phase of the presentation includes offering *Vandanas* to any of gods or goddesses like the Ganesha, Rama, Vishnu, Shiva, Dasavatara, Padmavati, Kalika, Chandika, Saraswati, Lakshmi, etc. In the following stage verses about the origin of the Creation is sung in addition to the singing of *mandapa sthapana* i.e. setting up of the alter meant for the worship of the *Devi Manasa*. There are several other steps such as *Bandee-biracini Vandana*, *Devi-avahana*, *Devir-adhivasana*, etc.

From the musical perspective *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* songs consist of six main divisions, viz. a) *Alapa*, b) *vandana*, c) *alapa*, d) *pada* and e) *upasamhara*.

a) **Alapa:** As in *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli* the performance of *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* also begins with *alapa*. Although there is hardly any difference between them in terms of the themes they deal with yet they vary in their style of presentation.

b) **Vandana:** The following step is *Vandana* or *Mangolacarana* which begins with the syllables *ha, ta, na, ri* and *rita*. *Vandana* songs are sung in the honour of gods or goddesses such as Ganesha, Shiva, Rama, Dasavatara, Padmavati, Visahari, Manasa and so on.

c) **Alap:** After the *Vandana* concludes on a high pitched note the *Ojā-Pāli* pauses for a moment and then resumes to sing the *alap* with notes *ha, ta, na, ri, rita*.

d) **Diha:** The step that follows the *alap* is known as *Diha*, sometimes called as *dhura* or *sthayi*. The *Ojā*, keeping the subject matter and the context in view, begins to

recite a verse that matches with it. On the other hand, the *Ojā* claps in response to the tune while at the same time maintain the rhythm of the song with his feet. In the mean time the *Pālis* pick up from the fourth phase of a particular verse at the first instance and continue to repeat it all over again.

e) **Pada:** The next step of *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* music is Pada. It contains a couple of rhymes or lines. There is a very close relationship between diha and pada since the subject matter, tune of the pada is determined only on the basis of the significance and aesthetic elements contained in the theme of the diha. After the *Pālis* complete the recitation of the diha, the *Ojā*, considering the theme of the diha, begins to sing verses from the Padma Purana. A pada consists of ten to fifteen caranas in respect to all forms of *Ojā-Pāli*.

f) **Upasamhara:** In this kind of *Ojā-Pāli* songs both the *Ojā* and the *Pālis* bid farewell to the snake Goddess Manasa. Such songs are sung from the *Padma Purana*. The *Ojā* initiates the songs and the *pālis* including the *daina pāli* play on the cymbals from the sitting position.

Some practitioners of *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* opine that just like the *Juna song* which is sung at the end of a performance in *Biyah Gowa Ojā-Pāli*, the same should be followed in *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* also. However, since the *Juna song* is not based on the *Padma Purana* it is not essential to be sung in *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*. But, whenever it is sung, the *Ojā* would not sing it, instead the *pālis* do it without the help of any musical instruments.

Dance

The performance of *Ojā-Pāli* cannot be possible without the presence of dance. It adds beauty, grace and meaning to the songs. Traditionally, Indian dance involves three key elements- nritta, nrtya and natya. The first of the three terms denotes the rhythmic movement of body while the second term suggests *rasas* (sentiments) and the last one refers to traditional story contents.

ii) Bisahari Ojā-Pāli or Geet Gowa Ojā-Pāli

In this kind of *Ojā-Pāli* the singers sing songs taken from the *Manasa Geet* or *Manasa Kavya* which was composed by poet Mankar and Durgabar. It is usually sung in sitting position and is slightly different from the *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*.

The head of the *Bisahari Ojā-Pāli* or *Geet Gowa Ojā-Pāli* is called the *Ojā* but *Gital* or *Pathak*. Again, unlike the other forms in which the assistants are called *Pālis*, in *Bisahari Ojā-Pāli* or *Geet Gowa Ojā-Pāli* they are known as *Juris*.

Both *Gital* and *Juris* played on the *Manjari* (very small pairs of cymbals) either single handed or with both hands. The manner in which the *Mankari* and *Durgabari* songs are rendered is commonly identified as *pancali*. On the other hand, the practice of singing the verses of *Manasa Geet* from beginning till the end is called the *Jagar*. Like other *Ojā-Pālis*, the *Bishahari Ojā-Pāli* is also closely attached to music. The various phases of the *Bishahari Ojā-Pāli* are a) *Arohan*, b) *Deva-Devi Vandana*, c) *Guru Vandana*, d) *diha*, e) *Pada* and f) *Samarani*.

a) **Arohan:** It is the phase where the musical notes or *ragas* are sung to initiate the performance. In the *Arohan* stage the *ragas* are sung in an ascending manner.

b) **Deva-Devi Vandana:** After the presentation of *Arohan* the *Gital* and the *Juris* sing glorifying the deities such *Shiva*, *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi*, etc. It is sung in order to receive the blessings of the Gods and Goddesses.

c) **Guru Vandana:** At this stage both *Gital* and *Juris* sing in praise of the deities so that the presentation of the act becomes successful.

d) **Diha:** The function of the *diha* of *Bishahari Ojā-Pāli* is similar to that of the same as served in *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*. The *Ojā-Pāli* narrates a story through a set of songs. The verses of the *diha* are composed on the basis of the nature of the theme of the story. The *Gital* first begins to sing the verses of the *diha* while the *Juris* catch up with last part of it and continue to repeat the same.

e) **Pada or Sangit:** In this part of the performance the pada or episode is done through distinctive set of songs by both the Gital and the Juris to the accompaniment of a manjira. In between the presentation the Gital explains the difficult parts of the songs.

f) **Samarani:** At the end of the presentation of the verses the Gital and Juris bid farewell to the deities that are invoked at the beginning of it.

iii) **Māre Gān**

The *Māre Gān-Gowa Ojā-Pāli* or commonly *Mare-Gan* is current among the *Bodo Kachari* and the *Pati Rabha* of Bongaon Mauza in between Chhaygaon and Boko areas. They observe *Mare-Puja* (another form of *Manasapuja*) annually, during the month of Jeth (May-June) collectively at *Khatira* (near Bamunigaon). The *Ojā-Pāli* known as *Māre Gān* amongst them is central in this worship.⁸⁸ The Deodhani dance or Dedhani forms an integral part of the kind of *Mare-Gan* practiced by the Pati Rabhas.

There are several aspects concerning the formation of *Māre Gān-Gowa Ojā-Pāli* that are different from the other types of *Ojā-Pāli*. Unlike other forms of *Ojā-Pāli* it does not have a *Daina - Pāli* but instead has six to ten *Pālis* and two Deodhoni (god-women). The *Ojā* of this form of *Ojā-Pāli* is to some extent different from the other varieties. Whereas the *Ojā* usually performs the role of a main singer or reciter, in *Māre-Gān-Gowa Ojā-Pāli* in addition to his usual role he also takes part in the presentation as the only priest. It is this fulfilment of the dual task that makes the character of the *Ojā* separate from the rest.

There are divergences in the aspect of the costumes of the *Ojā-Pālis* also. In *Māre-Gān-Gowa Ojā-Pāli* the dresses of the *Ojā-Pālis* are simple yet they are different from the others. Here, the *Ojā* wears a simple *dhoti* with a shirt and *chadar* around his neck both the ends of which would drop up to his knees. Instead of a head-gear as

⁸⁸ Kalita, Dhaneswar. (1991). *Traditional performances of South Kamrup*. New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, p.32.

commonly seen among *Ojās* as part of the usual costume of a *Ojā*, in this particular form of *Ojā-Pāli* he wraps a *gamosa* around his head. On the other hand, the *Pālis* put on *jamās* to cover their lower part of the body which is not colourful like many others but of white colour. The upper dress of the *Pālis* consists of vests only as they do not put on any shirt. They do not wear any head-gear also but put on *nepur* or anklets.

The performance of *Māre-Gān-Gowa Ojā-Pāli* is done mostly in standing position.

iv) **Padmapuranar Gaan**

The *Padmapuranar Gaan* is also another kind of *Ojā-Pāli*. The phrase *Gaan* in this context refers to the prominence of music, dance and acting in this particular kind of performing art in the same way as the scope of *Ojā-Pāli* does. From this point of view both *Gaan* and *Ojā-Pāli* bear resemblances in terms of the manner as well as matter of presentation.

As the name suggests this form of *Ojā-Pāli* is originated from the Padma Purana which is used by the *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli*. The text of Padma Purana from which *Sukanani Ojā-Pāli* recites verses during their performance is adopted by Padma Puranar Gaan also. However, there are differences between these two closely resembling forms in terms of their style of rendition of songs. There is yet another difference among them as far as prominence of musicians is concerned. In Padma Puranar Gaan the musicians known as *bayans* or *bains* have a greater role to play as the troupe is formed with two or more *bayans* who during the rendition of songs and verses accompany the singer with the *khol*. The main singer of Padma Puranar Gaan is variously called as the *Ojā*, *Gidal* or *Mul*. He is assisted by *pails* or *Pālis*. There is one who explains the verse sung by the *Gidal* in simple terms to the audience known as *dohari*. Due to the tasks that he is assigned to on many aspects he resembles that of the *daina Pāli*, the next to the *Ojā* in importance in a troupe.

The units of the musical presentation of Padma Puranar Gaan consist of five parts viz., alaap, vandana, diha, pada and samarani. Likewise Sukanani *Ojā-Pāli* in Padma Puranar Gaan alaap (musical notes or ragas) is delivered with the accompaniment of khol and cymbals.

It is followed by the ritualistic vandana wherein the Gidal or the *Ojā* and the *Pālis* or pails sing in praise of the gods and goddesses related to the performance of the art form. During this phase while the *Pālis* play on the *manjira* the bains play on the *khol*. In between the performance as the *Pālis* keep on playing on the cymbals the *Ojā* whirl around a *gamosa* (Assamese towel) with both hands.

In the succeeding phases a *diha* (refrain) of the song is sung by the Gidal. The song or the verse which is taken from the Padmapurana is accompanied by the *Pālis* and the bains also as they play on the *khol*s and cymbals. They participate in the song through their dance movements and singing along with the Gidal.

The entire proceeding of the performance comes to an end with the presentation of the *samarani geet* (concluding song). The song is sung together by the gidal, pails and bains while standing in a semi-circular position with their respective instruments being played on simultaneously. At the end of the presentation the performers before leaving the place of performance offer *namaskara* with folded hands to the audience and the spectators alike.

The art of *Ojā-Pāli* is a *Guru* based form just like any other Indian traditional art form. As such one has to learn this art form under the able guidance of a *Guru*. This art form is taught on the foundations traditionally followed by the practioners of *Ojā-Pāli* for centuries. *Ojā-Pāli* posses a living tradition and as one of such kind *Ojā-Pāli* has always undergone consistent changes and innovations in different aspects of it. In the past performances of *Ojā-Pāli*, in particular Vyasa *Ojā-Pāli*, were done in Sanskrit language. But gradually, as Sanskrit language died down it was replaced by Assamese language. A number of songs belonging to various traditions have also entered into the tradition of

Ojā-Pāli. In addition to this certain changes have occurred in costumes, music and songs, subject matters and place of performance as well. Traditionally, *Ojā-Pāli* is restricted within the men folk only but it is now participated by women also.

2.3 Kushan Gan

The tradition of *Kushan Gan* has emerged from the pan Indian tradition of Kathakata which constitutes the performance of either one or several singers depicting episodes from mythology and the epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata through music and dance. A Kathaka recites the episodes either from the great epics or the Puranas by means of songs, dances or acting. From this perspective the *kathaka* plays multiple roles of a narrator, interpreter and an analyser- all at the same time. It is one of the most popular forms of folk art prevalent in the Goalpara district of Assam. But it is also found in various other parts of India like Kochbihar, Jalpaiguri of West Bengal and Purnia of Bihar. Similarly, it is practiced in regions of neighbouring nations like Jhapa in Nepal, Mymensingh of Bangladesh and even in Doars regions of Bhutan also.

There are a number of arguments that claim for its origin. It is accepted by many that the word 'Kushan' has derived from the term *Kushilav*. The term *Kushilav* in turn has many alternative meanings such as a singer, an actor or a performer, another name for poet Valmiki who composed the Ramayana and also the two sons of Lord Rama- *Lava* and *Kusha*. In this regard Dr. Birendra Nath Dutta states that, "the most possible explanation is that it has been derived from, one of the two sons of Rama, who are said to have been the first singers of the Ramayan under Valmiki's training."⁸⁹ Another renowned folklorist from Assam, Dhiren Das is of the view that this form of theatre is primarily concerned with Kush. It is involved with an episode wherein once Laba was suddenly found missing for some time who was left by his mother Sita under the custody of sage Valmiki. Sage Valmiki, in order to save himself from the annoyance of Sita, created a figure like Laba out of Kush, a kind of grass treated as holy in Indian context. But later on, even after the return of Laba the created boy was kept alive and named him

⁸⁹ Dutta, B. N. (1995). *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University Press, p. 234.

as Kusha and both of them received lessons from the sage Valmiki. They were taught to render on the sufferings of Rama and Sita who would wander from place to place and this particular form of singing subsequently came to be known as Kushan Gan.⁹⁰ Referring to a similar kind of theatre tradition of Uttarakhand, Suresh Awasthi gives an account, “Sage Valmiki has brought with him his disciples Kusha and Laba to recite his epic poem, the Ramayan, at the time of Aswamedha yajna- being held at Ayodhya. The next morning the recitation was arranged for an assembly consisting of great sages, those well- versed in the Vedas, grammarians, musicians, experts in meters and song and dance. Kusha and Laba started reciting the epic set to music in multitude cadences in harmonious notes and tones accompanied with the instruments.”⁹¹

There is yet another myth which revolves around Kusha. According to this Kusha created a single stringed musical instrument called Bena out of a half-burnt piece of wood taken from the holy fireplace of a yajna. Kusha came from Mithila to Ayodhya singing out the Ramayana with the accompaniment of bena and for this reason the tradition of Kushan Gan is also called as Bena Gan. The use of bena as an instrument is indispensable in the performance of Kushan Gan where the Mul or the Gidal would initiate a verse or a song while playing on the bena.

There are a lot of resemblances between *Kushan Gan* and *Ojā-Pāli*. In *Ojā-Pāli* there are performers like the *Ojā* , the *Pāli* , the *Daina Pāli*, etc.and in the same way the form of *Kushan Gan* also has in it performers such as the *Gidal*, *Paila* or the *Dowari* or *Dohari*.

The plays of Kushan Gan were originally found only in oral form. At this stage they were composed in Assamese language that was prevalent in Kamata region and used by the Rajbongshi people. But gradually the plays in oral form began to disappear and were later replaced by themes taken from written texts. The source of *Kushan Gan* is the Ramayan but among the numerous versions of the epic the Krittibasa Ramayana composed by the poet Krittibas in the 15th century is considered as the prime source for

⁹⁰ Das, Dhiren. (1994). *Goalpara Loka Samskriti aru Lokageet*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, p. 350.

⁹¹ Awasthi, Suresh. (2001). *Performance Traditions in India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 2.

the themes of *Kushan Gan*. From the time when plays were written with the help of the Kritibasa Ramayana there was a change in the use of language also. The Assamese used by the Rajbongshis was substituted with Bengali language although not entirely. During the performance only the *dohari* or the *dowari* uses Assamese language while the rest uses Bengali language. In addition to this a good number of folk narratives are also adopted for the performances.

The troupe of a *Kushan Gan* is comprised of 15 to 20 numbers of people who are a mixed a group of semi-professional people. There is the *Mul* or *Gidal*, the main performer or singer of the troupe. He is assisted by four to five assistant singers known as *Pails* or *palis*. In addition to them there is the *Gidal* who acts as the main assistant to the *Gidal*. A troupe also has two *khol* players and four to five numbers of dancers who are known as *Chukuri*, or *Chukra*. Usually, the *Gidal*, the *Dwarii* or *Dowari* and the *Bain* (drum player) perform professionally while the rest are not professional. The term *Gidal* is derived from *Gital* meaning a singer. The *Gidal*, the main performer of *Kushan Gan*, has to be an expert in all the aspects related to its performance. He has to be a good dancer, player of the *bena*, an actor, in addition to his primary role in *Kushan Gan* as a singer. In a true sense, the *Gidal* plays the multiple roles of a director and at times a producer also. The *Dowari* also plays a multi-dimensional role in the in the performance. Being immensely skilled in singing, dancing and playing musical instruments he extends all possible help to the *Gidal* during the performance. Sometimes the *gidal* himself has to explain certain parts of his songs in simple words to the audience with the help from the *dowari* or *dohari* if there arises a need to do so. The *Gidal* wears a very simple costume comprising of a *bhuni*, shirt, and a shawl.

The *palis* of *Kushan Gaan* are also known as *Pails* which is nothing else but a distortion of the term itself. In a troupe of *Kushan Gaan* there are about four to five *pails*. Likewise the *pails* of *Oja-Pali*, or *Bhare Gaan* they are also required to have the essential qualities of a *pail* such as- the efficiency to dance, to sing and to play certain musical instruments. In addition to these they also need to be equally competent in acting since few among the *pails* themselves usually act out a particular scene during the course of

performance. The *Pali* or *pail* who is an expert in all the fields of knowledge pertaining to the art form and extends assistance to the *Gidal* in every aspect is designated the honour of a chief of the *palis* also known as *daina-pali*. He takes the responsibility to remind the *Gidal* at times when the latter forgets portions of the songs that he sings. The *palis*, too, in a similar way to the *Gidal* wear plain dhoti and shirt.

The unique aspect of the *Kushan Gaan* is the inclusion of a character called *dohari* or *dowari* who can be compared to that of the *daina pali* of Oja-Pali. The term *dohari* is derived from the Hindi word *dohra* meaning *to repeat*. In this case it refers to the action of a character who repeats the lines or refrains of a song that the *Oja* begins while the other *palis* would repeat the same over and over intermittently during the course of rendition of the same. The *daina-pali* in the same way as the *pali* of *Ojā-Pāli* produce comic elements through his discourse. The performance of *Kushan Gaan* becomes more interesting for due the clumsy dance movements, unusual way of conversation and also inelegant style of dressing.

A troupe of *Kushan Gaan* comprises of *bayans* or *bains* who play on the *khols* who along with the cymbalists announce the beginning of a *Kushan Gaan* performance as well as completion of the same. Sometimes due to the shortage performance are done with single *bain* also. But it is de rigueur for a *Kushan Gaan* troupe to have at least one *bain* because without the accompaniment of the *bains* the lustre of the performance of the *Gidal* would be lost. Not only that, even the performances of the *dohari* would be affected since it is essential for the *bains* to play on the *khols* when the *dohari* presents his *Song* (comic act). It is evident that the role of the *bains* in *Kushan Gaan* is of extreme importance without which it would appear dull and unattractive.

In a *Kushan Gaan* performance equal importance is given to the cymbalists also. The cymbals, made out of bell metal, are very small in size and are called *mandira* or *juri*. They are played by one or two *palis* among the group of *palis*.

There is yet another significant aspect of the tradition of Kushan Gaan that deals with the dancers associated with it. The dancers popularly known as *Chukuri* or *Chokri* or *Chokra* are actually boys of around 13/14 years old who are dressed as girls. In the past during the scenes that follow the initial songs the same dancers used to act out the female roles. But today, this job is performed by young girls. They wear sarees and other costume as commonly worn by the women folk, particularly of the Dhuburi.

Kushan Gan occupies a very important place in the folk theatre of Assam more precisely for carrying on the Ramayana tradition. It is regarded as one of the finest complete art forms that manifest an amalgamation of songs, dance, music and acting.

2.4 Ankiyā Nāt or Bhaona

Among the most important saints who in the period between 15th and 16th century heralded the pan Indian neo-vaishnavism or Eka-Sarana faith Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) was one of them. He was not a preacher of religion or a mere spiritualist alone, but was a poet, lyricist, music director, singer, dramatist, actor, director, producer, dancer, choreographer, musician, painter, sculptor, an able social organizer and a great social reformer also. He is the originator of the dramatic form known as *Ankiya Nat* or drama which has a religious origin. The chief purpose of presenting the dramas was to generate a devotional feeling towards Lord Vishnu and to spread the religious faith that was build on Neo-Vaishnavism.

Although there were several important and popular performing art forms prevalent in Assam prior to the advent of Vaishnavism through Srimanta Sankardeva, yet he is regarded as the pioneer of the actual theatre in Assam. His biographies (Carit Puthis) mention that he had undertaken a long pilgrimage of twelve years in his early part of his life during which he came across with different dramatic traditions of various regions. The places which were invariably the centres of the Bhakti movement had provided him with ample scope for the acquisition of knowledge about the dramatic traditions of those times. Sankardeva had, it is believed, come to know the forms like the Yakshagana, Kathakali, Bhagavata Mela, etc. and eventually made use of them to expound a unique kind of theatre form in Assam. There is no denying the fact that many

of the theories relating to dramaturgy had been proposed long before Sankardeva had developed his own. Just like many other dramatists who had digressed from the principles as laid down in the *Natyasastra*, Sankardeva, too, made attempts at modifications of various kinds in his distinctive form of drama so that they may serve the dual purpose of providing entertainment as well as instil religious sentiment among the audience. With the help of the performances of dramas in this pattern the saints could easily attract the attention of the common people and propagate the Neo-Vaishnavite faith in the region.

The form of theatre which Srimanta Sankardeva had introduced to the people of Assam became so much popular that it has remained till date a major form of entertainment for the people. The multitude of dramatists that followed the path of Sankardeva also contributed towards the development and consolidation of the form. The tradition of writing and presenting *Ankiyā* plays has continued without any break since the beginning of it in the sixteenth century.

As far as the genesis of *Ankiyā Nāt* is concerned there are diverse opinions as to when the first of such a play was staged. According to the information provided in the *Guru Carita* of Ramacharan Thakur the first play titled *Cihna-Yatra* by Sankardeva was staged at the age of nineteen.⁹² But, such a view has been refused by many on the ground that it could not have been possible until he had returned from his first pilgrimage during which he gathered ample knowledge about the various dramatic art forms that were traditionally followed in the regions that he visited. Moreover, it is learnt from his biographies that he was of thirty two years of age when he took up the first pilgrimage and that he first thought of presenting the play due to the pressure created by the people to whom he had narrated about the places like Gokul and Vrindavan.

The twelve long years of his first pilgrimage strengthened his ideas of theatre performance though of a restricted kind. Endowed with his personal experiences and coupled with his knowledge that he had achieved as a student in his early days,

⁹² Thakur, Ramcharan. (1985). *Guru Carita*. H. N. Dutta Baruah (ed.), V, 1456. Guwahati: Dutta Baruah Publishing Company.

Sankardeva devised out many techniques such as painted screens to be used as background, indigenous arrangements for lighting at night and even musical instruments like the *Khol*. In addition to these the architect also introduced a different type of preliminaries from the ones found in the Classical Indian dramatic tradition. However, due to the non-availability of the script of the play it is beyond possibility to explain the kind of language that was used for the performance.

Nevertheless, the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* has been able to survive till date in spite of the numerous challenges that have cropped up from time to time and unlike Sanskrit drama it has maintained its status most likely due to its adaptability to the changing situations and demands. However, the *Ankiyā Nāt* has at the same time retained its basic features intact. Although in many respects such as lighting, sound or stage design plenty of transformations have been made yet as far as themes, music or overall manner of presentation is concerned it has kept the elements closer to the origin of the form. The classical Sanskrit drama of the yesteryears was based on the principles as laid down by Bharatamuni in his *Natyasastra*. Within the extent of the twenty three chapters the treatise deals with among various other aspects related to theatre make-up, costumes, effigies or masks also.

On the other hand, the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* did not have any definite set of rules or instructions when it was first initiated. Its exponent Srimanta Sankardeva had to rely on various sources found across the mainland India during his long pilgrimage and subsequently extract rules and ideas on the basis of them and turn them suitable for the purposes set for such performances.

As for the kind of drama that Sankardeva developed in the early sixteenth century is concerned he did not define them as *Ankiyā Nāt*. Instead he termed them simply as *nata*, *nataka* or *yatra*. It was the later biographers only who in order to distinguish the form from the others mentioned it as *Ankiyā* drama. It is argued that the term *Ankiyā* is assigned to this kind of play because of the prominence of dance, movements of limbs (*Anga*) in the performance. On the other hand, it is so called for the reason that this genre by all means has only one Act to present before an audience. Apparently both the arguments seem valid as in case of the first it is vivid that *Ankiyā*

Nāt is performed through delightful dance or noticeable movements of the limbs, , etc. In the same way, from the manner of composition the second view seems stronger as it invariably has only one Act (*Anka* meaning Act) in it. The latter argument is more acceptable because customarily the nature of composition is taken for consideration, not the manner of presentation while determining the names of dramatic types.

The two saints employed the *Ankiyā Nāt* as a means to propagate the *Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma*- the religion of taking refuge with the One God only who is Vishnu. It centres round the worship of Vishnu (particularly in his two incarnations of Rama and Krishna) as it believes that Vishnu is All-God, the Divinity and other Hindu Gods and Goddesses are manifestations of the central force. All the plays of Sankardev - *Patni-Prasād Nāt*, *Kāliya Daman*, *Keli Gopāl Nāt*, *Rukmini-haran Nāt*, *Pārijat-haran* and *Sri Rām-Vijay Nāt*, are based on either Rāma or Krishna. Similarly Madhavdev's plays like *Cor-Dharā*, *Bhumi-Lutivā*, *Pimparā-Gucuā*, *Bhojan-Bihār* are too about popular episodes of Krishna.

The performance of an *Ankiyā Nāt* is called a *Bhawana* or *Bhaona* which literally means a 'show'. The word has been derived from the word *Bhao* meaning imitating either an action or an utterance of another person. It may also refer to the presentation of *bhava* or feeling before an audience.

Drama being an art form to be visualized (*drśya Kāvya*) as a rule must have something more in it than poetry being a form of art to be heard (*śravya kāvya*) only. But both forms of art attempt to attain similar ends. While for poetry the chief objectives are pleasure, virtue, profit and bliss for drama too the objectives are the same except that the latter along with the other objectives in sight also aims to arouse devotion to God Krishna or Vishnu. The medium of theatre has the capacity to produce the necessary effect of reverence of all sections associated with drama- the observer, the listener and the performer. An *Ankiyā Nāt* fulfils different objectives meant for different parts thereof. For example, the *Slokas* are for the learned, the songs for the Brahmins and other people of the assembly, the *Brajabhasa* for the village people, the masks for the illiterates and the *Gayan-Bayans* for those endowed with a musical sense.

For the people of the medieval period religion was the core of the life and the society of that time. Religion and faith on God influence along with other spheres the art and literature of any society. As such since Sankardev tried to reform the society through religion, his dramas automatically became religion centred and propagatory. One of the chief purposes of *Ankiyā Nāt* was to introduce the unlettered people to the principles of Vaishnava faith for which the subject matter, characters, dialogue, etc. are all employed to the fulfilment of that direction. The plots of the *Ankiyā Nāts* were based on the epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas*. Usually episodes showing the greatness and glory of Lord Krishna and Rama are chosen. The saints took Krishna as a major tool to reform the worn out society and to give it a new shape. Mere presentation of the episodes through songs or hymns cannot serve the end because visuals of events produce faith in the audience rather than plain auditory images.

In addition to the distinctive thematic pattern, the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* is marked by the characteristic music, musical instruments, dance, costumes, make-up including masks and effigies.

Music:

In *Ankiyā Nāt* the role of music is the most indispensable one since the performance of a play to a great extent relies on it. The music of *Ankiyā* drama which was an innovation of the Neo-Vaishnava movement is a form of classical music and had achieved prominent status at the hands of Sankardeva. He strongly believed that with the help of both music and drama he would be able to draw the attention of the general people towards the ideals of vaishnavite faith which he was trying to propagate to counter the prevalent Shaktism. He could well perceive the natural love of mankind for the finer arts such as music, dance or other artistic expressions.

The music of *Ankiyā Nāt* encompasses the preliminaries (known as *Purvaranga* or *Purba ranga* in Sanskrit drama) that are presented prior to the actual beginning of the play. The preliminaries of *Ankiyā Nāt* are patterned on the ones that are prescribed in the *Natysastra* and are followed during the presentation of Sanskrit drama, albeit, with certain differences. In this connection the eminent scholar Maheswar Neog observes

that 'the word *Purba ranga* is not current in religious circles of Assam; but another word *dhemali* or *dhiamali* has gained currency in its place.'⁹³ The preliminaries comprise of certain performances called *dhemalis* which are of various kinds. There are different opinions regarding the number of such *dhemalis* that a presentation might actually have. According to the *Guru Carita* it is of two types- *Bar-dhemali* and *Ghosa-dhemali*. On the other hand, the *Bordowa Guru-Carita* mentions that there five kinds of *dhemalis*, viz. *Nata-dhemali*, *raga-dhemali*, *chota-dhemali*, *bar-dhemali* and *ghosa-dhemali*. Maheswar Neog in his discourse on the aspect refers to about twelve kinds of *dhemalis* that are practised by certain *Sattras* (monasteries). The twelve varieties are identified as –

- a) *Saru-dhemali* or *Chota-dhemali* (minor preliminary)
- b) *Bor-dhemali* (major preliminary)
- c) *Na-dhemali* (new preliminary)
- d) *Cho-dhemali* (preliminary with the masks)
- e) *Nata-dhemali* (preliminary of the dancers)
- f) *Deva-dhemali* (the preliminary of the gods)
- g) *Raga-dhemali* (preliminary with classical melodies)
- h) *Ghosa-dhemali* (preliminaries with the ghosa)
- i) *Garuda-mardana-dhemali* (preliminary of the beating of Garuda, the bird)
- j) *Barpetia-dhemali* (preliminary originating at Barpeta)
- k) *Cahini* or *Utha Cahini-dhemal* (an intermediary stroke on musical instruments in between two concerts) and
- l) *Guru Ghat-dhemali* (concert in the honour of the religious preceptor).⁹⁴

There are opinions that some of the *dhemalis* have been added later on by the practitioners of the form. Dr. Neog points out that the *Na-dhemali* was added up by Madhavadeva or someone else later on while the *Barpetia-dhemali* had originated at the *Sattra* of Barpeta which in the subsequent times became part of the presentations in the Upper Assam also.⁹⁵ It is to be observed that the rhythms employed in the *dhemalis* are

⁹³ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 259.

⁹⁴ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 259.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 260.

not similar to each other; instead they are characterized by distinctive type of music having its own rhythm.

The music of the *Ankiyā Nāt* s is very much based of the classical Indian music and Saint Sankardeva made use of around twenty three numbers of *ragas* in his plays such as asowari, ahir, belowar, basanta, bhatiyali, gauri, kedar, dhanasari, kau, kanara, kalyan, mahura, nata, purabli sindhura. Sri-gandhar, sri, sri-gauri, tuda-bhatiyali , etc. The *Katha-Guru Carit* mentions that Sankardeva had used another three ragas- timira, meghamandali and bayumandali in his first play, the Ckihnayatra although they were found absent in rest of the plays written by him.⁹⁶

On the other hand, his chief disciple Madhavadeva employed seventeen types of ragas in his plays. The foremost among them are- asowari, akashmandali, basanta, belowar, bhatiyali, barari, gauri, dhanasri, kau, kanara, kayan, kamud, sri and sri-gandhara. However, there is a different opinion regarding the use of the certain ragars by Madhavdeva in his dramas. According to Maheswar Neog the singura, kau, mahur and dhanasri ragas were not used by Madhavadeva.⁹⁷

The prevalence of many of the ragas had been found in the works of other writers of the Vaisnava period such as Durgavara and Pitamvara as well. While the former of the two made use of the ragas to render the *Ramayana* composed by Madhava Kandali, the latter used it to present his *Usha Parinaya*. Nevertheless, the prevalence and the subsequent use of the various ragas in the works of the poets indicate that music in Assam had already attained great progress which was found to bear resemblances with those of the north and south of India. The use of newer ragas during the presentation of *Ankiyā Nāt* s has continued as the later dramatists have made persistent efforts to add them into their works.

The music of *Ankiyā* drama is characterized by its distinctive *taala* or rhythm. The *taala* which is incorporated in the song itself is different from the other forms of

⁹⁶ Lekharu, Upendra Chandra (ed). (1964). *Katha-guru-carita*. Nalbari: Dutta Barua & Sons, p. 46.

⁹⁷ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, pp. 281-282.

Vaishnava music. The major *Taalas* that are employed in *Ankiyā Nāt* s are *ekataali*, *paritaala*, *domain*, *jatiman*, *rupak*, *kharman*, *visam* and *cutakalr*.

Along with the *taala* or rhythm another very crucial aspect of the music of *Ankiyā Nāt* is the songs that are used in it. There are primarily three kinds of songs viz. songs that are based on the *ragas*, the *bhatimas* and the *payars*. In the first of the three types, the songs are composed on the basis of the strictly followed rules or *ragas*. As per the norms the performance of *Ankiyā Nāt* is initiated with the *nandigeeta* which is based on the *suhai raga* and on the rhythm of *eka-taali*. It must, however, at the same time be mentioned that Sri Sankardeva also made exceptions to these rules since it is found that he did not employ the *taala* in all of his plays. Out of the six plays which are written by him only three viz. *Keligopala*, *Rukmini-Harana* and *Rama-Vijaya* have made use of the *suhai taala*.

Again, usually the *raga* or melody *sindhura* is employed in the song which is rendered while introducing the main character on to the arena of performance. Likewise the previous one, it is also sung in the same rhythm of *eka-taal*. However, in two of the plays of Sankardeva i.e. *Patni-Prasada* and *Keli-Gopala* the exponent has not used the *raga sindhura*, instead made use of *asowari* and *nata* ragas respectively in them.

The performance of an *Ankiyā* drama is drawn to a close with a song that is sung either in *Kalyan* or *purabi raga* and is maintained in *kharman taal*. But there have been deviations in this regard as well. Excepting the plays *Patni-Prasad* and *Keli-Gopala*, the other four plays of Sankardeva have followed the prescribed rule. The two plays mentioned here have instead employed the *shyama* and *ahir* ragas.

In *Ankiyā* drama there are various songs meant to heighten the sentiments of the plays. The songs are employed to give expression to diverse modes of emotions and situations. However, this should be kept in mind that the rules set for the *Ankiyā* dramas are not rigorously followed by the practitioners of the form.

The next type of song is the *Bhatima* which constitutes a different kind of lyric. The *bhatimas* are basically the songs that are sung in the honour of a king, a god or any saintly man and mainly have three varieties. The three primary divisions of *bhatima*

(panegyric) are dramatic bhatima, deva bhatima (bhatima that is presented in praise of lord Krishna) and raja bhatima (bhatima that is sung to eulogize a king). In addition to these Saint Madhavdeva later on added another bhatima named guru bhatima which is sung in the honour of the preceptor.

Again, the dramatic bhatima is sub-divided into three types. The first of these types deals with the central theme of the drama as well as the panegyric of the lord Krishna. The panegyric is usually preceded by the *nandi* sloka and presented by the *Sutradhara* of the play. On the other hand, the second *bhatima* is delivered by the different characters in the play. The third and the last one, known as the *Muktimangal bhatima*, is sung at the end of the play which may be considered as a benedictory ode as it presented to express well wishes to all the people who participate in the play whether by playing, watching or even helping the performers in various ways.

The last of the three different types of the songs is the *payara* which is designed to give ideas about the psychological state of the characters involved in a play. Sometimes, it is also sung to comment upon a particular situation or action within a play.

Musical Instruments:

In *Ankiyā* drama the songs and dances are presented with the help of the various musical instruments. There have been references to the musical instruments that were available prior to the emergence of the two saints. Maheswar Neog in his book *Tradition and Style*⁹⁸ refers to Madhavakandali's work the *Ramayana* wherein the poet has mentioned of certain musical instruments such as *mardala*, *khumuchi*, *dagar*, *bhemui*, *kartal*, *ramtal*, *tabal*, *jhanjhar*, *jijiri*, *bheri*, *tokari*, etc. Dr. Neog further points out that another pre-Sankardev poet Suryakhari Daivajna in his book *Darrang Rajar Vansavali* speaks of a number of musical instruments which were not enlisted by Madhavakandali earlier. Some of the additional musical instruments that he mentions are *khol*, *dundubhi*, *gagana*, *turi*, *murali*, *dholok*, *gomukha*, etc.

However, while references to a good number of musical instruments have been made in various texts that point out their prevalence and use in performances yet not all

⁹⁸ Neog, M. (1981). *Tradition and Style*. Jorhat: Asom Sahitya Sabha, p. 17-18.

of them are actually used in an *Ankiyā* drama. As per the tradition that was established by the two saints only a few namely- *khol*, *mridanga*, *taal*, *daba* , etc. are used in a performance of *Ankiyā* drama.

Out of these musical instruments the *khol*, *mridanga* and the *taal* are played throughout a performance but the *daba* is played on certain specific moments only. The instrument is usually kept in every *namghar* or village prayer hall or in the *Sattras*. It is large in size and is played with two thick sticks. The *daba* is played two times a day in these places – early in the morning and in the evening. The instrument, on the other hand, is used at various point of time during the performance of an *Ankiyā* drama. It is chiefly played at the moment when the main character enters the stage. It is also played when there is a scene of marriage or the situation of a battle. Apart from these the beating of the *daba* has various other purposes also. Sometimes when there is a requirement of inviting the general public to a congregation or a need arises to make announcement of an important incident the *daba* is played too.

The other musical accessory that is very common and indispensable is the *taal* or the cymbals. There are three varieties of cymbals that are used during the presentation of a song or simple music in Sankarian tradition. These cymbals are known as *bar taal* or *bhor taal*, *pati taal* and *saru taal* or *khuti taal*. The first of the three bears the largest of the sizes while the other two stand smaller in their order.

There are few other musical instruments such as *tokari* and *dambaru* or the *flute* which are sometimes used by certain particular characters in *Ankiyā* dramas. As for example, the flute is traditionally played by none other as the character of Krishna while the *dambaru* is used by Siva.

The music of *Ankiyā* drama has been able to generate its distinctiveness which is founded on diverse types of musical tradition drawn from different sources. One of the prominent sources was the father of Srimanta Sankardeva, the progenitor of *Ankiyā* drama. It is to be noted here that his father Kusumbar Bhuyan himself was an acclaimed musician who, in terms of music, had left a deep mark on his son. In one of the verses in

his *Rukmini-Harana* Sankardeva has referred to his father as *gandharva sakshyata* indicating that he was a master of the fine arts.

Another very important source responsible the creation of the music tradition was his long trips to various holy places across the India of those days. These visits facilitated him with opportunities to experience and learn different forms of music and dance. The encounters with the saints or holy men who sang in the glory of their respective divinities had made a deep bearing upon his mind. During the times of his pilgrimage the movement of Vaishnavism was sweeping over the greater part of the land. The songs and dances performed as means of devotion inspired Sankardeva to develop his own form of theatre.

Apart from this, Sankardeva's musical sensibilities were shaped by the numerous forms of indigenous musical traditions prevalent in Assam and the neighbouring areas. The music associated with the performances of *Putala Nach*, *Oja-Pali* or *deodhani Nach*, etc. laid the very foundation of the form of *Ankiya Nat* or drama.

Dance

Likewise many other religious beliefs found in India the faith which Saint Sankardeva introduced in Assam was of celebratory in nature as well. The usual activities of the Sattras were carried out through songs, music and dances done in order to celebrate the glory of God. The place of dance in *Ankiyā* drama is indispensable which starts from the very beginning of the whole performance. The performance of dance takes place much before the actual start of the play. The presentation of an *Ankiyā* drama begins with the *purva ranga* which brings in the musicians who play on their instruments, sing and at the same time maintain certain dance movements. In the *ghosha dhemali* the *bar bayan* or the master player followed by the other musicians make such movements during the presentation.

The dance form of *Ankiyā* drama is comprised of a number of varieties. However, according to Dr. Maheswar Neog there are basically three scenes across in an *Ankiyā* drama. These include *Sutradhara dance* (dance performed by the Sutradhara), *Krishna*

dance (dance performed either by Lord Krishna or Rama) and lastly *Gopi dance* (dance performed by the milk-maids).⁹⁹

In the *Sutradhara dance*, as the name suggests, the performance is carried on by none other than the *Sutradhara* himself. The dance begins as he enters the area of performance. But prior to his entrance, a screen (*aar kapur*) is held in front of him as is done with the entrances of the other major characters of a play. This tradition is visible in many other traditional Indian theatre forms such as *Yaksagana* and *Kathakali* also.

The dance form is divided into two stages of performance- the *Saru bhangi* (minor postures) and *Bar bhangi* (major postures). In this dance the *Sutradhara* would first recite the *nandi sloka* and then continue to dance to the rhythm of the song he would sing. However, the presentation of the dance depends upon the structure of the play. In some plays where there is absence of a *nandi song* the performance begins with the dance followed by an expression to sing continuously of the glory of the god. On the other hand, in case of the plays with the *nandi song* the manner of presentation changes. Under such instances the presentation begins first with the recitation of the *sloka* and is followed by the dance. The *Sutradhara* presents his dance in *ektali* rhythm using different varieties of the rhythm.

The next major dance type is *Krishna Nac* or *Pravesar Nac*. It is so called as it marks the entry of the main characters like Lord Krishna or Rama and their dance movements subsequently performed before the spectators. Likewise the *Sutradhara*, in this context also a screen is held up by two persons in front of the characters as they kneel down to seek blessings from the gods as well as the spectators present there with folded hands just before they enter the stage. While the principal characters remain in such position the musicians start with a song which is carried on after the screen is dropped paving the way for the characters to enter the stage. The song is sung in the *ektali* and while it is sung by the singers and the musicians together the main performer continues to dance. Once the song comes to an end the performer carries on dancing to the musical rhythms and towards the closure of the piece kneels down once again towards the alter and leaves the scene.

⁹⁹ Neog, M. (1981). *Tradition and Style*. Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, p. 24.

The third form of dance that follows it is the *gopi-nac* or the dance of the milk maids. It is performed surrounding Lord Krishna. The dance is presented to mark the entry of female characters on the stage after the rendition of songs is over.

In addition to these dances there are a number of dance forms associated with the preliminaries conducted prior to the beginning of the actual drama. During the preliminaries the musicians or the orchestra troupe perform dance movements as they play on their instruments to present the *dhemalis*. The *dhemalis*, as has been already mentioned, may vary from *sattra* to *sattra*.

Another type of dance often performed during the presentation of *Ankiya nat* is the *cali-nac*. It is used to give expression to the sentiments of female characters in the drama. The *cali-nac* has a variety of forms, such as the *raja-ghariya cali-nac* or the cali dance of the court-yard, *bandarar cali-nac* or the cali dance of the monkeys. There is another kind of cali dance known as the *judhar cali-nac* or the cali dance of war which is based on the episode of the killing of Kamsa by Lord Krishna.

The *Rasa Nritya* is representative of the dance of the gopis or the milkmaids of Brindavan who would dance around Krishna. It is usually held in *rasa-purnima* and performed to the accompaniment of songs.

In yet another type of dance known as *yudhar-nac* or the dance of battles movements are designed to provide the audience with the impression of a battle. It is to be noticed that the dance is divided into various forms depending upon kind of weapons with which the characters are shown to fight in a battle and also the manner in which they fight. Sometimes two characters are put to contest against one another while on certain occasions a group of characters participate in the battle. In both cases, the musical instruments as well as the songs and movements would vary from one another.

In *Ankiyā Nāt* or *bhaona* the prominence of dance, songs and music can be gauged from the fact that during the presentation each and every character in a play enters and exits with dance movements. The movements of the various dance forms are always accompanied by songs that are sung to give apposite expression to emotions or feelings.

Costumes and Make-up

The costumes of *Ankiya Nat* and Make-up also bear great significance as both have gone through a lot of changes over the years. The costume as well as the make-up differs from character to character.

The *Bayanas* who play on their respective instruments particularly during the performance of the preliminaries wear *ghuri* or *jama*. They also put on a *chadar* around their body and *paguri* or turban on their heads. The *paguri* has basically two designs- one of them has a fixed pattern which can be easily put off after the performance is over. On the other hand, the other kind of *paguri* is prepared instantly with a piece of cloth which is wrapped around the head and can be unfurled at the end of a performance. The turban is sometimes decorated with garlands made out of *bakul* flower.

The *Sutradhara* of the *Ankiyā Nāt* also wears a typical turban which is shaped like the beak of a gadura bird. In order to decorate the turban colourful beads are used with an equally gay cloth strip. The colour of the entire costume is white. Dr. Neog in his book *Sankardeva and His Times* mentions of two kinds of turban for the Sutradhara. In one of the types, the sides are elliptical that slightly protrude at the front end. On the other hand, the other resembles the head gear of the Mughal emperor which has a protruding back end. In some ways the second one looks like the head dress worn by a Kathak dancer as well.¹⁰⁰ The *Sutradhara* also puts on a mark on his forehead which is made out of sandal wood along with earrings and belt wrapped around the waist. His costume further includes a chain of beads on his neck and a traditional bracelet.

The costume of the main characters such as of Rama and Krishna stand out from the other characters in an *Ankiya Nat*. The colour of the costume is always yellow while they are decorated with glittering *mukuta* or throne or the head-dress that is also different from the other characters in shape and size. The *mukuta* of Krishna is adorned with a feather of peacock. In addition to this, garlands of flowers and colourful beads are also worn by Krishna. The costume of Krishna would not complete without the anklets and bracelets that form essential part of it.

¹⁰⁰ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 254.

The costume of the other key character of an *Ankiya Nat*- Rama is no different from that of Krishna. He, too, puts on the same costume as Krishna as they bear similarities between them in every aspect.

The characters representing sages wear cloths of saffron colour with white marks on their foreheads. On the other hand, the kings are, apart from the colourful costume, decorated with *Kiriti*, a headgear.

There is a tradition of wearing ornaments by the male characters which are arranged as per the status that they represent. The common ornaments that the characters put on are chains of beads, ear rings, bracelets, garlands, etc. art worth mentioned.

The female characters traditionally are played by male actors. In *Guru-Carita* Ramachandra mentions that young and good looking boys with sweet voice were selected for female roles.¹⁰¹ However, under the changing scenario it is now performed by female artists. Nonetheless, at times when they are played by the male actors great care is taken in costume designs of these characters to maintain authenticity of a female personality. The female characters wear a *Ghuri* or *Lehenga*, a wrapper kind of petticoat and *chadar* while sometimes saree is also used by them. In *Ankiya Bhaona* K. D. Deva Goswami mentions that *Mekhela*, an important dress ware of the Assamese women, is not used by the women of the higher classes but by those belonging to the lower classes.¹⁰² However, such a view is difficult to accept considering the fact that even during the reign of the great Ahom Kings the women from the royal family used to wear *mekhela* and Sankardeva, being a scholarly person and a contemporary to the Ahom rule, must have known the traditional value of the garment. Usually, the culture of a region gets reflected in its art forms and from this perspective it is to be considered in every probability that the *mekhela* which is an important part of the Assamese traditional dresses would not find its place in the drama form. As far as the use of ornaments by the female characters of *Ankiyā* drama is concerned they put on the usual

¹⁰¹ Thakur, Ramcharan. (1985). *Guru Carita*, H. N. Dutta Baruah (ed.). Guwahati: Dutta Baruah Publishing Company. Para 1515.

¹⁰² Deva Goswami, K. D. *Ankiya Bhaona*. Dibrugarh: Banalata, p. 85.

range of ornaments such as ear ring, strings of colourful beads, anklets, bracelets, marks on forehead, etc.

In every performing art form the role of make-up holds an important place and so is true for *Ankiyā* drama also. In the past there was a particular person known as the *Khanikar* who had done all the tasks related not only to make-up alone but to the making of effigies and masks required for the plays as well. The *Khanikar* was a class of artistes located in the royal circle also since the Ahom kings had created a post of *Khanikar* and offered all the support to establish itself as professionals. This class, however, is difficult to find as professionals at present. Under the circumstances, in most of the situations the accessories needed for dramatic performances are prepared by the devotees in the *sattras* or monasteries.

The *Khanikar*, in the past, had been an integral part of the entire troupe of performers and in the absence of a *Khanikar* in a particular village, the villagers would invite one from the neighbouring areas. The work of a *Khanikar* was a hereditary one although at present there is no such tradition in practice.

To prepare colours for make-up certain materials were mixed, the key ones among them are- *haital* (the yellow orpiment), *nil* (indigo), *dhal* (white orpiment), and *sendoor* (red lead). Different characters of an *Ankiya Drama* are painted with different colours. As for example, the character of Krishna is black green and sometimes he is painted in indigo also. In order to produce such a colour *haital* and *nil* colours are mixed together.

In this way *dhal* and *sendoor* are fused to get pink, *haital* and *nil* are mixed to get green colour. On the other hand, *haital* and *sendoor* are blended to make pale red while *dhal* and *haital* are used to produce creamy white colour.

The characters like the demons or Asuras, if they do not put on masks, are painted in black. It is easily prepared from powdered charcoal that is mixed with honey to make a paste and apply on to the face.

In order to paint the faces of the female characters a paste of Joha rice powder along with turmeric, vermillion and honey and water is prepared. On the other hand, certain characters such as Sani or Sage Sukracharya paint their faces with vermillion to portray the rage that define their characters. In another method, prior to the fixing of colours on the faces a special plaster prepared out of the mud used by an insect was used in order to keep the colours stay long and also to remove them easily after the presentation was over. Again, sometimes to make the faces sticky so as to retain the colours for long hours the juice of bael is used prior to the application of colours on the faces. The fluid that is produced by earthworms is also used to add glitziness to the colours put.

While preparing for the moustache and hair of the characters sometimes the moustaches were either drawn with black paint or made out of the hair-like portion of the water hyacinth. In order to make tufts of hair for the actors, particularly for the female actors various materials were used like black rags, jute fibre, yak's tail and hairs collected from different animals which were later properly washed and dyed.¹⁰³

Masks and Effigies

The use of masks and effigies form an integral part of *Ankiya Nat*. The employment of such masks and effigies enhanced the appeal of the performances among the audience and helped to achieve the ultimate objective of attaining a sense of spirituality through grandeur and larger than life presentations. The *Natyasastra* also submits that wherein characters are present with many arms, many heads, ugly faces, faces of animals and the like, there should be use of masks.

Throwing more light on the usefulness of masks in theatrical performances Richard Southern puts forward that mask is a common but a powerful tool which is accepted in all theatrical traditions around the world. According to him, "We touch here one of the most powerful elements of theatrical techniques, it is clearly not for nothing that one symbol of theatre which is above all others has come to be accepted through

¹⁰³ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 273.

the world is a mask.”¹⁰⁴ He observes certain important aspects related to the use of masks in dramatic performances. In his view masks provide fearful and dreaded look necessary to enact some characters. It helps an actor to perform more than one role in a play. Masks also facilitate an actor to play the role of an animal or birds, etc. thereby achieve closeness with the reality. The use of masks almost becomes indispensable while performing the role of characters having more than one head, e.g. the Ravana. With the help of the masks it becomes easier for the actors as well as the playwright to draw the attention of the spectators to the events of the play and satisfy the actual purpose of it. On the contrary, the greatest disadvantage of the use of mask is that an actor cannot exhibit the aptitude in facial expression as the facial appearance of a mask is invariable.

The masks and effigies are prepared in three different ways. Sometimes these are made with the sheath of betel-nut or bamboo plants while more commonly wood and bamboo wicks are used to produce the masks and effigies. The masks prepared from the sheath of betel nut plants are very fragile and short-lived. They are coloured with *dhal*, *nil* or lime, etc. before they are used. In case of the wooden masks strings are attached to the holes made near the ears of the mask so as to put them over the face keeping it stable. The masks made with the help of the bamboo wicks are also worn in the same way.

The process of making masks or effigies from bamboo wicks is very complex and lengthy. Generally, after the shape is prepared from the wicks they are wrapped with pieces of torn clothes and a layer of the mixer of soil and cow dung is applied on it and is left to dry off. Sometimes instead of soil and cow dung, paper pulp is also used which makes the masks lighter and comfortable to wear. While making the larger effigies the smaller parts of the same are prepared first and later on joined together to give it complete shape and layer of cow dung is applied. Once dried the shapes are once again given another layer of the mixer of sticky soil and cow dung so that when the colours are applied on them they do not bloat and remain intact for long.

Among the other accessories the lighting arrangement and curtain (*Arkapor*) hold importance. As far as arrangement of lighting is concerned there are basically three

¹⁰⁴ Southern, R. (1964). *Seven Ages of the Theatre*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 29.

devices that were used in the past. These devices are known as *Mahata* or *Mata*, *Agnigad*, and *Ariya*.

Mahata or *Mata* is lighted when the *gayanas* and *bayans* first enter the space of performance. The *Mahata* is a kind of firework that produces dazzling light. The same *Mahata* is burned when the other principal characters such as the *Sutradhara*, *Narayana* or *Krishna* enter. The *Mahatas* produced so much light that it was as bright as the day light when they were illuminated.

The next device *Agnigad* is a kind of torch that is made of bamboo splits and is shaped like an arch. They are fastened to the bamboo posts which are again attached to the banana plants as the base. Traditionally, during the performance of a play a total of nine or twelve numbers of *Agnigads* were used to produce light.

The *Ariyas* are also illuminating devices which were made of bamboo splits with a length of five to six feet long. The splits were wrapped around with rags or tattered clothes to a certain point which were then soaked with mustard oil. When the soaked *Ariyas* were burnt it produced very bright light. The *Ariyas* were used in two different ways. Sometimes, they were held by some person in front of a performer at the time of his entry and during the performance as well. But generally, the *Ariyas* are tied to the posts wherever available around in order to illuminate the whole the performing area.

However, because of the presence of newer technologies at present these techniques are hardly used now-a-days. Sometimes, of course, even when one or the other of the devices is used it is done only as a customary practice.

The *Arkapor* or the curtain also bears great significance in the traditional *Ankiya Nat*. It is a piece of cloth that is held in front of an actor as he prepares himself to enter the acting area and reveal himself to the spectators. The purpose of the device was also to increase the suspense and to add charm to the manner of presentation. It was also assisted by the lighted *Mahata* which was kept in front of the *Arkapor* and as soon as the curtain was removed the light from the *Mahata* fell on the face of the actor and he became visible to the spectators present. Under the changing scenario although the curtain is used to hide the principal actors for a moment from the viewers, the *Mahata* is

not held in front of the curtain instead light is focussed on the face of the actors to serve the desired purpose.

The tradition of holding the curtain prior to the entry of the major characters onto the stage is found in various other theatre traditions of India, particularly South India. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya mentions that in *Yaksagana* “a piece of red cloth is held by two people does the duty for a curtain for a temporary period to introduce the characters as they appear.”¹⁰⁵ Referring to the presence of the same technique in *Therukkothu*, a folk theatre tradition of Tamilnadu N. Shymala explains that a white cloth is held by two persons in front of each character while appearing on the stage for the first time. This piece of cloth is known as *Thirai Cheelai* in Tamil language.¹⁰⁶

A.B. Keith, the German scholar in his book *The Sanskrit Drama* while explaining the stage its properties of the ancient Classical plays mentions that usually the entry of any character onto the stage is made by removing the curtain by two maidens, who are engaged to such a job only considering their beautiful shapes and faces.¹⁰⁷ Such an observation by Keith makes it clear that the use of curtain in various dramatic forms of India including that of *Ankiya Nat* is due to the direct influence of the Sanskrit drama.

The wholeness of the *Ankiya Nat* could be realized to the optimum extent only when all the accessories are put together in proper balance. Each of the elements carries within it the power to elevate the performance to a different level. They contribute not only to the aspect of entertainment alone but to the increase of the religious fervour among the spectators also. However, under the rapid changes that have been witnessed by all aspects concerning human civilization, the elements associated with *Ankiyā Nāt* have also undergone a lot of transformations. As for example, the lighting arrangements have changed tremendously over the years. The tradition of using *Agnigad*, *Ariyas* or *Mahatas* was gradually replaced by the gas lights and petromax lamps. But, this has been again replaced by the more modern electric lights. It has helped to eliminate the

¹⁰⁵ Chattopadhyaya, K. (1962). “Glimpses of Indian Folk Theatre.” *Natya: Theatre Arts Journal-Folk Theatre Number*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Natya Sangh, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Shyamala, N. (1962). “Therukkuthu: The Folk Theatre of Tamilnadu.” *Natya: Theatre Arts Journal-Folk Theatre Number*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Natya Sangh, p. 64.

¹⁰⁷ Keith, A.B. (1992). *The Sanskrit Drama: Its Origin and Development, Theory and Practice*. Chapter XIV. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 359.

difficulties involved with stage lighting, scene setting to a great extent and at the same time has effected in reduction of expenditure and labour as well. The use of spot light, strip light or flood light has made it easier for the people to bring out more emotions out of the dramatic situations presented on the stage. It also provides the spectators with greater amount of enjoyment. Again, if musical instruments are considered then it is observed that in addition to the traditional musical instruments, a number of other modern instruments have made a way into the arena of music. As such, instrument like the synthesizer has become a part of the modern day performance. Again, in the past the actors had to rely solely on their own voice to throw dialogues and make them audible to gathering that were present during the performance. Today, because of the improved microphones and amplifiers the actors do not have to put in extra efforts to deliver the dialogues. In spite of such changes in various branches of *Ankiya Nat* it still has maintained a strong flow of the traditional form.

The performance of the *Ankiya Nat* is usually staged in the premises of a *Nam-ghar* (the community prayer hall). The ground of the *Nam-ghar* was utilized as stage whereas the surrounding area served as the auditorium for the spectators to sit and experience. At times, whenever such performances were organized outside the *Nam-ghar* proper but within its precincts, the performing space was assigned in the middle while the spectators were seared around it leaving a passage that would lead to the green room for the performers to enter and exit. As has already been mentioned the chief purpose of the drama form is to evoke devotional feeling to the Lord Vishnu, such presentations are generally made on certain occasions like the *Janmastami* (the birthday of Lord Krishna), the *Rasa purnima*, the *Dol-yatra* , etc. The presentation of an *Ankiya Nat* is by and large made at night time which runs till almost dawn. Later, such performances were staged on royal courtyard also.¹⁰⁸ The *Ravana-Vadha* play was enacted on the occasion of the visit of the Kings of Manipur and Cachar to the Ahom Royal Palace.¹⁰⁹ Later on also, during the reigns of King Gourinath Singha and King Kamaleswar Singha, dramas titled *Padmavati Harana*, *Rukmini Harana* and *Akruragamana* were performed in

¹⁰⁸ Bhuyan, S.K (ed.). (1963). *Tungkhungia Buranji*. Gauhati: Historical and Antiquarian Studies, p..5.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, p. 51.

the courtyard of the royal Palace. It further points out to the fact that the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* had received a lot of patronage from the Royal family.

With the passage of time and an increasing number of believers in Neo-Vaishnavism, more and more plays began to be enacted. But, due to the lack of space the *Nam-ghars* could no longer accommodate the increased numbers of spectators within its premises. Under such a scenario, it became inevitable that the stage and the auditorium were taken out of the *Nam-ghar* to a more spacious area. Some of the essential materials such as the *Sahasragocha* or *Sahasrabanti*, *Thochkbonti* could not be shifted out of the *Nam-ghar* proper. But, the *Chandratapa* or the Canopy continued to serve as the permanent house roof even in the new stage along with the adoption of newer methods of light arrangements. Today, with the change in the approach towards the form of drama as a means of cultivating religious feeling to a popular form of entertainment, the place of such performances has also changed. Now-a-days, the *Ankiya Nat* has come out of the premises of the *Nam-ghar* to the open stage or temporary sheds.

The other noteworthy feature of *Ankiyā Nāt* is the employment of the *Sutradhara* (the holder of the thread or the stage supervisor). This is a direct influence of the *Sutradhara* of Sanskrit drama but in the hands of Sankardev and Madhavdev it has achieved a unique identity of its own. The *Sutradhara* of Sanskrit drama does not remain present throughout the performance on the stage but disappears as soon as he completes the invocation. On the other hand, in *Ankiyā Nāt* the *Sutradhara* remains on the stage from the beginning till the end of the performance and fulfils his assigned role of a producer as well as a running commentator. He dances with the orchestra, introduces the characters, gives the directions, announces their exit and entrance on the stage, fills up lacunae in the action of the play by song, dance and speech, delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot. It is the *Sutradhara* who opens up the events in a play through the recitation of the *Nandi* (the benedictory verses) and also announces the subject matter of the play through the *Prarochana*. It is followed by the singing of the *bhatima* and *Prastavana* which is a terse conversation between the *Sutradhara* and his companion (Sangi). The *Sutradhara* performs a crucial role till the end of a play since like he does at the beginning, at the close of the play also he recites

another important verse- the *Mukti-mangal Bhatima* through which he begs forgiveness to God for any mistakes made during the enactment. He further points out to the moral aspect of the plays and urges the spectators to tread on the path of righteousness and virtue. As such, considering the load of responsibilities that he has to bear on his shoulders it becomes essential that the *Sutradhara* is played by a very talented person who has ample knowledge about acting, dance and music.

The language of *Ankiyā Nāt* has also uniqueness about it. It was not the language of the people of Assam of that period. The language is neither a pure version of the local language nor classical or Sanskrit. It is known as *Brajabuli* or *Brajawali*, an artificial language created by blending Assamese with Maithili. There is still confusion as to why Sankardev had to develop an artificial language that was different from the existing one. There is no doubt that he was well versed in Sanskrit apart from Assamese. It is probable that he came in touch with the Maithili language of Mithila which during the medieval period was a great centre of Neo-Vaishnavism. Sankardev perhaps felt that people from outside Assam should also understand and relish his plays which would be difficult had it been presented in Assamese language. Moreover, Sanskrit was not the language of the common people. As a result he opted for a blending of Maithili language with that of Assamese making it possible for greater number of people to appreciate the value of the plays.

After the demise of both the *Gurus*- Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the Brajabuli language gradually began to lose its importance in the performance. Towards the later part of the eighteenth century the Brajabuli language gave way to the Assamese language. However, the *sattras* have tried to keep the Brajabuli language still in use although its use has, in most cases, limited to the activities within the *sattrā* circle only. On the other hand, the adoption of Assamese language has given a new dimension to the form of drama. The new type of drama, sometimes designated as *Matri-bhasar Nat* or plays of mother tongue, has made it more easily acceptable and accessible.

The Chief Practitioners of *Ankiya Nat*

During the Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, both Sankardeva and his chief disciple Madhavdeva and the other prominent followers made efforts to propagate Vaishnavism and adopted the presentation of dramatic acts as means to disseminate the ideas of the faith. Such performances also contributed a lot to draw the attention of the common people towards the new faith. The people of Assam with diverse nature and beliefs were enticed by the versatility of the genius in Sankardeva in the fields of literature, music and theatre, rallied around him and converted themselves to his Bhakti-cult, the Neo-Vaishnavite faith.¹¹⁰ Under the direct influence of Sankardeva and others soon Sattras, Nam-ghars were established almost everywhere and simultaneously the dramas written by the two saints were also enacted in those places.

The practice of writing and enactment of dramas to propagate the newly established faith turned out to be so powerful that it soon became a rule that prior to the appointment of a Sattradhikar, the head of a Sattr, the person had to compose at least one drama and perform the same before an audience and thereby prove his ability.¹¹¹

However, apart from the exponent of the form- Sankardeva, among the most prominent dramatists of this genre are Madhavdeva, Ramacharana Thakur, Dvija Bhusana, Gopal Ata and Daityari Thakur.

Sankardeva and his drama

As has already been mentioned Srimanta Sankardeva was a multifaceted genius whose contributions to the development of socio-cultural and religious field of Assam is enormous.

As far as religion is concerned he was responsible for bringing about a religious reformation movement in Assam through the introduction of *eka-sarana-nama-dharma* which means to worship of the one and the only supreme God- Vishnu or Krishna,

¹¹⁰ Sarma, S.N. (1966). *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and Sattr Institution of Assam*. Gauhati University: Guwahati, p. 17.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p. 165.

through prayers and absolute surrender. The propagation of this new faith not an easy task for Sankardeva as the people of this region had followed different religious practices. The more forceful ways that prevailed were Shaktism and Saivism while Vaishnavism. Saktism was already a deeply ingrained practice with the temple of Maa Kamakhya at the centre. The temple of Kamakhya was rebuilt in 1563 by the Koch King Naranarayana and his brother Chilaraya during the time of Sankardeva which indicates the influence of the faith among people.

Besides this, there was sweeping existence of superstitions that functioned under the veil of religion. The dedication to god was substituted with debased forms of religious rituals. Even the family of Sankardeva had followed the path of Saivism. It is said that his father *Kusumvara* had worshipped Lord Siva in order to have a child. As a result of the devotion showed to the God, a son was born which made the father to name the child as Sankardeva or *Sankaravara*.¹¹² While establishing the new faith which was based on the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* Sankardeva had to fight very hard against several opposing forces particularly against *tantrism* and blood-sacrifices. He was, however, adequately supported by his ardent followers like *Harideva* and *Damodardeva* in the initial stage. Later on, Madhavdeva, the most sincere of all the disciples of Sankardeva played a major role in spreading the message of the faith in every possible manner.

Sankardeva also played a key role as a social reformer as his faith does not advocate difference of caste, credo or class. People from all walks of life could be admitted to his faith. During the times of Sankardeva casteism in Assam was also very much prevalent when people of humble birth and lower caste could find places among those from the higher classes of the society. But, the teachings of Sankardeva made it possible for these people to be treated equally by others and even gave them the chance to take part in the devotional matters which had so long been denied.

In the field of culture also the contributions of Sankardeva has been immense. It was he who had founded the *sattras* (monasteries) and the *Nam-ghar* (the community prayer hall). These institutions became the centres of both religious and cultural

¹¹² Lekharu, Upendra Chandra (ed). (1964). *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari: Dutta Barua & Sons, p.26.

activities. The *Nam-ghar*, in particular, since its establishment, has played the role of a kind of parliament as well as auditorium for the common people of the society. It has helped to give the Assamese culture an identity of its own and at the same time has inculcated a sense of unity among the various sections of the people of Assam.

The achievements of Sankardeva in the domain of literature are remarkable as he had opened up new vistas to Assamese literature. He was an extra-ordinary scholar who is said to have composed the first poem *Kara tala kamala* and *Harichandra Upakhyana* when he was still in his schooling years.

His literary works can be studied under three main categories. In the first are the works that he had compiled from other works, the second category deals with the translated and adapted works while the third one relates to the original works produced by Sankardev himself.

In the first category of works there is only one text- *Bhakti Ratnakara* which is based on the other texts such as the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Srimad Bhagavatgita*. The chief purpose of the book is to promote the supremacy of Lord Vishnu and the necessity of *ekasarana bhakti* or absolute devotion to the Lord.

So far translated works of Sankardeva are concerned mention must be made of the *Uttarakanda Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana* books I, II, X, XI and XII. These translated works display the genius of Sankardeva. In them Sankardeva has not only infused the ideals of his faith wherever he could but has employed his creative power also while retaining the originality of the same to a certain extent. Although he has kept the essential aspects of the original text drastically unchanged, yet he has made necessary additions and alterations so as to serve the actual purpose of his works- to propagate the message of faith of Neo-Vaishnavism.

In the second category of works belong *Bhakti-Pradipa*, *Harichandra Upakhyana* and *Rukmini Harana*. The *Bhakti Pradipa* is a text containing *slokas* or verses adapted from the *Gita* presented in the form of conversation between Krishna and Arjuna.

The second of the three, *Harichandra Upakhyana*, is said to have been composed by Sankardeva when he was still in the school. The text is based on the *Markendeya Purana*.

The third work titled *Rukmini Harana* is adapted from the *Harivamsa* and *Bhagavata-Purana*. It deals with the story of Krishna and Rukmini. The brilliance of Sankardeva can be perceived from the fact that a lot of details in the text have done in the light of Assamese tradition and culture.

The third category comprises of the works that are written originally by Sankardeva. It consists within its purview two major forms of literature- poetry and drama. Under the section of poetry several types of it are *Bargita*, *Kirtana-Ghosa*, *Guanamala* and *Bhatima*.

The *Bargita* (the noble or venerable song) is a devotional song composed by both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva though they did not call the numbers as *Bargita* themselves. The songs, inspired by the devotional forms of singing such as the *Krishna Kirtana* or *Hari Kirtana*, are arranged with definite melodies (raga) and rhythm (tala). The composition of such songs done in the Brajabuli language and sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments like *Khola*, *Mridanga* and cymbals was a great innovation as it can easily attract people from all sections and accept the faith of Vaishnavism as promulgated by the two Gurus. The *Bargit*, due to its subject matter and manner of presentation, has attained a revered position in the realm of Assamese music.

The work that follows next in importance is the *Kirtana Ghosa* which is an anthology of different stories explained in verse form. The themes of the stories, although taken from various Puranas, bear the originality of Sankardeva. It is believed that the different books within the text had been written at various points in time during the life of Sankardeva. Nevertheless, the text, still much revered and used, was composed to be sung at the religious assemblies. The *Kirtana Ghosa* is one of the four most important texts of the Vaishnavas of Assam, the other three being the *Bhagavata Purana* (Bk-X, Adikanda), the *Nam-Ghosa* and the *Bhakti-Ratnawali*.

The *Gunamala* within its small size deals with the feats of Krishna. It is believed that Sankardeva composed the book at the request of the Koch King Naranarayana. The book, based on the *Bhagavata-Purana*, contains a total number of 378 verses in it.¹¹³

The other important innovative composition that Sankardeva made was the *Bhatima* or the Panegyrics. They are lyrical in nature and are further classified into three groups- the Dramatic *Bhatima*, *Deva Bhatima* or the exaltation of Lord Krishna and *Raja Bhatima*.

The plays of Sankardeva

Of all the literary productions that Srimanta Sankardeva did the most spectacular and creative has been the dramatic works by him. Although he has produced six plays with manuscript-

- i) Patni Prasada
- ii) Kaliya Damana
- iii) Keli Gopala
- iv) Rukmini Harana
- v) Parijata Harana and
- vi) Rama Vijaya,

Sankardeva had also produced another play titled *Cihnayatra* that is believed to have been presented before an audience at Bordowa. The play is considered as the first play by Sankardeva. But, due to the non-availability of the text of the play it is assumed that the play did not have a written manuscript. On this ground it may be accepted that Sankardeva composed a total of seven plays.

The *Cihnayatra*: The performance of the play was first made at Bordowa which is said to have continued for seven days. As noted earlier there has a lot of debate regarding the presentation of this play as one of the biographers Ramcharana Thakur in his *Caritputhi* mentions that Sankardeva presented the play at the young age of nineteen years only. But it is difficult to accept the argument for the fact that several other

¹¹³ Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, p. 183.

biographers have contended that Sankardeva has never composed any play before his first pilgrimage which he undertook at the age of thirty two. It is perhaps more reasonable to acknowledge that Sankardeva conceived of composing plays only after he had acquired knowledge about such forms prevalent in different places he visited during the course of his pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, in order to present the play successfully Sankardeva had engaged some artistes to make various musical instruments like the Mridanga, tala, etc. Not only this, he had devised out certain specific *ragas* (melodies) also to set the tunes of the songs and verses that were sung in the play.

Moreover, for the purpose of the enactment of the play he had built a seven layer stage above the spectators which was itself an innovative experiment and nowhere to be found in the world at that point in time. The stage was designed to be suitable for the employment of drop scenes which was again unique. In addition to this, it enjoys the privilege of being the first play in the modern Indian languages.

Patni Prasada: It is usually regarded as the first play by Sankardeva though some argue that *Kaliya Damana* is the first drama that he composed.¹¹⁴ But, the body of the text of *Kaliya Damana* clearly refers to all the plays except *Patni Prasada* and *Rama Vijaya* and mentions that he composed these plays at the request of his cousin *Ramaraya*. On the other hand the body of the text of *Patni Prasada* has made no reference to *Ramaraya* indicating the point that the play was composed much ahead to the appearance of *Ramaraya*. Further, considering the lack of perfection in the use dramatic of techniques, the use of slokas and *Bhatimas* in the regular way, it may again be reasoned that *Patni Prasada* was produced earlier than the others.

The story of the play revolves around Krishna and the treatment of the wives of the *brahmanas*. In the play Krishna is seen taking rest with his cowherd friends under an *Ashoka* tree on the bank of the *Kalindi* lake. During this time the friends tell Krishna that they feel hungry upon which Krishna sends few of his friends to get some food from the nearby *Brahmans* who are busy worshipping through sacrifices. When approached the

¹¹⁴ Medhi, K.R. (1978). *Studies in the Vaishnava Literature and Culture of Assam*. Jorhat: Asom Sahitya Sabha, p. 89-90.

brahmanas refuse to give them any food and consequently Krishna sends his friends to the wives of the *brahmanas* for something to eat. The wives of the *brahmanas* on the other hand give the boys some food and they along with the other women of the locality prepare to go and see Krishna personally and offer something to him. The *brahmanas* having come to know about it step up to stop their wives from visiting Krishna. But soon, the *brahmanas* learn about the real identity of Krishna and pay their reverence to the Lord. The play contains two slokas, two *bhatimas* and seven songs.

Kaliya Damana: The play, being the second production of Sankardeva, is based on a story from the *Bhagavata Purana*. It was written as has been mentioned before at the request of his cousin *Ramaraya* when the latter was at Pat Bausi. The main story of the play has a sub-plot also.

The main plot of the story involves *Kalinaga* (the kali serpent) who lives in *Kalindi* lake and has turned the water of the lake poisonous. Once, the cowherd boys along with their cows meet their death by the bank of the lake as they drink the poisonous water from it. At this juncture Krishna comes and jumps into water of the lake which inflames the serpent and wraps up Krishna in its coils with an intention to crush him to death. In the meantime, the parents of Krishna and his friends and the neighbours as well arrive on the bank of the lake terribly shaken by the impending danger on Krishna as he is taken under the water by the serpent. However, to everyone's surprise he appears dancing on the hood of the snake. Unable to see the pain that *Kalia*, the serpent, goes through, its wives come forward to Krishna and beg him to show mercy upon their husband. At this Krishna stops to dance and asks *Kalia* to leave the lake immediately and proceed to *Ramanaka* Island with its family. As they offer their prayers to Krishna, he comes back to the bank and is received with great love and relief by his parents and others present.

In the subsequent plot of the story the people of Vraja are seen taking rest as they decide to spend that night on the bank of the *Kalindi* lake. But at night, a terrifying wild fire breaks out and surrounds the people with an intention to destroy them. Scared to the death they call upon Krishna who appears and swallows up the fire and saves them.

Keli Gopala: The story of this play is also taken from the *Bhagavata Purana* book X which revolves around Lord Krishna and his engagements with the gopis of Vraja.

The play begins with the mesmerising music on the flute by Krishna. As the melody of the music reaches the ears of the Gopis, they cannot resist the temptation but come out to meet him on the bank of river Yamuna refusing to hear to objections of the husbands and the other family members. When they reach the spot where Krishna is, he asks them to return to their homes. But, the gopis tell him that they have renounced all the material pleasures of the world to be with him and pray him to play on the music on the flute to sooth their desires. The Lord acknowledges their prayers but soon they are overpowered by a sense of pride which makes him disappear all of a sudden. At this moment, a demon known as *Sankhacuda* appears and threatens the gopis. But, Krishna comes to their rescue and drives the demon away and begins to play them again.

However, the gopis were still full of pride of being with Krishna which makes him disappear once again. The gopis, grieved by his desertion, begins to search for Krishna and sing in praise of him but unable to find him they go on recollecting the pastimes of Krishna. Meanwhile, Krishna mischievously takes away one gopi with him but soon deserts her as she also wanted to take advantage of his innocence. The gopis then begin to wail at the abandonment of them by Krishna and sing in praise of him. The sweet songs of the gopis then makes Krishna appear before the gopis again and play with them in order to provide them pleasure and fulfilment.

The play has a total of thirty one songs in it that are based on various *ragas* or melodies. The majority of these songs are sung by the gopis as they express their feeling of joy and sorrow that result out of either being with or separated from Krishna. There are two *bhatimas* also each of which is presented at the beginning and at the end of the play.

Parijata-Harana: It is also based on the story taken from the *Bhagavata Purana* and deals with the contest between Indra and Krishna for the tree of *Parijat Flower* (a celestial flower).

The play begins with the arrival of both Indra and Narada in Dwarka to meet Krishna and to make request to him to recover certain valuable articles along with some maidens that were forcibly taken away by *Narakasura* of *Pragjyotishpura*. But prior to it, Narada presents a *Parijata flower* to Krishna who in turn gives it to his wife Rukmini as the latter, after having an idea of its preciousness from Narada himself, expresses her desire to have the flower for her.

Krishna assures Indra that he would help him to get back all the items of Indra and others and so he subsequently leaves for his abode while Narada stays back in Dwarka. During his stay Narada visits *Satyabhama*, the other wife of Krishna, and tells her about the *Parijata flower* and how it is given to Rukmini. Narada does not fail to put in the wrong idea in her mind that it is given to Rukmini instead of her because Krishna loves the former more than the latter. Such an attitude of Krishna as projected by Narada grieves *Satyabhama* very much. Narada, on the other hand, reports to Krishna about the condition of *Satyabhama* which makes him go hurriedly to see her and to assure her that he would fetch the tree of *Parijata flower* from the garden of Indra. But, Krishna in his attempt to fulfil the promise which he made to Indra, fights against *Narakasura* and rescues all the articles from him and returns them to Indra. After it is done Krishna wished to fulfil the promise that he made to his wife *Satyabhama* of giving her the tree of *Parijata flower*. But, Indra's wife *Saci* would not accept it and give up the authority over the flower. As a result, the conflict over the matter becomes more serious and a fight occurs between Krishna and Indra as both want to keep their words to their wives. At the end, Indra recognizes the true identity and power of Krishna and tender the tree of the flower to him. The play contains a total of eighteen songs including the five *payars* of it.

Rukmini Harana: Likewise the previous play this was also composed after the second pilgrimage of Sankardeva was over and he was back at *Pat-Bausi*. It was once again based a story from the *Bhagavata Purana*.

In the play both Krishna and Rukmini, the princess of Kundila, are told about one another by two different minstrels. The appreciating words of the minstrels made such huge impact one another that they immediately fall in love with one another. While the

parents of Rukmini accept the relationship of her with Krishna, the brother *Rukma* does not agree to the proposal. Instead he wants to marry off his sister to Prince Sisupala against her wishes who already arrives Kundila with his friends in Kundila.

But, Rukmini sends a message to Krishna through a brahmana messenger about the worrisome situation. Krishna, having learnt about the feelings of Rukmini towards him and the impending danger from the opponents, instantly rushes to Kundila and fights against the forces of Rukma and Sisupala. At the end, both the opponents are defeated by Krishna and the lovers elope to Dwarka to be united through a marriage.

There are forty two slokas in the play including the four *bhatimas*. Of the four *bhatimas* the middle two are used to describe the beauty of both Rukmini and Krishna, while the first and the last one are employed as benedictory and *muktimangala* respectively. The play also contains thirty one songs which are set to various *ragas*.

***Rama Vijaya*:** It is the last of the six plays that Sankardeva had composed but is the first Assamese play which is based on the *Ramayana*. The other plays of Sankardeva are based on the *Bhagavata Purana* where the young Krishna is presented as the hero of those plays. The play was written at the request of the great warrior *Chilaraya*, the brother of the Koch King Naranarayana while Sankardeva was at Kochbihar. It is based on the *Adikanda* part of the *Ramayana*.

The hero of *Rama Vijaya* is the young *Rama* which deals with his winning of *Sita* as his beloved wife at the grand *swayamvara*, the function of choosing a suitable husband. The play begins with the journey of both Rama and his brother Laxmana to the *ashram* of Sage Vishwamitra, their guru. It unfolds episodes that involve the killing of *Maric*, a demon, the visit to the *Swayamvara* of Sita as her suitor, the breaking of the *Haradhanu* (the unconquerable bow of lord Shiva) and the subsequent marriage with her. The play also deals with battles against the failed suitors and also another confrontation with *Parasurama* whom Rama defeats easily. It ends with the arrival of the couple at Ayodha and their happy stay there.

Though the story of the play has been borrowed from the *Adi kanda Ramayana*, yet Sankardeva was able to bring a lot of traditional elements into it which makes the

spectators more interested in it. It has two Nandis, thirty nine slokas, twenty songs and four *bhatimas*.

Although the plays of Sankardeva are inspired by the early Sanskrit dramas yet they cannot be judged on this parameter only. There is no doubt that the plays exhibit the creative genius of Sankardeva. He has been highly successful in incorporating a lot of elements into the plays which make them more convincing and indigenous and thus appealing to the taste of the spectators. For Sankardeva the presentation of the plays bore two purposes – to spread the message of *Bhaktism* and also to provide entertainment. It is also used as a tool for various social reforms that affected the society of the times of Sankardeva.

Madhavdeva and his plays

Madhavdeva was the principal disciple of Srimanta Sankardeva and was also highly instrumental in spreading the faith of Vaishnavism in Assam. Like his Guru, he was also a playwright of high calibre and also a composer of a good number of *Bargeets* (noble songs). His plays, excepting *Arjun Vanjana*, are shorter in length and are commonly known as *jhumuras*. His *jhumuras* are characterized by the pervasiveness of songs and dance. Nevertheless, it was a common feature of the age to which they belonged and in fact, it was the common feature observed not only in Assamese dramas but also in North and South Indian dramas in the medieval age.

In his dramas, Madhavdeva has presented charming images of child Krishna. The plays provide the audience with delight and pleasure through their representation of babyish splendour and grandiosity of child Krishna on the one hand and the love and affection of mother Yoshoda on the other.

Madhavdeva has written five plays although there are opinions that he composed more than twelve. However, the six plays that are genuinely written by him are- *Arjuna Bhanjana*, *Cor-dhara*, *Bhumi-Letowa*, *Bhojana-Vihara*, *Bhusana Harana*, and *Pimpara-Gocuwa*. According to the *caritas* there are two other important plays titled –*Rama-Yatra* and *Govardhana-Yatra*. The play *Rama-Yatra* as mentioned in the *Katha-Guru Carita* lasted for five nights and was highly successful. But, regrettably enough it was

later destroyed believing that no one later on would be able to present it as successfully as it was done in the first instance. It also mentions that names of the participant actors in the roles.¹¹⁵ The *Guru-Carita* by Daityari Thakur also refers to the existence of this play. On the other hand, the other play *Govardhana-Yatra*, as mentioned in the *Katha-Guru Carita*, was so powerful that towards the end of the play when the *Meghamandala raga* was sung it began to downpour very heavily and people who gathered to watch the play had to run for shelter.¹¹⁶

The play, *Arjuna Bhanjana*, was written during his stay at Barpeta. The theme of it has been borrowed, as has been noted earlier with Sankardeva's plays, from the *Bhagavata Purana*, book X.

The play centres around the child Krishna who is punished by Yoshoda for breaking her churning pot and also for eating butter when she was away to look after the milk that was put on fire for boiling. When Yoshoda returns and finds Krishna doing all this she tries to catch hold of him to punish but Krishna runs away to escape the wrath of his mother. However, she catches him and after a lot of trouble is finally able to tie him down to a mortar. In spite of all this, Krishna moves on with the mortar tied to his waist with a rope but is stuck between two Arjuna trees as he tries to pass between them. As he put in more force the trees fall down and two spirits appear out of them. They offer their prayers to Krishna and leave the place to their own abode. In the meantime, the huge sound produced by the falling of the trees brings all the worried people of Vraja including Nanda and Yasoda to the place. Nanda finds his son lying down with the mortar still fastened to his waist. Picking up Krishna in his arms he scolds Yasoda for such cruelty to which she also gives appropriate reply. At the end the quarrel between the husbands and wife continues while Krishna is shown busy playing with his friends. The play has seven slokas and eight songs in it.

The play, *Cor-dhara*, does not have any proper theme or dramatic episode. It is rather based on a very simple situation where the naughty child Krishna is caught red handed while stealing butter.

¹¹⁵ Lekharu, Upendra Chandra (ed). (1964). *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari: Dutta Barua & Sons, p. 519.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 549.

The play begins with Krishna entering the hut of a cowgirl or a gopi to steal butter and other sweets. But the gopi sees him and quickly closes the door and calls out her friends. At this Krishna also calls out his mates and when all of them arrive he promptly puts the blame on the gopi. He even threatens the gopis of reporting the incident to his mother. Consequently, the gopis release Krishna but he would not move until they offer him some butter. The gopis finally agree to give him some butter if he entertains him through his dance. In the meantime, Yasoda finding Krishna nowhere goes out in search of him and comes to know of his whereabouts on the bank of Yamuna. When Yasoda reaches the place and embraces Krishna he reports her of the ill-behaviour of the gopis. At this she reproaches the gopis for their behaviour and takes Krishna away from them. The play contains two slokas and six songs in it. There is no use of *bhatima* in this jhumura.

The plays titled ***Bhumi- Letowa*** and ***Pimpara Gucuwa*** bear similarities as far as their stories are concerned. In both the plays child Krishna is caught while stealing butter and is quick to put the blame on others for the act. In the former when Yasoda catches him the blame is put on someone unknown while in the latter the blame is put on the gopi in whose home he goes in to steal. But whereas in *Bhumi-Letowa* mother Yasoda promises to give him as much butter as he could consume and even offers him the portion which was kept separate for offering to God, in *Pimpara-Gucuwa* Yasoda warns him to stay at home and not to go from home to home in search of butter and milk to which Krishna replies in a harsh tone. He threatens his mother that if she behaves in such a rude manner then he would go away to Mathura.

In ***Bhojana-Vihara*** Krishna is seen playing games with his friends as they go out for a picnic with their cows. Soon a demon named *Agha* attacks them but Krishna kills it and saves everyone. After this they resume to play and later on when they are about to eat the meal *Narada* appears before them and asks for some *prasada*. The boys offer him what Narada wants and he leaves them. As Krishna and others begin to eat one of their friends come and report that the cows cannot found anywhere. While his friends panicked Krishna tell them to finish the food first and volunteer to search for the missing cows himself. Later on when Krishna goes out to search he does not find any trace of them and accordingly returns to the place where his friends were. He becomes more

surprised when he discovers that even his friends have gone missing. Krishna soon discovers that it is Brahma who has stolen his friends and the cows. In order to give Brahma idea about his power Krishna creates another set of cows and friends just like the original ones and as expected this took Brahma by surprise. He now realizes the real identity of the child Krishna and returns all his friends and cows. The play comes to an end with the homecoming of the cows and the cowherds to Gokula after the picnic was over.

The last of the six plays is *Bhusana-Harana* in which Krishna is found sleeping on the bank river Yamuna. At this moment Radha appears and steals his ornaments and hides them. But when Krishna wakes up in order to test his knowledge about them she enquires about his ornaments to which he says that he has no knowledge about it. Radha, thus assured of her efficiency, returns to Gokul with her pitcher full of water. On her return she hands over the ornaments to Yasoda. At the time when Krishna is worried over his loss of ornaments and the probable reaction of his mother, his friends inform of Radha's mischievous act. Thus, having learnt about the incident he goes to his mother and confidently asks for his ornaments and this sparks off a quarrel between him and Radha. Krishna complaints to his mother that Radha has insulted him which Yasoda believes and embracing her son she retorts Radha for her behaviour asks her go away from her home. The play does not have any sloka and consists of five songs in it.

As has been observed the plays of Madhavdeva which are called *Jhumuras* primarily deal with the childhood wonders of Lord Krishna. The plays demonstrate two different aspects of Krishna. On the one hand is the very mischievous boy, in the form of a mortal being, who always create trouble for the mother and the gopis, in particular, while on the other, it is the same Krishna who assumes the higher responsibilities of saving the world from dangers thus, exhibiting the Omnipotent in him. Madhavdeva has successfully endowed the character of Krishna with human qualities and through them he is able to evoke the *Vatsalaya* sentiment in the spectators. The relationship of Krishna and Yasoda that tells about pure, innocent, self-less love can be found only between a mother and child which in turn help to evoke the *Vatsalaya* sentiment among the spectators and thereby influence them to embrace the faith Vaisnavism.

There are few other followers who had tried their hands with composing *Ankiya Nats*. Among them Ramacharana Thakur, Dvija Bhusana, Gopal Ata, Daityari Thakur, etc. are the notable ones.

Ramacharan Thakur has composed only a single play titled ***Kamsa-Vadha*** which is based on the *Bhagavata Purana* book X. The title of the play makes it clear that it deals with the episode of the killing of the notorious Kamsa by Krishna and Balrama. Kamsa, infuriated to know about the existence of his arch enemies –Krishna and Balrama, in Gokula intends to kill them. With this aim in mind he sets up a trap and invites the kids to participate in a dual which is accepted by both Krishna and Balrama. But, to the contrary of what Kamsa had planned they are able to kill Kamsa instead with the assistance of Sage Narada and restore Agrasena onto the throne and also release his parents – *Daivaki* and *Vasudeva* from prison. The play has seven slokas and eleven songs in it.

The next important playwright is **Dvija Bhusana** who also composed only one drama titled ***Ajamila Upakhyana***. The play is about *Ajamila*, a well versed Brahmin youth who incidentally marries a prostitute and becomes father of ten issues from the marriage, Narayana being the youngest one. He gradually degrades himself as he commits a lot of crimes to maintain his family. Towards the end of his life the lord of Hell sends spirits to capture his soul and bring it to the hell for its punishment. In this moment of crisis he calls out the name of his youngest son Narayana for help. But, Lord Vishnu, thinking that Ajamila has taken his name, immediately sends four agents to rescue him from his trouble. These agents come from the heaven and save him from the grasp of the spirits from the hell. As a result the soul of Ajamila becomes pure and attains salvation. The play contains three slokas and ten songs including one *bhatima*.

Gopal Ata, a sincere devotee, composed three plays. The titles of these plays are- ***Janmayatra, Boka Yatra or Nandotsava and Gopi-Udhava Sambada***. The first play by him deals with history of the birth of Lord Krishna. It tells how Vasumati is assured by Brahma of the birth of Krishna to save her from the atrocities of the demons and devils. Accordingly, various gods and angels are requested by brahma to be born as *gopas* and *gopis* near Gokula. The play gives an estimate of the divine characters that are born as human beings on earth for the purpose of taking care of Krishna. The play further brings

in the character of Kamsa and his ill treatment of his sister *Daivaki* and the sister-in-law *Vasudeva*. Kamsa, having learnt from the prediction about his death in the hands his sister's son, kills each of the seven babies. But he is unable to prevent the birth of Krishna, the eighth son of Daivaki and Vasudeva. Post his birth as per the instruction of the God who appears before Vasudeva, he goes to Gokul and exchanges the baby with the one of Yasoda. The exchanged baby girl actually is the reincarnation of Yogamaya. When Kamsa comes to know about the birth he rushes to the prison and tries to kill the baby. But the baby vanishes into the air and warns Kamsa that his slayer is already born. At this Kamsa repents and releases Vasudeva and Daivaki from prison. It ends with the celebration in Gokula at the birth of Nanda's son. The play has one sloka and fifteen songs.

The second play *Nandotsava* is only an extension of *Janma-Yatra*. The play involves with the events of the celebration of the birth of Krishna in Nanda's home. The play which is usually performed on the following day of *Janma-Yatra* has only two songs in it.

The third play of Gopal Ata is *Gopi-Udhava-Samvada* is inspired by story from the *Bhagavata Purana*. The story of the play follows the killing of Kamsa and restoration of Agrasena on the throne which made Krishna to stay back for a long time at Mathura. But his absence in Gokul leaves everyone live in agony and hearing this Krishna deputed Udhava to console those grieving souls. Accordingly, when Udhava arrives in Gokul he is surprised by the sense of love and devotion of the gopis to Krishna. Udhava tries his best to soothe the pain of the devotees by answering all the queries about Krishna and also by praising them for their devotion. The play ends with the return of Udhava to Mathura after the purpose of his visit is deemed successful. The play comprises of three slokas and twenty four songs and a *bhatima* also which is presented at the beginning.

Daityari Thakur had written two plays namely- *Nrsimha Yatra* and *Shyamanta Harana*. The first play deals with the episode of the killing of *Hiranyakasipu* by Lord Vishu in the incarnation of *Man-Lion*. The play begins with the events which made the two doorkeepers- Jay and Vijay born as sons of demons because of the curse pronounced on them when they offended Sage Sanaka and other siddhas. Under the spell of the curse

they born as *Hiranyakasipu* and *Hiranaksya* and were also ordered to consider Krishna as their enemy.

In the subsequent events *Hiranaksya* is killed by Vishnu when he appears in the incarnation as Boar. This enrages *Hiranyakasipu* and seeks to take revenge upon Krishna as he becomes more powerful by dint of the boon bestowed on him by Brahma. But, in total contrast to his attitude his son *Prahlada* shows absolute devotion to Lord Vishnu which annoys *Hiranyakasipu* to such an extent that he orders his son to be killed. However, when all the attempts to kill him fail the father himself steps in and asks Prahlada to show him where Vishnu is. To this he replies that he is to be found everywhere, even in the post in front of them. As *Hiranyakasipu* hits at the post a figure in the form of man-lion who is none other than but an incarnation of Vishnu comes out from it and kills him taking his body on its lap. The play consists of twelve slokas and nineteen songs including a payara and two bhatimas.

The second play ***Shymanta Harana*** moves around a precious jewel which is in the custody of king Satrajit. King Satrajit turns down the request when once Krishna wishes for the jewel to be given to Agrasena. But one day his brother Prasanna goes into the jungle to hunt wearing the same jewel and gets killed by a lion who takes the jewel away and who in turn is killed by Jambavanta, the king of bears. When his brother does not return King Satrajit becomes suspicious of Krishna's hand in it. On the other hand, Krishna having learnt of the misunderstanding goes in search of lost Prasanna and finds his dead body. Eventually he is able to get the jewel back from Jambavanta following a fight against him. Krishna then goes to Satrajit and returns the jewel to him who, ashamed of his wrong perception of Krishna, marries off his daughter to Krishna. There are fifteen songs, two bhatimas and seven slokas in the play.

In all the plays mentioned above the aspect that predominantly comes out is the emphasis on the glorification of Lord Vishnu or Krishna. However, it is further to be noted that the different playwrights have made efforts to consider it from diverse perspectives. While Sankardeva's plays deal with Krishna in his youthful vigour, Madhavdeva's plays present him as a playful yet mighty child. On the other hand, the later dramatists also bring out the humane but supernatural being of Krishna. The plays

and the playwrights have, nonetheless, been successful in singing of the glories of the Lord and spread the message of god among the common mass. These plays with their serious subject matter, grand manner of presentation assisted by songs, dance and music certainly have had great impact upon the audience of those times when they were staged. These plays have for so long served the dual purpose of spreading religious faith and also providing a mode of simple entertainment. It is for the sincere efforts of these playwrights, particularly for the innovations made by Sankardeva, that Assamese theatre traditions have found its distinctive place in the global scenario.

Decay of *Ankiyā Nāt*

As it happens with everything the form of *Ankiya Nat* or *Bhaona* has also gone through a lot of changes over the ages. The form, through its presentation of plays with a religious perspective and sensorial performances fulfilled the purpose of converting the people into the faith of Vaisnavism. The intellectual genius of Sankardeva which made enormous contributions to the field of literature, music and theatre was influential enough to bring in the people of diverse faith into one faith which is founded on true democratic principles. The *Ankiya Nats* as presented by the religious leaders did not serve only one purpose but rather played a major role in fostering fraternity, integrity and communal harmony also.

In the period after the Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the practice of writing dramas in the manner of their preceptors was carried on by their disciples, particularly by the heads of the Sattras institutions. Although their dramas were of inferior quality and strayed away to a certain extent from the standard raised by the two Gurus, yet they could still exercise their influence on the people from all sections of the society.

The tradition of *Ankiyā Nāt* has continued till date in spite of the numerous challenges coming from various directions. After the death of Sri Sankardeva and Sri Madhavdeva, their disciples, mostly heads of the 'Sattras' institutions wrote dramas following the footprints of their Gurus. Though their dramas were inferior in quality in comparison to those of their preceptors yet they were very much liked by the common people. During the rule of the Ahoms the Sattras were patronized by the Kings. But when

the treaty of Yandabo (1826) was signed with the British the Ahoms lost their Kingdom forever and due to lack of patronisers *Ankiyā Nāts* became much maligned as a rustic form of amusement and the field was gradually occupied by the new theatrical forms and techniques from outside the state of Assam. The British brought Bengali people to do the clerical jobs who in turn brought their traditional Yatra form of theatre to Assam. In addition to this, they also brought theatre parties from Calcutta on festive seasons such as Durga Puja or Kali Puja to hold their theatrical shows in the Western pattern of proscenium stages temporarily built near the puja pandals. With the expansion of western type of education these theatre forms had developed more and eventually tremendously affected the tradition of *Ankiyā Nāt* as more and more people were drawn to them.

In the post independent India the influence of the Western world was felt even more strongly and the Western dramaturgy began to occupy the centre stage as greater number of permanent stages were built in various parts of Assam. This also facilitated people to experiment with newer techniques and concepts of drama mostly borrowed from the West. These developments continued to have negative impact on the traditional forms of theatre in Assam. People became more interested in plays based on realistic presentation of life staged with the assistance of modern lighting, sound, music or settings rather than the seemingly old and outdated manner of presentation.

The emergence of Assamese films that began with the making of Joymati in 1935 by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala also contributed to the further diminution of *Ankiyā Nāt* and such other forms. Later on, more importantly around 1960's, the appearance of a unique brand of theatre- the mobile theatre, formed with commercial objective in mind again contributed to it. This form is distinctive in the sense that it is, as the name suggests, mobile in nature which carries with it its own tent, stage, chairs, lights, sound system, generator, etc. to places wherever it goes. Unlike professional theatre groups of other states it is not dependent upon the permanent stages for the performances. The simultaneous advent of radio and television also hampered the desired growth of *Ankiyā Nāt*. Having been induced by the electronic media with all the glitziness people have become fascinated with those cultural activities that have hardly any root in their own while scheming them to overlook their distinctive traditions.

Under the present circumstances *Ankiyā Nāt* has undergone certain alterations even though the core things have remained unchanged. As far as the role of Sutradhara is concerned sometimes he does not remain throughout the performance but leaves the place after the presentation of the *nandī* and *bhatima*. As has already been mentioned the language of *Ankiyā Nāt* is brajabuli but at present the colloquial Assamese is used mostly as it facilitates easy access for the common people to grasp the inherent sense of the plays.

Traditionally, female roles are performed by male actors but now-a-days, they are performed by female actors. Again, in the past *Ankiyā Nāt* or *Bhaona* could be presented only inside the namghars or the prayer hall. But with the passing of time, it is now performed outside of it and sometimes on typical proscenium stages as well. Today in Assam, a number of *Bhaona* competitions are organized throughout Assam at various levels. They have yielded both positive and negative outcomes. While on one hand it has brought in financial benefits to those involved in the practice it has, on the other, turned the performances into mere presentations devoid any trace of spirituality in them.

However, it is to be noted here that there has been great resurgence of *Ankiyā Nāt* or *Bhaona* in recent times as more and more people are found to have practised this art form in addition to the other modern art forms. Even the Government has been putting in greater efforts to make this theatre form more popular among the young generation by introducing courses in educational institutions or offering scholarships, etc.

Ankiyā Nāt or *Bhaona* is a result of Saint Sankardev and Madhavdev's attempt to popularise *Eka-Saran Nam Dharma*. Initially both the saints through the establishment of *Namghars* and religious texts tried to attain their objectives but soon realized that these means attracted only those who had reverence for such serious thoughts. They felt that the easiest and the most convincing way to bring in the inconsistent and the unlettered section of people unto the faith was to use dance, music and acting. To this end Sri Sankardev developed the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* endowed with simplicity in plot, an easily comprehensible language, abundance of music, dance and drama, all taking place in an open stage that preached brotherhood, equality and love for God.

2.5 Amateur Theatre in Pre and Post-Independent Assam

Assamese Theatre in the Pre-Independence period

The rich tradition of theatre which both Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had built on the foundation of the available folk theatre elements and the Indian Classical theatre traditions continued to persist. But, it could not keep on its journey as strongly as desired in the nineteenth century due to the clashes between among the Ahoms royal classes and the Koch royals over power that emerged in the 19th century. The continued tussle led to the entry of the Burmese which caused massive destruction to the social, economic and cultural domains of the land. In order to bring an end to this mayhem the British were invited by certain groups among the Ahoms and eventually after the defeat of the Burmese at the hands of the superior British forces and the subsequent treaty of Yandabu signed in 1826, the people of Assam had no other alternatives but to accept the terms set by the new occupants.

Amidst all the chaos the followers of Vaishnavism carried on the task that the two saints had started and *Nam Ghars* and *Sattras* were being set for the propagation of the faith though on a subdued scale. In the meantime, Calcutta- now Kolkata had turned into a cultural capital for the entire North-East region. The Bengali people initiated the renaissance through the fusion of knowledge from the east and the west. This movement which was developed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy or Vidyasagar on the western thoughts and wisdom influenced not only the educated Bengali people but the Assamese students also who had gone there to study.

Theatre movement in Assam took its inspiration from the emerging Bengali theatre that itself was fashioned after the Greek and English playwrights like Shakespeare. The Assamese students had the opportunity to witness plays enacted on proscenium stages rather than the open stages which were in practice in Assam. Moreover, the division of a play into various acts instead of the single acts of the *Ankiyā Nāṭ*s also gave them excitement to experiment with the new kind of drama. Parallel to this, the trend of social reformation movements taking place in Bengal and its appeal for the larger participation in such movements, the desire among these people to free itself

from the British domination, the craving for the removal of superstitions or the ill practices from the society drove the Assamese students try for new attempts at playwriting and producing the same on stages.

Under such circumstances, Gonabhiram Sarma, inspired by the widow-marriages in Bengal, wrote *Ram-Navami* as early as in 1857. But, there has been a little debate over this matter as some claim that it is not *Ram-Navami* rather *Kaniyar Kirtan* of Hemchandra Baruah which is the first Assamese modern play. It is believed that Gunabhiram Baruah had written the play while he was on his way to Assam by boat. The play began to appear serially in *Arunodoi*, the first Assamese Newspaper, brought out by Christian Missionaries from the March, 1858 issue. But, the whole play came out much late in 1870 while *Kaniyar Kirtan* was published in 1861. As such, Harischandra Bhattacharya has opined that considering the date of publication *Kaniyar Kirtan* should be recognized as the first modern Assamese play.¹¹⁷ Contrary to this Dr. B. K. Baruah considered *Ram-Navami* as the first modern Assamese play.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Dr. S. N. Sarma refers to *Ram-Navami* as the first play in the history of Assamese modern theatre.¹¹⁹ From the points raised it may be safely said that if considered from the date of publication then *Ram-Navami* can be easily accepted as the first modern Assamese play. The story of the play revolves around a widow *Navami* and *Ram*, a broadminded educated young man. In the play both Ram and Navami fall in love and wishes to marry each other after Navami becomes pregnant. But, due to the fierce opposition of the society they fail to unite and are compelled to claim their own lives at the end.

The other play *Kaniyar Kirtan* is also a social play which throws light on the ill effects of addiction to opium. It tells how a rich person Kirti Kanta goes on to lose all his wealth due to his habit of taking opium. It was followed by another important play *Bangal-Bangalani* by Rudra Ram Bordoloi which through *Tabhuli*, a woman of loose character and her lover depicts the sacredness of marriage and evils of extra-marital relationships.

¹¹⁷ Bhattacharya, H. *Asomiya Natya Sahityar Jilingoni*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, p. 119.

¹¹⁸ Baruah, B. K. (1964). *History of Assamese Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 148.

¹¹⁹ Sarma, S. N. (1991). *Asomiya Natya Sahitya*. Guwahati: Saumar Prakash, p. 325.

Although the history of modern Assamese theatre begins with the appearance of a number of social plays yet it is observed that there was a simultaneous emergence of Puranic plays. The trend of writing such plays was started by Srimanta Sankardeva in his *Ankiyā Nāt* s. But, the tradition of writing plays on the Puranic stories while at the same time making it suitable for the modern proscenium stage began in the later part of the nineteenth century only. During the period from 1875 to 1893 several such play were composed. The first play of this nature was *Sitaharana* (1878) by Rama Kanta Choudhury. It was followed by Harivilas Agarwala's *Sita Swayambar Nataka* (1881) and *Abhimanyu's Vadha* (1885) by Bharat Chandra Das. Six years later as a result of the combined efforts of three dramatists, namely Raibahadur Kanaklal Baruah, Gopalkrishna Dey and Rajanikanta Bordoloi, appeared *Sabitri Satyaban*. It is followed by few other plays like *Shakuntala*, *Haradhanu Bhanga Nataka*, *Harishchandra Nataka*, etc. Regrettably enough, the scripts of the majority of these plays has been lost due to lack preservation of the same.

In the middle of all of this there appeared two plays that were translated one each from Sanskrit and English languages. In the first case, it was a translation of Kalidas' *Abhijnanam Shakuntalam* that was titled *Shakuntala* (1887) in Assamese and done by Lambodar Borah. His translation was actually based on the already translated version of it in Bangla language by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The other work was Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* translated into Assamese as *Bhramaranga* (1887-89) by four persons- Ratnadhar Baruah, Ghanashyam Baruah, Gujanan Baruah and Ramakanta Borkakati. The dramatists while translating the later tried their best to endow the play with local taste by incorporating a lot of indigenous elements into it.

But, the real beginning of the modern age in Assamese began with the contributions made by five dramatists- Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Padma Nath Gohain Baruah, Durga Prasad Majinder Baruah, Benudhar Rajkhowa and Chandradhar Baruah.

Among them Lakshminath Bezbaruah's plays can be divided into four categories, viz. comic, light social play, Puranic and historical. His comedies are *Litikai*, *Nomal*, *Panchani* and *Chikarpati-Nikarpati*. His second category of plays has two plays- *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* and *Bezbaruah Betal Sastha Binsati* while the only Puranic play by him is *Devajani*.

On the other hand the historical plays are- *Chakradhwaj Singha*, *Belimaar*, *Joymati Konwari* and *Gadadhar Raja*. In the comic plays the playwright has taken help of tales and presented them dramatically in his distinctive style. His objective in them was not to be didactic but to provide the audience with pure laughter. In this context Basanta Kumar Sarma mentions that, “Bezbaruah also sports with human follies, not with crimes. His humour, though low, is genial and the touch of satire is incidental.”¹²⁰

His light social plays deal with the portrayal of the harsh realities of life in rural areas of Assam in a lighter vein. On the other hand, in the historical plays the dramatist has presented a true reflection of important phases of the history of Assam.

The playwright that followed him was Padma Nath Gohain Baruah who wrote plays that appeared between 1897 and 1933. They were- *Gaonburha*, *Joymati*, *Gadadhar*, *Tetun Tamuli*, *Sadhani*, *Lachit Borphukan*, *Bhoot Ne Bhram* and *Banaraja*. The *Gaonburha* is social play presented through comic elements. It depicts what happened to the ordinary local people under the rule of the Briktish. *Tetun Tamuli* is written in the shadow of a popular story while *Bhoot Ne Bhram* is a play aimed at creation of awareness about various evils prevalent in the society. The other plays except *Banaraja* are traditional historical plays.

The other notable figure was Durga Prasad Majinder Baruah wrote four plays independently while the fifth was co-written with Benudhar Rajkhowa. His independent plays were- *Mahari*, *Negro*, *Brishaketu* and *Guru-Dakshina* while his *Kaliyug* was a joint attempt. The *Mahari* is a comic play about the funny situations that young boy faces because of the lack of English language when he comes to work as a supervisor. Although the script of the play *Negro* is not available yet it is learnt that the play was also a farce about an Assamese gentlemen who having western education begins to look down upon his own people even his own wife. The *Brishaketu* is a Puranic play while *Guru Dakshina* presents the wonders of Lord Krishna.

Benudhar Rajkhowa is another very significant playwright of the time who brought out his plays within the period from 1894 to 1932. The plays of Rajkhowa are-

¹²⁰ Sarma, B. (1998). *The Evolution of Assamese Comedy*. Guwahati: Gurukul Prakashan, p. 241.

Seuti Kiran, Duryodhanar Urubhanga, Darbaar, Kuri Satikar Sabhyata, Dakhyyagga, Yamapuri, Tini Ghoini. Chorar Sristi and Tuponir Parinam. Of all the plays the most important one is *Sueti Kiron*. It broke the stillness that set in for more than two decades of social play of serious note after *Ram Navami* first appeared on the scene. The play has made a mark in the history of Assamese drama. The other plays, either social, comic or Puranic, do not display the same excellence as the *Seuti Kiran*.

The last of the five key playwrights was Chandra Dhar Baruah who had mainly written historical and Puranic plays. His two historical plays titled *Mughal Vijay* and *Ahom Snadhya*, though written in 1936 posthumously published much later in 1975, were based on the battle of Saraighat between the forces of the Ahoms and the Mughals and the Moamariya rebellion respectively. Chandradhar Baruah's other plays are *Meghanad Vadha, Tilottama Sambhava, Bhagya Parikshya* and *Rajarshee*. Apart from the *Bhagya Parikshya* which is based on an Arabian story, the stories for the rest of the plays have been adopted from the Puranas.

The establishment of the permanent stages at various places in Assam also played a part in the growth and development of theatre. Permanent stages in Tezpur (The *Ban Stage*, 1901), at Barpeta (1905), in Nagaon (1902), at Azara (1904), in Tinisukia (1914), in Guwahati (*Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir*, 1915), in Lakhimpur (1920), in Nalbari (1921) and at few other places created an environment for the growth of theatre in Assam.

Among the playwrights who had made a deep impact on the growth and development of theatre in Assam, Padmadhar Chaliha is a noteworthy one. Some of the important plays by him are – *Nimantran, Amal Lila, Kene Moja* and *Ronpure Kotha Koy* – all written between 1917 and 1956. Another equally important dramatist of the period was Mitradhev Mahanta Adhikar. With plays like *Kukuri Konar Athmongola* and *Biya Biporjyoi* Mitradhev Mahanta created a niche for himself in Assamese drama as a comedy playwright. Few of the notable plays by him are- *Eta Surot, Boidehi Biyog, Swarga Ne Martya, Charan Dhuli Niboka Raja, Tengar-Bhengar, Sensa Jor, Osin Kathor Ghora* , etc. Apart from the great number of published plays he has more than thirty plays that have remained unpublished.

The playwright who initiated a fresh approach to Assamese theatre and enriched it with a new life was Atul Chandra Hazarika. Having witnessed the enormous influence of Bengali drama on the contemporary Assamese theatre he intended to bring in a new movement into it through the infusion of traditional Assamese elements with those of the modern. In this respect he had chosen for himself the historical and the Puranic plays. Among the important works in the category of Puranic plays are- *Data Karna*, *Narakasur*, *Nanda Dulala*, *Beula*, *Sri Ramchandra*, *Nirjatita*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Champavati*, *Sabitri* and *Shakuntala*. On the other hand his notable historical plays are- *Matri Pujat Momai Bali*, *Kuranganayani*, *Kanauj Konwari*, *Chattrapati Sivaji*, *Tikendrajit*, etc. In addition to these he has left behind him more forty plays of various subject matters which have made him one of the most revered theatre personalities in the history of Assamese theatre. In this context Birinchi K Baruah observes that, "Atul Hazrika wrote dramas to meet the demand of the Assamese stage which before he started writing had been practically monopolized by the dramas of the Bengali playwrights, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Dwijendralal Roy. Atul Hazarika liquidated this dependence once and for all and his success inspired numerous writers for the Assamese stage." ¹²¹

Along with Hazarika there were few other playwrights who also tried to give Assamese theatre a fresh character through their works. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan and Lakhikanta Dutta were two such talents engaged in this direction. The former of the two contributed with his historical plays such as *Jerengar Sati*, *Badan Borphukan*, *Chandrakanta Singha*, *Bidrohi Moran*, etc. while the latter enriched theatre with his social and historical plays- *Manomati*, *Sansar Chitra* or *Muktir Abhijan*.

Among the pioneers who have given Assamese theatre its enduring existence and a unique identity in the space of world theatre Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was one only next to Srimanta Sankardeva. It is indeed true that there had been attempts at various points of time by different playwrights to provide Assamese theatre with its own identity. But, none have been more successful than Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in infusing true Assamese characteristics into its theatre. His effort of revamping Assamese theatre was not limited

¹²¹ Baruah, B. K. (1964). *History of Assamese Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 158.

to dialogue, songs or stories alone but to affect an overhaul of the entire process of theatre art. As a result of such endeavour even a Puranic story of Usha and Aniruddha seemed new with the incorporation of local elements that are close to the tradition and culture of the people. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, both a pre and post-independent cultural activist, was able to cast an enormous influence on the subsequent writers and artists who looked up to him for guidance and spirit. The plays of Agarwala are- *Sonit Konwari* (1921), *Rupalim* (1936), *Karengor Ligiri* (1937), *Labhita* (1947), *Nimati Koina* (1964), *Sonpakhili*, *Khanikar*, *Kanaklata* and *Sundar Konwar*. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala had to fight against a lot of challenges while trying to bring a new lease of hope to Assamese theatre. He even had to struggle hard to get rid of the Bengali songs that dominated the stage of the day and replace them with the traditional marriage songs, lullabies or *bihu songs*. Trained on film making in the West, Agarwala could finely integrate both traditional and foreign elements to make the art form new and more attractive. The Puranic, historical, social and fictional plays discovered a new direction in the able hands of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and the Assamese theatre due to his contributions could occupy a higher position at the world stage.

Although in this part, discussion has been carried out on the drama of the pre-independence period yet some liberty must be taken while considering the plays and the playwrights who fall in between the pre-independence and post-independence stage. Accordingly, apart from Jyoti Prasad Agarwala there were a few more playwrights who need mention for their contributions. The prominent among them are Kirtinath Bordoloi and Muktinath Bordoloi who together composed *Basantir Abhisekh*, *Luit Konwar*, *Sur Vijay*, *Meghawali*, etc.; Daiva Chandra Talukdar, Prasannalal Choudhury, Ananda Chandra Baruah and Kamalananda Bhattacharya. Dandinath Kalita, too, presented several plays meant for the *Ban Stage* of Tezpur. Some of the notable offerings of Kalita comprise of – *Satir Tez*, *Agni Pariksha*, *Muktir Abhijan*, *Pohaniya Kukur*, *Parachit*, *kichaka Vadha*, etc. Except the *Agni Pariksha* the other plays are built around social issues of the contemporary times. In the same manner Lakshminath Sarma wrote *Shrinkhal*, *Bichar*, *Kabir Jivan*, *Hridayar Mulya*, *Atma Sanman*, *Prajapatir Bhool*, etc.

It is evident from the discussion that modern theatre in Assam grew simultaneously with the entry of the British on its soil. Its growth and development was

due to the interest shown by the educated Assamese youths who had come under the western influence during their stay in the erstwhile Calcutta. But, the most striking feature of the theatre of this period is that in spite of being under the shadow of a foreign rule where restrictions were widespread, it could still display its strength through artistic expressions and establish its own identity independent of outside influences.

Assamese theatre in the Post-Independence Period

Although the social plays in Assamese theatre stage emerged in its early phase of development yet its real significance was realized only after India had won its freedom. The devastation caused by the World War II, the freedom struggle of 1942, the decay of moral ideals and age-old traditional values, the rising economic disparity among sections of people, corruption, etc. noted following independence had created complicated situation. Under such difficult circumstances the dramatists of the times adopted a realistic attitude towards the phenomenon of the world. It resulted in the replacement of the old traditions of Puranic and historical plays with the modern ones written on social problems that affected the people of the times.

Along with the subject matters of the plays there was a simultaneous transformation in the style of the plays as well. Till the independence of India the playwrights had been following the Shakespearean style of playwriting- its romantic luxury, the combination of serious and lighter moods, the five acts division, the soliloquies and asides- all added exclusive dimension to the earlier plays. But due to the problems that surfaced in the post-independence period, particularly economic and class-discriminations, the playwrights had to give up the Shakespearean approach and adopt the more accommodative ones introduced by greats like Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello, Yeats or Eliot of the later 19th century. They further looked up to the philosophies, ideas and works of people like Jean Paul Sartre, Camus, Edward Albee, Ionesco and Beckett for inspiration and guidance to tackle the new and demanding situation of the twentieth century. As a result, Assamese drama of the post-independence period is noticed to have a variety in it.

Likewise the changes that occurred in the fields of subject matter and style of presentation in the new era, there were obvious modifications in the other departments of theatre such as the stage design, lighting, sound, etc. as well.

The post-independence era is noted for the growth of the more concrete form of social plays but at the same time a number of historical plays were produced during this phase also albeit with a lot of transformations in the sphere of subject matters and style. Some of the notable plays that emerged in this category are- *Maniram Dewan* (1948) and *Lachit Borphukan* (1948) by Prabin Phukan, *Piyoloi Phukan* (1948) by Nagaon Natya Samaj, *Kushal Konwar* (1949) by Surendra Nath Saikia, *Rajdrohi* (1956) by Abdul Malik, *Tikendrajit* (1956) by Atul Chandra Hazarika, *Jerengar Sati* (1962) by Uttam Baruah, *Bhogjara* (1978) by Phani Sarma, *Gomdhar Konwar* (1984) by Suren Bhagawati, *Nangal Mati Aru Manuh* (1987) by Paramananda Rajbongshi, etc. In all these plays the playwrights attempt to reconstruct the historical events to comment on the contemporary scenario in the society. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Labhita* (1948) also occupies an important place in the history of post-independent Assamese theatre. The play is set against the background of India's freedom struggle, the traumas of the World War II and also the mass movement of 1942.

The majority of the Assamese plays in the post-independent era were based on subjects that closely reflected the contemporary social reality. The public was disillusioned with the freedom earned through uncountable sacrifices. The highly optimistic masses were deprived of the economic freedom and the ever growing social discriminations further disappointed them to the extent that it consequently drove them to rebel against the established traditions of the society. Caught up in this situation the playwrights also made sincere efforts to give adequate expression to the anguishes, anxieties, disappointments or anger of the general people. Some of the important plays written during the period are- *Magribor Ajaan* (1948) by Sarada Bordoloi and Krishnanada Bhattacharya; *Ashar Balichar* (1954) by Parfulla Baruah; *Interview, Pratikaar* (1955) by Amarendra Pathak; *Pahila Tarikh* (1956), *Sei Batedi* (1957), *Upahaar* (1972) by Sarada Bordoloi; *Satkar Baan* (1954); Phani Sarma's *Chiraj* (1957); *Meena Bazaar* (1958) by Girish Choudhury, *Chaturanga, Vishwarupa* (1961) by Prabin Phukan; Durgeswar Borthakur's *Ba-Marali* (1961); Lakshadhar Choudhury's *Nimila Anka* (1965); Arun Saram's

Jinti, *Urukha Ponja* (1964); Phani Talukdar's *Juye Pura Son* (1967); Prafulla Bora's *Saanko* (1968), *Suryasnan* (1967) and *Baruar Sansar* (1969), etc. Although the playwrights in most of these plays have endeavoured to follow the footsteps of Ibsen yet they have not been equally successful in adopting it the way Ibsen uses symbols to convey the deeper truths of man's life. The plays have, no doubt, raised the pertinent issues prevalent in the society but they have failed to offer any reasonable solutions to resolve those issues.

From the sixties onwards there was gradual shrinkage in the use of Ibsenian ideas in the plays of the Assamese writers.¹²² On the contrary various dramatic movements that found prominence in the literature of the West attracted the attention of these playwrights. As a result the ideas of surrealism, imagism, symbolism and expressionism were accepted as more suitable to the need of the hour by the playwrights than those of Ibsen. At the same time, the concept of Brecht's 'epic theatre' which advocates detachment between the actors and the audience also gained its momentum among the Assamese playwrights. On the other hand, the seemingly disconnected, disunited and unrealistic approach of Absurd theatre that developed after the World War II in protest against the traditional mode of play righting also became evident from the later part of the sixties only. The important Assamese plays written under the influence of Absurd theatre during the period were- Arun Sarma's *Ahaar* (1971), Basanta Saikia's *Mrigatrishna* (1973), *Manuh* (1977), *Asur*, etc.

Considering the plot divisions, lack of divisions of scenes and acts, presence of irrelevant dialogues Arun Sarma's play *Ahaar* can be easily accepted as an absurd play. In *Mrigatrishna* the subconscious thoughts and desires of a lower division clerk are expressed through a dream on the stage because of which rather than an absurd play it is sometimes classed as a psychological play only. On the other hand, in *Manuh* the playwright has symbolically used two tigers. In it the heroine is presented as constantly being chased by an invisible tiger from the beginning till the end. Noted scholar Satya Prasad Baruah has mentioned that the elements of absurd drama are quite evident in the play.¹²³

¹²² Bharali, Sailen. (1990). *Natak Aru Asomiya Natak*. Guwahati: Bani Prakash, p. 98.

¹²³ Baruah, S.P. (1983). *Natak Aru Abhinay Prasanga*. Guwahati: Granthapeeth, p. 201.

Interestingly enough, though there was sharp fall in the use of Ibsenian approach, yet it did not stop altogether and there were still some playwrights who had chosen to write plays in the same way. In this context mention may be made of Dhanchandra Das' *Prithivir Putra* (1971), Amar Pathak's *Pratihar* (1973), Jiten Sarma's *Saru Bowari* (1974), Tikendra Majumdar's *Jiwan Trishna* (1976), Haren Deka's *Indrajaal* (1983), Basanta Bhattacharya's *Grahan Mukti* (1982), Mahendra Borthakur's *Balia Hati* (1996), etc.

Just along the employment of the new theatre traditions of the West into its plays there has been a simultaneous attempt by the contemporary playwrights to present the subject matters through symbolic expression instead of the usual method of visual realism. Consequently, in place of economic crisis, issues like social injustice, discrimination, corruption, indifferent attitude etc find place in the plays. The plays that are written in this framework very often advocate the creation of a progressive society. In this respect *Nayika-Natyakar*, *Mrinal Mahi*, *Zabala* of Satya Prasad Baruah; Arun Sarma's *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya*; Himendra Borthakur's *Baagh*; Mahendra Borthakur's *Janma*; Basanta Saikia's *Asur* and *Ejan Nayakar Mrityu*; Munin Sarma's *Sabhyatar Sankat*, etc. are representative of this kind of plays. In *Naeeka-Natyakar* two women, Sashwati and Bhaswati, of opposite temperament are shown. Sashwati is a firm believer of age old traditions while the other lady wants to shape her own fate. Bhaswati, in her attempt to revolt against the male dominated society, does not hesitate to break relationship with her first husband and move on to marry another man. On the other side, Sashwati bound by her faith in the traditional ways does not dare to leave her ailing husband. Arun Sarma's *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* is a very sensitive play about a dedicated, passionate theatre artist who is much ahead of his times. He has to constantly face the negligence of a society that is blatantly indifferent to the artists and writers of the society. In Himendra Borthakur's *Baagh* a search for a new society in order to fight against the prevalent social injustice and corruption has been made. The evil forces that cause obstacles on the path to progress have been compared with ferocious tigers.

It is significant to note that from the later part of the eighties new awareness began to emerge in domain of Assamese theatre tradition. Under this situation, instead of borrowing ideas from the Western theatre traditions, the playwrights have made use of the folk-traditions and folk theatre forms and fused them to give expression to the

modern issues. The rationale behind such attempts is not only to uphold the traditional art and culture and to devise out a unique theatre tradition of its own but also to draw the attention of the general people towards theatre. In the larger perspective of the nation such attempts have been very successfully made by figures like Habib Tanvir, Girish Karnad, Ratan Thiyam, Vijay Tendulkar, etc. In Assamese theatre Arun Sarma's *Buranjir Paath* (1978), Satish Bhattacharya's *Maharaja* (1983), Ali Haider's *Dhumuha Pakhir Neer* (2008) belong to this trend. In both *Buranjir Paath* and *Maharaja* the playwrights have employed the traditional *Oja-pali* style while in *Dhumuha Pakhir Neer* the form of *Ankiyā Nāt* has been used. In continuation of the same trend Paramananda Rajbongshi in his play *Nangal, Mati Aru Manuh* has applied the *Khulia Bhaoria* form as found in the Darrand district. Similarly, other playwrights like Rafiqul Hussain, Gunakar Deva Goswami, Phani Talukdar, Munin Bhuyan, etc. have employed folk songs, dance forms, legends and tales prevalent in various places across Assam. The use of these techniques have enriched not only the theatre form in question but the very folk art forms as well which provide as models for the experimented theatre.

At present, the new generation of playwrights seem to have revolutionised the field of modern Assamese theatre through the employment of folk- art forms and folk-drama into it. Among the key persons who have shown great interest in this direction are- Baharul Islam, Gunakar Deva Goswami, Naren Patgiri, Anil Saikia, Bhupen Goswami, Jyoti Prasad Saikia, Tarun Talukdar, Dipak Mahanta, Debabrat Borthakur, Dipak Gogoi, Robijita Gogoi, Pabitra Rabha, Ajit Borthakur, etc. to name a few.

It is to be noted here that in the present time Assamese theatre is observed to have moved in two directions. One of them is the stream of theatre which is led by the amateur theatre groups while the other one is maintained by the mobile theatre groups. The mobile theatre movement which was initiated by the formation of 'Nataraj Theatre' by Achyut Lahkar in 1963 has produced a new wave in Assamese theatre. It holds its shows at different places with an aim to do business and for the purpose it stages plays that are often full of emotions and suspense by using modern technologies at disposal. On the contrary, the amateur theatre groups usually are not regular with the practice of the art form, the main reason being the lack of enough funds needed for a play. But, in spite of that these amateur theatre groups have struggled hard to introduce the

audience to new plays or trends out of their love and dedication for the medium. The prominent groups actively engaged with this form are- New Art Players, Baan Theatre, Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir, Jirsong Theatre, Chaturangam Gosthi, Nawik, Seagull, Gaantha, Kakshya, Puberun, Rangalaya, Bapuji Natya Mandir; Rang and Dapon of Barpeta; Natyapith of Sivassagar; Natyacharcha, Akhora Ghar of Dibrugarh, Acting Cademy of Chabua; Pathar of Duliajan; Padatik of Namrup , etc. The amateur theatre groups always put in their entire energy to the successful presentation of plays and are often found to carry out a lot of experimentations with various theatre forms. The amateur theatre groups have been presenting their plays not only within the state but in other parts of the country and some of them have even performed outside India. It is to be mentioned here that a large number of the plays of the new generation of playwrights have remained unpublished till date and it is hoped that if brought out it would immensely contribute to the enrichment of the Assamese theatre tradition at large.

2.6 The Mobile Theatre

The mobile theatre of Assam is a unique form of theatre which carries its own equipments that are essential for the staging of a play such as, the stage, generator for lighting, chairs and even a huge auditorium/ tent hall to places wherever it goes. With the help of these equipments the theatre troupe puts up a temporary auditorium at a particular place to present plays before an audience for a few evenings. Once the theatre shows at that place is over, the group moves on to another place to where it is invited. It is to be noted here that commercial theatre groups are active in different parts of the nation who keep on touring places to enact plays but for that purpose they are dependent on permanent stages. But, unlike them the mobile theatre of Assam does not have to depend upon such conditions as it always carries its own stage and all other required materials necessary for the presentation of a play on a stage.

The mobile theatre is greatly different from the commonly found amateur theatre type. Though the primary objective of both the types is the same i.e. to present a play before an audience yet the mobile theatre has a complete different approach to the entire practice.

Where as in amateur drama the works related to the staging of a play is done by a small group of people out of their love for the art form, with mobile theatre the whole system is run by professionals. The artists as well as the workers are paid mostly on a monthly basis to do the designated jobs. As such even if the workers have to move from place to place with all the properties there occur no difficulties in holding the shows.

For the mobile theatre group the chief objective lies in providing entertainment to the spectators. But it takes a backseat with the audience of amateur theatre as they give greater importance to reason, intellect, etc. Again, the spectators of the amateur theatre belong to a specific area only while the audience of mobile theatre includes literate and illiterate people from both rural as well as urban areas.

Again, in terms of stage pattern and other techniques also there are vast differences between these two types of drama forms. The unique aspect of the stage design for the mobile theatre is that it always has a twin stage which facilitates it to accommodate all the requisite properties for play on the stage. They can continuously present the scenes of a play without any halt. But in contrast to this, due to the provision of a single stage it becomes very difficult for the amateur theatre to present scenes without a break or pause. Moreover, it also imposes a limit on the use of certain scenes where it needs an elaborate setting for the overall effect.

The functioning of a mobile theatre

It is to be noted here that the mobile theatre groups do not present their plays throughout the year. Usually, the theatre groups stage their shows from the middle of the August to middle of the month of April. During this time frame they travel across the state to perform in places to wherever they are invited.

But prior to that they require a lot of time for preparation and rehearsals of the plays picked for a particular season. Once the shows for the current season come to an end, the theatre groups make plans for the following season and accordingly sign agreements with the artists for that season. With the increase of the popularity of mobile theatre, there has been a simultaneous enhancement of the reputation of the artists also. Towards the end of April the groups publish the names of the plays and the

accompanying artists and take every measure to advertise them. It is during this time that the organizations or institutions from various parts of the region approach the groups to invite for shows by paying some amount in advance.

The mobile theatre troupes usually have their own office and also a hall to hold the rehearsals. These halls are big enough to accommodate around seventy-eighty people. The rehearsals normally begin from the month of July and last till the middle of August. In the beginning separate practise sessions are arranged for music, dance or acting, etc. But later on during the final rehearsal sessions they are combined together to give the performance a complete shape. The artists after performing for three nights at one spot have to move on without rest to the next place for the following shows.

It is evident that in order to maintain continuous performances almost simultaneously at more than one place it is necessary for the troupes to have at least two sets of everything ready for use. As such it requires a huge investment on the part of the producer of the troupe. Usually, the auditorium of a mobile theatre has the capacity to accommodate around fifteen hundred to two thousand spectators. There are chairs and wooden galleries for the people to sit inside the hall. The stage is built with wood posts and wooden planks. The auditorium is constructed with bamboo, iron poles with tarpaulin put on the roof. The sides are covered with thick colourful and decorative screens and curtains.

A festive mood gets created every evening around the place where the shows of a mobile theatre are scheduled to be staged. As the evening sets in, the colourful lights fixed around the auditorium are switched on and the audience begins to enter the hall after getting tickets from the designated counters. Inside, the seats are segregated into various classes according to the rates of the ticket. When the bell rings to mark the beginning of the show the colourful screen put in front of the stage is removed. At the same time the lights inside the hall are dimmed and melodious musical tune is played. It is followed by a short musical drama after which the main play begins. Earlier there was a provision for a tiny break in between the events of a play. But from the middle of the eighties the practice has been stopped. Today, a short pause is taken just ahead of the

last scene of the play. It is used to announce the play and the musical drama which would be presented on the stage the following evening.

A brief note on the growth of Mobile Theatre in Assam

Though the mobile theatre of Assam is primarily a form of modern drama it has an indispensable linkage with the traditional Yatra of Bengal. It is difficult to ascertain form when the Yatra theatre entered Assam but based on the historical facts it is perceived to have come to Assam along with the British in early 19th century. After the occupation of Assam by the British there was a great import of Bengali people to assist with the administrative works. These people later on invited some Yatra troupes to perform during festivals such as Durga Puja or Kali Puja. These troupes would come for such performances and return home. It was natural for the people of that period to have a kind of special attraction towards performances of this kind. Among the important Yatra troupes that came to Assam were Natta Company, Bholanath Opera or Sailabala, etc. which later on played the roles of model for the development of Yatra troupes in Assam itself. As a result of efforts in this sphere during the period of 1868-78 Jaidev Sharma of Kamrup district formed a Yatra troupe. It was followed by a host of other such troupes like Assam Kohinoor Opera Party, Rampur Yatra Party, Binapani Yatra Natya Sangha, Hajo Natya Kala Kendra, Kohinoor Opera Party, Sanjibani Opera Party, etc. These Yatra troupes in the beginning of their formation presented acts that were written in Bengali language. However, later on the plays were presented in Assamese language as they were translated in to Assamese language.

The first Assamese play to be presented in the form of Yatra theatre was *Nal Damayanti* written by Dhaneswar Sharma. Dr. Harishchandra Bhattacharya in his book *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and the Stage* writes, "During about 1870-1900 AD two Assamese brothers named Katiya and Ahina hailing from the Kamakhya Hills, formed a yatra troupe and begun to exhibit some performances here and there. A similar one, Garga Ostad, Radha Satola... performed manuscript dramas translated from Bengali."¹²⁴ In 1888 Bhogiram Kakati of Pathsala formed Bhaluki Yatra

¹²⁴ Bhattacharya, Harishchandra. (1964). *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and the Stage*. Gauhati: Barua Agency, p.70.

Party and presented a number of plays on the stage. In a similar manner few other Yatra troupes like *Bamiunkusi Yatra Party* (1908), *Helna Yatra Party* (1916) and *Pathsala Theatre Party* (1923) were formed. The last of three mentioned here later on changed its name to *Pathsala Natya Samity* and presented plays at various places of Kamrup with the help of its own tent, stage and other equipments that were carried on bullock-carts.

It was, however, Brajanath Sarma who in 1921 started *Sila Salika Opera Party* that in the beginning performed of certain functions like marriage parties or Puja celebrations, etc. It is to be noted here that Brajanath Sarma himself adopted acting as profession and he even paid the actors of the party salaries on monthly basis. But, he did not remain in that group for long and in 1930 he joined *Assam Kahinoor Opera Party*. With plays like *Veda Uddhar*, *Kalapahar*, *Hindubeer*, *Bijay Basanta*, etc. this troupe marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Assamese theatre. These plays replaced the tradition of presenting translated Bengali plays with plays original Assamese plays and at the same time begun the tradition of holding the performance for about three hours instead of the whole night. The *Kahinoor Opera Party* brought revolutionary changes in the field of acting as for the first time female actors were included in the troupe and in 1933 the first play with co-acting was presented in Doomdooma. The *Kahinoor Opera Party* under the leadership of Brajanath Sarma was the first completely professional mobile theatre party of Assam and for the same reason he is regarded as the pioneer of mobile theatre in Assam. Apart from the *Kahinoor Opera Party* there were few Yatra parties who were able to cast great influence on the development of theatre in Assam. Among them the *Govindapur Theatre* (1923), *Lakshminarayan Party* (1927), *Sri Sri Sankardev Opera* (1930), etc. were important. These Yatra Parties were formed in old Kamrup district. However, in old Goalpara district also the tradition of Yatra emerged powerfully. Some of the important troupes of Yatra that were formed in Goalpara were the Yatra troupe of Prabhat Adhikari of Dalgoma (1925), the Kadamtala Yatra Troupe (1924) under the leadership of Rajen Das, the Binapani Opera formed in Dudhnoi (1932), etc.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Hazarika, Rupkamal. "Natya Andolan aru Goalpara." *Aglati*. Souvenir, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Dudhnoi Conference, p. 172.

Although the popularity of Yatra could be perceived both in Kamrup and Goalpara district as number of troupes were formed in the two districts, yet its popularity expanded to the regions of Upper Assam also. The *All Assam Idea Dramatic Society* formed in 1936 under the initiative of Bhadra Gogoi at Naharkatiya of Dibrugarh and *All Assam Star Theatre* by Guru Prasad Borthakur at Kujibali Hanhchara of Sivasagar in 1938 contributed a lot towards the development of commercial mobile theatre in Assam.¹²⁶

It is observed that although the art of Yatra had become immensely influential across the whole of Assam yet its popularity was felt more in lower Assam than the vice-versa. Again, even though these Yatras were formed in the pattern followed in West Bengal yet many a times they had taken special shapes by including indigenous elements into it. But, towards the second half of the 19th century, Yatra theatre made efforts to accept the modern techniques and ideas by giving up certain old notions or methods because of which the line of difference between Yatra and popular theatre became very thin and blurred.

In the post-independence period permanent stages were built at various places of Assam wherein the modern educated people staged modern plays. They undermined the form of Yatra as inferior form of theatre that was participated by the people from the lower rung of the society. But, it was still the most popular source of entertainment in Assam and to cater to the popular taste of the people there emerged a few groups with the purpose to present plays in the style of Yatra.

Among these newly established theatre groups, the *Basudeva Opera Party* (1957), *Chaturbhuj Opera Party* (1955), *Nataraj Opera Party* (1959), *Suradevi Natya Sangha* (1964), etc. were the prominent ones.

It was the *Nataraj Opera Party* which opened new doors to the emerging mobile theatre in Assam. In the very first year of formation the group produced plays like *Bhaktar Ahvaan*, *Kohinoor*, *Dharmar Bali*, etc. which were directed by Chandra Choudhury and Kamala Vaishnava. The opera was pioneer in introducing a short musical dance play prior to the beginning of the main play. The theatre troupe under the

¹²⁶ Hazarika, Atul Ch. (1967). *Manchalekha*. Guwahati: Junaki Prakashan, p. 277.

leadership of Sadananda Lahkar was able to earn a lot of popularity within a very short span of time as it produced original plays written by Assamese playwrights thus resisting the trend of Yatra plays specially in the tea gardens of Assam. On 2nd October, 1963 the *Nataraj Opera* completely transformed into a full-fledged commercial mobile theatre group with the new identity of *Nataraj Theatre*. The group came up with plays like *Tikendrajit*, *Jerenger Sati*, *Beula*, *Bhogjara*, *Allah-Isvar*, *Erina*, etc. It is matter of pride for the group that its play *Beula* that was produced in the second year of its appearance ran continuously for more than fifteen consecutive years.

The success of the *Nataraj Theatre* points out to certain factors which affected the replacement of the former *Yatra* by new concept of mobile theatre. The foremost reason was economic. When the producers of the Yatra parties discovered that there was a surplus still left with them even after paying out for the members of the party, it made them feel that more money could be earned by introducing ticketed performances on a regular basis. They were convinced that if implemented professionally it would financially benefit all of them, which indeed became a reality later.

In the post-independent period there was a surge of production of modern plays on the permanent stages though it was mostly urban centric. Besides, the developments in the field of film making also made the Yatra a neglected art form and gradually became a mode of entertainment of the illiterate section of the society only. The educated people of the towns began to look down upon the Yatra and very often ridiculed it as theatre of the lower category.

Under such circumstances Sadananda Lahkar and his brother Achyut Lahkar, both from a middle class family and former Yatra artists themselves, felt the need to bring in a transformation to the traditional mode of presentation of Yatra plays. The objective behind such an intention was a threefold one. They wanted that the dying art form of Yatra is somehow kept alive and at the same time, the social prestige of the people involved in the art form remains intact and the artists are also able earn as much money required for a respectable living. For these various reasons Achyut Lahkar envisaged of a type of theatre that would be a combination of the traditional and modern and would travel from place to place to reach to the audience. As a result the formation of the

mobile theatre proved to be very successful as it provided the former Yatra artists with a common platform to come together as a unit and escape the social derisions, mockeries of other people. It also liberated them to a great extent from the penury that they had to usually go through.

Inspired by the immense success of the *Nataraj Theatre*, another theatre group named *Suradevi Theatre* at the initiative of Dharani Barman was formed in 1964. The renowned artist, revolutionary and one of the most important figures revered in Assam, Bishnu Prasad Rabha became a part of it as he was given the responsibility of directing the plays staged in the first year of its appearance. The plays presented by this theatre troupe also created a lot of sensation among the audience. Some of the important plays that the troupe produced are *Emuthi Saul*, *Dakshyayagya*, *Mahaveer*, *Lachit BorPhukan*, *Uttar Purush*, etc. This gave impetus to the movement of mobile theatre in Assam and several other groups such as *Natavani*, *Aradhana* were formed during this period. The formation of these different theatre groups created a healthy competition among the groups and at the same time redefined the status of the genre. It was accepted both by the elite class as well as the general people and with the joining up of the famous artistes of Assam like Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Gajen Baruah, Brajen Baruah, etc. with *Suradevi Theatre* there was an immediate change in the outlook of people towards theatre of this kind. People in general began to consider the form of mobile theatre not as an inferior form but rather a respectable one.

In 1968 late Karuna Majumdar of Hajo in Kamrup district formed *Purbajyoti Theatre* to which Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Phani Sarma, Bhupen Hazarika and others came and strengthened the position of mobile theatre. The *Purbajyoti Theatre* pioneered in bringing to the stage of mobile theatre plays that had direct relevance to the life of the common people. As a result of this effort instead of the prevalent costume play of mobile theatre of that period *Purbajyoti Theatre* presented social plays on the stage like *Siraj*, *Sonit Konwari*, *Saanko*, *Dabi*, etc. In 1970 Kumud Sarma produced another theatre group named *Assam Star Theatre* followed by *Rupkonwar Theatre* by producer Biren Kalita in 1971.

In 1976-77 as a result of the combined efforts of both Ratan Lahkar and Krishna Roy the *Kohinoor Theatre* was formed and after few years in 1980-81 Krishna Roy independently produced *Awahan Theatre*. Both the theatre parties produced such powerful plays that they were able to open a new door to abundant possibilities. New and extremely talented writers could showcase their abilities as playwrights. Noted writer Mahendra Borthakur appeared as playwright for the first time with his play *Simalu Chandan* which he wrote for *Awahan Theatre*. Likewise, Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia also entered the field of mobile theatre with his play *Ramdhanu*. The plays like *Soragurir Chapari* by Mahendra Borthakur, *Baghjaal* by Arun Sarma, etc. on the stage of *Kohinoor Theatre* have remained unforgettable experiences for the audiences. *Kohinoor Theatre* has been able to receive tremendous appreciation because of the presentation of a number of excellent plays such as Shakespeare's *Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, the translated adaptations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and dramatised versions of a few magnificent Assamese novels like *Ashimat Jar Herai Seema*, *Patal Bhairavi*, *Sagaraloi Bohu Dur*, *Anuradhar Desh*, etc. In 1986-87 producer Prashanta Hazarika of Mariyani started *Hengul Theatre* and brought in a change to the type of plays presented on the stage and provided the audience with a refreshed taste. It produced several highly successful plays based on the contemporary socio-cultural issues not only pertinent to the Assamese society but the societies of other places as well. Apart from the *Karengar Ligiri* by the legendary Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, one of the greatest Assamese icons, the stage of the *Hengul Theatre* also witnessed the presentation of other incredible plays like *Mukhyamantri*, *Aghat*, *Haladhiya Charaye Baodhan Khai*, etc. The plays staged in different mobile theatres helped it to grow more strongly and encourage others to join in the movement.

As a result of the development of the conducive environment the mobile theatre gradually begun to take shape as an industry as more and more theatre groups were formed at different places of Assam. The *Bhagyadevi Theatre* started by Sarat Majumdar at Maroa of Nalbari District, *Mukunda Theatre* at Makhibaha, *Binapani Theatre* at Sarthebari- all in the region of Lower Assam along with the *Jyotirupa Theatre* at Nitaipukhuri of Sivasagar district, *Srimanta Sankardev Theatre* at Kujibali Hanhchara of the same district- belonging to the Upper Assam region, together through their

numerous productions have contributed hugely towards providing quality entertainment to the audience.

The stage of mobile theatre was much benefitted by the works of the noted playwrights like Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mahendra Borthakur, Arun Sarma, etc. They introduced to the audience new subject matters based on the social, political and humanitarian issues of the contemporary society. The stage of the mobile theatre witnessed a newer range of subject matters instead of the ones resplendent with excess of emotional expressions.

Types of drama in mobile theatre

In the usual way whatever issue is dealt with in a play becomes the subject matter of it. But, for the convenience of a study it is normally categorized into four viz. *mythical or Puranic, historical, social and fictional*.

The mythical or Puranic plays are based on the stories drawn from the *Puranas* or on supernatural stories about gods and goddesses believed to have existed preceding the times of the *Purana*. Such stories are generally very well known to the people. However, playwrights very often make sincere efforts to incorporate some new elements into them while keeping the origin intact to the maximum extent. Apart from employing them to spread religious messages they are also used to focus on the human values as stressed upon by the participating gods and goddesses. The Puranic drama occupies a very significant place in the history of Assamese drama. Adoption of this type of drama has been intermittently observed in mobile theatre also.

Another important category of play is the historical play that deals with a plot adopted from some historical events or incidents. In this type also the playwright by using his imagination may bring in certain changes to the original story in order to make it more attractive and sometimes contemporary as well. Dr. S. N. Sarma, an eminent scholar, has commented that the historical drama is an artistic manifestation of a past event and human expressions. The success of such a play depends upon the ability to put

in flesh and blood and instil life into the dry skeleton of a historical incident.¹²⁷ Sometimes plays are written on the life and achievements of a particular individual whose actions have greatly influenced the larger sections of the society. The mobile theatre, since its inception, has produced plays on this front as well in addition to the other varieties of historical plays.

The third category of plays is social drama which revolves around various significant events and vital issues of the society. In a social play even the society of the past can be presented on the stage although it generally concerns itself with relevant issues born out of the reality. The principal aspect of a social play is the conflict that it portrays. The dramatist in his attempt to present the social problems phase in characters from diverse sections of the society and the conflicts that arise in the play may result either due to the differences that may be observed between these groups or could be because of the clashes between the individual and the society.

There is another set of plays which is concerned with matters that take place within a family and such plays are designated as family drama. The mobile theatre of Assam is very rich in the treatment of such stories on the stage.

The fourth category of plays is known as romantic or fictional plays since they are governed by the element of imagination. However, such plays are not altogether detached from the reality but are very much responsive to the pertinent problems of the society that they represent.

The mobile theatre groups, since its beginning, have shown its openness to accept and present different types of plays on stage. This approach of the groups in turn has always encouraged the playwrights to think of newer subjects and add to the growing popularity of mobile theatres in Assam.

Three out of the four plays which *Nataraj Theatre*, the pioneer in this field, had selected for the presentation in the very first season of its formation in 1963 were original plays excepting *Haider Ali*- a very popular play of the erstwhile Yatra theatre form. The other theatre groups like *Suradevi* and *Purbajyoti* also staged plays that had

¹²⁷ Sarma, S.N. (1991). *Asomiya Natya Sahitya*. Guwahati: Saumar Prakashan, pp. 210-11.

already became popular among the audience due to their presentation by the smaller amateur groups. But, once this reserve was exhausted there was a growing need for new plays among the theatre groups since they could not present the same plays over and over again and own the risk of losing the audience and the business as well. As such during the period of 1960-70 in order to fulfil this need the theatre groups apart from the new and original plays also relied on the plays that were part of the Yatra form. Moreover, the plays which were commercially presented on the stages of Kolkata and earned great appreciation from the audience were also adopted for the mobile theatre stage. In 1964, the *Nataraj Theatre* presented *Engaar*, a translated version of the original Bengali play *Angaar* written by noted theatre personality Utpal Dutt. Similarly in the following year also it presented another popular social play *Bandita*.

It is evident that during the initial period of its formation the mobile theatre groups by and large relied on various sources due to the paucity of original Assamese plays. They even borrowed plays that were either a part of another theatre or region. At this point the historical and Puranic plays found preference on the mobile theatre stages as they were readily available and also popular among the audience base.

However, in spite of the difficulties the scenario of the mobile theatre gradually began change. It slowly gained a market for itself where people came to enjoy a show by buying tickets. In fact, the willingness to watch a ticketed performance was introduced and made an acceptable norm among the masses by the mobile theatre groups only.

With the rise in the number of theatre groups there was a simultaneous increase of the demands for new and interesting plays capable enough to attract audience. But as has been noted there were not enough original plays in Assamese that were suitable for the stage of the mobile theatre. The theatre groups needed to keep in mind that the majority of the audience that it had belonged to the rural areas and as such the producers of the groups always wanted to cater to the taste of this section which was governed by their love for simple stories of family drama having a mix of the emotions of laughter and tears, conflicts, dance, music, dramatic dialogues, etc.

It was a time when a few Assamese playwrights were trying to write plays meant for the stage of mobile theatre. The prominent playwrights among them were Prafulla Bora (*Devajani*, *Riksaw wala*, *Angikaar*, etc.) Bhaben Baruah (*Seutir Sendoor*, *Mallika*, etc.), Rudra Choudhury (*Radha-Anuradha* adoption from the original Bengali play *Swayang Sidha*). Unfortunately, due to the lack of preservation most of the scripts of the plays of this period have been lost. But from the ones that are available it may be derived that the bulk of them are built around a love affair where the hero and the heroine have to struggle through a lot of challenges before they are united at the end. They also raise certain prominent and relevant socio-economic issues of the times.

The decade from 1980 to 1990 seems to be the brightest time for the growth and development of mobile theatre. During this period a great number troupes, whether big or small, were formed with similar objectives of practicing the art of drama and also earning money through it. The birth of these groups at once brought in the struggle for their survival. There was an undeclared competition, though purely on business terms, among the groups as each of them strived hard to stay in the competition. The rising contest among the groups led each of them to give more emphasis on the area of acting and the quality of plays so that one can outshine the other and earn greater popularity and consequently money as well.

As time passed on the attitude of the society towards mobile theatre slowly but surely transformed. Whereas the educated aristocrats of the towns undervalued the mobile theatre groups and held low in esteem the plays as similar to those that were presented by the Yatra parties of the past, the intellectual minority of the society could sense the immense potentiality of the whole phenomenon. The image of the mobile theatre groups and everything associated with it was further enhanced by the various writings published in different magazines and newspapers like *Rupkar*, *Rang ghar*, etc. Soon, the movement which started in the villages of Assam steadily spread to the towns and subsequently the people who used to underrate the theatre practice as low grade also became a part of the regular audience of it.

From the eighties the association of the renowned litterateurs of Assam with the mobile theatre groups grew stronger and it eventually brought in tremendous changes to

the entire perception about it. The rich ideas, wisdom and intellect of the writers gave mobile theatre the much needed impetus and reinforcement. The playwrights made sincere efforts to raise the contemporary socio-political and economic issues of the rapidly changing society through their plays on the stage. The prominent playwrights among them were Bhaben Baruah, Prafulla Bora, Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Ratna Ojha, Pabitra Deka, Arun Sarma, Mahendra Borthakur, Sewabrat Baruah, Hemanta Dutta Mahesh Kalita are only to name a few.

For Assam the period from 1980 to 1990 was extremely crucial. There was a lot political turmoil in the state as the famous Students' movement against foreigners that had started in 1979 picked up the momentum by 1980. At the early stage of the movement it was mostly peaceful but from 1983 it turned into a violent one that left the whole of Assam burning. The deep sense of anguish that resulted out of the awareness about the threat to the very existence of Assamese people and an equally reactive state force that inflicted indescribable atrocities or torture on the masses taking part in the protest found adequate space in the plays of the mobile theatre. Achyut Lahkar's *Duliajan* (Nataraj Theatre), Bhaben Baruah's *Swahid* (Kahinoor Theatre), Sewabrat Baruah's *Agnisikha* (Rang Ghar Theatre), etc. are such plays that were inspired by the events of those times.

Parallel to this, some theatre groups in order to kindle patriotic feeling in people produced plays that were based on the lives and activities of freedom fighters. It also included such freedom fights that took place elsewhere in the world. *Ei Matite* by Mahendra Borthakur (For Awahan Theatre), *Ajeya Vietnam* by Achyut Lahkar (Nataraj Theatre), *Kanaklata* by Bhaben Baruah (Anirban Theatre), etc. are important plays presented on the stage.

By 1985 there was a wind of change blowing in Assam. The six years long Students' movement culminated with the formation of a regional government. But the events of the recent past and also the changed political scenario had left a deep mark on the life and culture of the state. The most affected part of the society was the youths who were becoming disarranged, morally degraded, carefree and materialistic in nature. Several plays were written with these issues in the background. Mahendra Borthakur's

Baliya Hati (Kahinoor Theatre), Jiten Sarma's *Matal Ghora* (Theatre Bhagyadevi are representative of the situation.

The situation of Assam deteriorated again from 1990 with the masses getting disillusioned with the people's government and the subsequent political instabilities that resulted out of it. Far more than that, the issues of separatism and terrorism also caused great concern among people and the nation. All these found expressions on the stage. Hengul Theatre came up with *Maj Nishar Cinyor* (Mahendra Borthakur) and *Changlot Fenla* (adoption of the original novel by Parag Das by Mahendra Borthakur). Similarly, Awahan Theatre staged *Swargar Duar* (Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia) to present glimpse of such difficult times.

The plays of mobile theatre are not restricted to the portrayal of the contemporary society or the historical and Puranic plays alone. They also include plays that are written on the great and popular novels and short stories of native as well as international writers. In the late seventies two very popular novels titled *Miri Jiyori* (Rajani Kanta Bordoloi adapted by Mahesh Kalita) and *Ashimat Jar Herai Sima* (Kanchan Barua adapted by Prafulla Bora) were presented on the stages of Manchakonwar Theatre and Kahinoor Theatre respectively. These two successful plays set an example and paved the way for the other playwrights to make scripts on the notable fictional writings of great authors.

Further mention may be made of the attempts by different theatre groups in staging highly acclaimed plays by the celebrated playwrights of the world. As such many of the magnificent plays by William Shakespeare have translated and presented by various mobile theatre groups. His *Othello* (Padma Borkotoky), *Hamlet* (Mahendra Borthakur), *King Lear* (Mahendra Borthakur) have been enacted by Indradhanu Theatre, Kahinoor Theatre and Bhagyadevi Theatre. Even Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* have also been adapted into plays by the mobile theatre groups.

During the eighties the mobile theatre went through a lot of experimentations and as a result it dared to present scenes on the stage which till recent times seemed impossible to do. However, facilitated by the advanced technologies successful attempts

were made to present the Classic Indian epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The Greek epic of the *Iliad and Odyssey* was also given a dramatisation on the stage. All the three Classics were presented by the *Kahinoor Theatre*.

Not only this through the nineties both Indian and foreign movies were made into plays. By dint of the enormous technical advancement it has become possible for the mobile theatre groups to present the highly complex scenes within the limited space of the stage with ease and bring to life the characters that are otherwise very difficult to put on. They have been extremely successful in drawing huge crowd to the theatre halls due to the extraordinary sense of curiosity among the spectators. The *Kahinoor Theatre* in their play *Titanic* showed on the stage the sinking of the huge ship in the vast ocean. Similarly, *Anaconda* is yet another play where a monstrous snake is shown as realistically as it was possible. Such plays create a sensation among spectators and raise their expectations from the play.

There is yet another variety of play that traditionally forms an integral part of the practice of mobile theatre. Prior to the presentation of the main play, the mobile theatre stage, offer a musical dance drama on the stage. It is, as the type qualifies, dominated by music and dance that deals with a story. The drama is presented for about half an hour to forty five minutes.

The dialogues of the characters of such plays are delivered from the background in the manner of versified language. The actors on the stage merely lisp them and act out the play through dance movements. The subjects for these short plays are taken from all places. Earlier, old mythological stories were adopted for these types of plays. But, at present, they are framed around a contemporary modern story also. The striking aspect of these plays is that they present a long story in a very short span of time and provide ample entertainment to the audience at the same time. Moreover, they also help the audience to settle down as they enter the hall and subsequently prepare themselves to watch and enjoy the main play.

From this account it seems evident that there have been gradual changes from 1980 onwards in the kind of plays that are written for the stages of mobile theatre. The

playwrights made tremendous endeavours to liberate mobile theatre from the influence of the historical and Puranic or Mythical plays. Instead of the supernatural, surreal, religious or moral messages of the Puranic plays and the noble viewpoints of the historical plays, the plays of this period rather focussed on the life and problems of the common people as affected by the various contemporary issues. As a result of the efforts of the playwrights a stream of such plays has continued till today on the line which they initiated.

Further, it has become quite obvious from the discussion that the mobile theatre groups have not left any stone unturned to fulfil the prime objective of providing entertainment to its audience. They have constantly updated themselves in every aspect concerned. In their attempt to serve their purposes the mobile theatre groups have shown their courage to experiment with a range of plays that call for risky and complex arrangements. Nonetheless, through its variety of plays the mobile theatre has been able to cast immense influence on the life and culture of the Assamese society. Apart from serving as one of the major sources of popular entertainment it has also helped the society to be conscious of a number of relevant issues through its plays.

Factors responsible for the growth of mobile theatre in Assam

The first foremost reason for the growth of mobile theatre is the lack of permanent commercial stage in Assam. It is true that the establishment of smaller stages in the small towns and villages had greatly contributed to the development of modern Assamese theatre. But, the majority of these stages were not suitable for the purpose of presenting modern plays. The conditions of the halls with stages of the bigger towns were also not different as most of them were old and dilapidated. With this scenario in perspective it was indeed very difficult to think of building a commercially viable theatre practice. Moreover, there was an apprehension that even if better stages are constructed in the only city in Assam there would still be a lack of audience who would come to watch a ticketed show. As such the only way was to adopt the idea of mobile theatre.

During the phase of the growth of mobile theatre, the stages of the towns were occupied by the modern issue based plays. There is no denying that these plays had provided mental food to the educated audience of the towns but the ordinary and uneducated people from the rural areas always desired to enjoy a simple story since their primary objective was to get entertainment only. It was also a time when the Assamese film industry was flourishing and the films with their real life-like presentations of people, surrounding, simple stories, and provocative scenes had greatly impacted the audience and attracted them towards it. But there was a shortage of cinema halls in Assam and therefore, by and large, people were unable to go and see a movie. This, however, provided an opportunity to the mobile theatre to thrive. It could earn its popularity since it went to the doorstep of the audience instead of them going to the towns and equipped with all the elements that they wished to see, the mobile theatre could satisfy the desires of these audience.

The prevalence of the *Yatra* in the lower Assam also paved the way for the rapid growth of mobile theatre in this part. The people could now watch a very new and attractive form of theatre which had all the ingredients for entertainment in it.

In mobile theatre, like in films, even unreal things are presented as real. The stage of the mobile theatre, with the help of technologies, can show a running vehicle, a train or even an aeroplane. The audience, out of their curiosity over how such very difficult things are presented on the limited space of a stage, also become attracted to this form of theatre.

Further, the mobile theatre groups always engage the experienced and talented artists as actors and as a result the plays presented by these artists obviously turn out to be great and captivating. Many a times, the actors from the celluloid world are also employed for the purpose of acting as there is a natural fancy among people to see the actors live on the stage. It also adds to the upsurge of the interest in the public for mobile theatre.

Traditionally, mobile theatre holds shows in a tent erected in an open field and at a particular place for a few days only. But, it helps to bring in a new atmosphere of

festive mood to the entire area. The evenings around the theatre becomes an attraction itself and this atmosphere induces the public to enter the hall and get relaxation through entertainment after the day's hard work is over.

The unusual set up of watching a play under the open sky in a temporary hall provides the audience with a different sense of pleasure and it is this peculiarity that also draws the attraction of the people towards this form.

The mobile theatre, over the decades, has made tremendous progress. It has continued its steady growth due to its flexible approach to the form. The flexibility of the mobile theatre allows it to embrace new techniques, themes, trends, etc. and thereby keep up to the expectations of the audience.

In the present situation the mobile theatre has been able to grasp the attention of the audience wherein with the help of latest technologies they are able to present scenes as realistically as possible that are otherwise impossible to be enacted on the stage. However, there is always a flipside to such attempts as it is observed that sometimes in order to create a sensational scene backed up by technologies the basic story of the play is sacrificed. As a result the play fails to leave any lasting impression upon the spectators. The actual significance of a play would remain unrealised if it fails to register any deep impact on the audience by dint of its basic plot of the story sans devices.

However, in spite of certain imperfections, the mobile theatre of Assam has hugely contributed not only to the field of culture but also to the literature, society and economy of the state. There have a lot of experimentation going on for the last many years in various aspects of the form of mobile theatre itself. Newer batch of dramatists have attempted to write modern and truly original plays meant especially for the stage of mobile theatre. But, despite their attempt at bringing out something new and original, they have not given up on the core of the genre which is to provide a complete slice of pure entertainment.

Contributions of Mobile Theatre

The true identity of the mobile theatre which, since its inception, has been tirelessly and relentlessly producing plays on its stages across the state cannot be circumscribed simply as groups that deal with enactment of plays. It has, rather, immensely contributed to the art, literature, culture, society and economy of Assam. There are numerous amateur groups that have been intermittently staging plays in the various permanent halls in Assam. But, if it is about a continuous and regular theatre practice then there are none but the mobile theatre groups who have been engaged in this direction at a stretch since 1963 when *Nataraj Theatre* was first established.

It is no denial that the theatre parties have made great contribution to the Assamese literature at large. As the practice demands the theatre groups need new plays for each new season and considering the extent from which such a routine has been going on it is easy to assume that if collected the number of the plays would be massive. However, the entire range of the plays may not qualify as part of literature for various reasons but, there would still be a huge number of plays compelling enough to be included as genuine literary works that bear the marks of originality. In this context Dr. S. N. Sarma observes that the mobile theatre troupes beyond doubt have vastly contributed towards the development of the theatre movement in Assam particularly in the last one and half decade.¹²⁸ The theatre groups have introduced the audience not only to the genuinely original Assamese plays but also to the great literatures of other nations either through translation or adaptations.

Culturally too, the mobile theatre groups have done great work through its presentation of the musical dance dramas. In these short musical plays emphasis is always laid on the presentations of various dance forms not of Assam alone but of the other parts of the country and nations as well. Such attempts by the groups have always enriched the culture of Assam as it opens up doors to the cultures.

The contribution of mobile theatre to the betterment of the society is noteworthy. The institution of mobile theatre has always been people centric. It reaches

¹²⁸ Sarma, S.N. (1982). "Asomor Bhramyaman Natyagosthi Aru Janachetana." *Karani*, Annual Souvenir by Kahinoor Theatre, p. 14.

to the people. It goes to all places whether difficult terrain or convenient, set up the tents, stays for a few days and if required provides entertainment to the people and also teaches them lessons of life. The theatre troupes through their plays reveal the degradation of social values and other squalors. On the other hand they also uphold the significances of morality, ethics, unity, camaraderie, etc. that the contemporary society very much lacks. From this perspective it may safely said that the mobile theatre groups have done great services to the society to maintain social harmony among people of diverse groups.

More than any other sphere the mobile theatre has made incredible contribution to the economy of Assam. The foremost aspect of this contribution is that it has been able to ensure an economic security for the people involved in this field. There had never been any dearth of artists in Assam. But it was extremely challenging to accept art and culture as a profession as most of the artists, however famous they were, throughout their life had to live in utmost penury. It was the advent of the mobile theatre form which brought in revolutionary changes in this regard. The initiatives of the mobile theatre gave the artists the much needed belief that they can live a respectable life even by taking creative works as profession. The establishment of mobile theatre requires a good number of workers such as technicians for the arrangements of light and sound, stage design, cooks, drivers, guards, etc. apart from the actors, dancers or musicians. The theatre groups provide financial security to all of them by paying them money as monthly salaries and thereby, help them to maintain both family and profession.

The mobile theatre groups present their shows when they are invited by different organizations with a commercial purpose in mind. Very often the performances are arranged in aid of certain organizations or institutions and with the money that remains after all the expenses are met such organizations or institutions get benefitted. In this way mobile theatres have also played a significant role in the establishment of many schools, colleges, libraries, clubs or other such organizations.

In the wake of the globalization and ever growing market economy the institution of mobile theatre has also faced tremendous challenges. The mobile theatre group, in order to survive, has to struggle not against the other theatre groups but rather against

the far more powerful digital media. The constantly transforming society has brought in changes in the taste of audience also. Such change of taste among the audience is believed to be triggered by the digital media which promote cheap modes of entertainment and deprive the audience from the genuine means of entertainment.

There has been certain amount of criticism due to the unwarranted emphasis given to gain profit out of such endeavours rather than endorsing values and artistic aspects. Today, the mobile theatre groups are often criticised for bringing in pointless sensation and violence on the stage at the cost of serious work of art. But, it would be too farfetched an idea to undermine the genuine efforts of the sincere artists who have been always struggling to withstand these threats looming large over it.

The importance laid down by the theatre groups on the ostensible star artists chosen on the basis of the popularity gained from few appearances in video songs has also affected on the presentation of the plays on stage. A number of such artists join the theatre stage even without having any experience of acting live on stage ever. Consequently, the quality of plays drops and the audience feel disappointed who may never come for another show. As such the producers of the groups should make sure that the artists are chosen not on terms of cheap popularity alone.

The use of modern technology has been a boon for the mobile theatre institution. It has enabled them to achieve what was impossible earlier. But, again reckless usage of technology might work the other way round. It has always been a practice that the songs in the plays are sung live by singers who are employed for such works. They have been an indispensable part of the entire scheme of things. But of late, it is observed that the songs of a play are pre-recorded in a studio and regrettably not by the regular singers but again by star singers who do not otherwise have any association with mobile theatre. Under the circumstances the regular and not so popular singers are left with very limited scope for singing which is indeed painful for an artist. Since the famous singers are already well established both professionally as well as financially they do not require the support of the mobile theatre. On the other hand, the singers who are talented but not in the limelight need the support of the mobile theatre. To save them from further crisis

the concerned people can take adequate steps to record the same songs by the regular singers and help them to live with honour.

In spite of all the challenges the mobile theatre still holds a lot potentiality to take the theatre movement of Assam further ahead. It still has a strong audience base comprising people from all sections of the society. The tradition of mobile theatre enjoys uniqueness nowhere else to be witnessed on the same scale. Although in recent times a great number of theatre halls or stages have been built yet people are more interested to watch the performances offered by the mobile theatre groups. It apparently proves the point that there is ample scope for the genre to explore new avenues and continue serve the causes that it always has stood for.

Chapter-III

Echoes in the Nine Hills: Theatre Tradition in Manipur

3. Manipur

The state of Manipur, the 'jewelled land', is an important part of the North-Eastern region of India and has a very rich tradition of art and culture particularly in the field of music, dance and theatre. It was formerly a princely state which became a part of India on 15th October, 1949 and later on attained full statehood on 21st January, 1972. The state shares a long international boundary with Myanmar in the south-east while Indian states Nagaland falls in the north, Assam in the west and Mizoram in the south.

The people of Manipur have an inherent love for the different performing arts adorned with lyrical beauty and rhythm. In fact, they constitute the very core of life of the Manipuri people. The Manipuri theatre is the outcome of the old ritual dances and in the later phases, the product of the Vaishnava movement.

3.1 Lai-Haraoba

The dances of the ancient past were mainly animistic in nature and with the arrival of Vaishnavism the dances were tendered as medium of homage paid in the honour of Lord Siva and Parvati. However, the origin of the Manipuri theatre is always traced to native primitive fertility sect and also ancestor worship. Among the oldest forms of traditional dance-dramas of Manipur the *Lai-Haraoba* is the most important one.

Lai-Haraoba (Lai-Deity, Haraoba- festival) literally means the time when the gods and goddesses expresses their joy. The happiness of the gods is manifested through the happiness of the human beings. It represents in its totality the entire culture of Manipur. Although the dance form of *Lai-Haraoba*, after the advent of Vaishnavism, is associated with the *Rasa Lila* of Siva and Parvati, yet traditionally it is performed as a religious dance aimed at pleasing the Gods. "Dancing among the Manipuris is like an amusement and a

religious ceremony....The dances are free from sensuous characteristics.”¹²⁹ There are views that attempt to point out to confirm the antiquity of *Lai-Haraoba* to that of the *Natyasastra* and mentions that the form has its roots in the text of Bharata. The cult of Saivism is no new to the land of Manipur. “The pre-historic period of Manipur proves the wide prevalence of Saivism and Tantric cults. On many a hill tops there remains still the Siva Lingas....The Manipuri equivalent of god is Lai which is corrupted form of Linga.”¹³⁰

The tradition of *Lai-Haraoba* is participated by all members of the Manipuri society. The dance form can be preformed either both in solo as well as in group form. But when presented in a group form it is usually led by the *Maibas* and *Maibis* (High priest or High priestess of a temple). During the practice of *Lai-Haraoba* “the deity is worshipped in his own peculiar place as chief deity of the Universe without interfering at all with the claims of any other god.”¹³¹ It is strongly believed that the rituals concerning *Lai-Haraoba* should be strictly followed since wrong practices of it would bring in misfortune, disease or even death. The purpose of the celebration is to entreat the gods for blessings so that the land and the people enjoy prosperity in every aspect of life.

One of the most significant aspects of the celebration of *Lai-Haraoba* is that it explains the close relationship between god and man, and acts as a model for the others to follow. It shows the essentiality of a harmony between elements of the Universe without which things may turn out to be discordant and despicable. The movements of *Lai-Haraoba* dance also depict the same intimate relationship. As for example, the dancers while dancing raises their hands up towards the sky which symbolize the unification of the earthly and the ethereal elements

The form of *Lai-Haraoba* can be classified into three divisions though there are very minor differences between them. The first of the three is *Chakpa Haraoba*-performed in summer, includes all the rites connected with the desire to please God. The

¹²⁹ Neog, Maheswar. (1959). “Assam.” *Marg*. Vol.XIII, No.1, December, p. 9.

¹³⁰ Singh, E. Nilakanta. (1961). “Lai Haraoba.” *Marg*. Vol. XIV, No. 4, September, p. 30.

¹³¹ Hussain, Majid. (1994). *Encyclopaedia of India, Manipur*, vol.xxi. New Delhi: Rima Publishing House, p. 75.

second, *Moirang Haraoba*, which is performed in autumn, includes all the rites connected with the adventures and romantic life of Than Jing, a local deity. And the third, namely *Kanglei Haraoba*, performed in Spring, includes the rites connected with the romantic life of goddess *Pan Thoibi*, who is regarded as Parvati, the consort of Lord Siva.¹³²

The ceremony of *Lai-Haraoba* begins from the northern side of Manipur, particularly in a village called Sekmai in the month of *Phairen* that falls between the English months of February and March. The reason for starting the ceremony from the northern side is due to the belief that the local god *Koubru* resides in the north and Sekmai falls in that direction. It is further believed that there could be disasters in the villages if it is not celebrated in Sekmai village first. The festival then moves on from the northern side and ends in the villages such as Moirang which falls in the south of Manipur. The celebrations continue variably for two to ten days in different places. Although people of Manipur eagerly look forward to celebrating the ceremony whenever it is planned but due to the growing high cost involved in it *Lai-Haraoba* cannot be celebrated every year.

When the festival begins a procession is taken out either to a tank or a river with the idols of the deities and all the people from the village under the leadership of a priest and priestess to offer flowers to the water in order to invoke the spirit of the gods and goddesses. The procession is attended by musicians who play on *pena* (a single stringed instrument played like a violin) and drums in addition to the carriers of fruits, umbrellas, etc. for the deities. After the ritual of calling out the spirits of the gods is over the *Maibis* a dance in the honour of the protector gods of the four directions. At the end of this phase two pitchers are filled with water and the procession returns to the shrine. On their arrival the deities are placed in the temple on wooden throne and their hands and feet are washed. Then fruits and other items are offered to them, as mark of respect.

In the meantime, the worshippers also wash themselves and put on clean clothes. It is followed by the sprinkling of sacred water to purify and drive away the evil spirit if there is any. Then the *Maibis* begin dancing with gestures of the hands and light

¹³² Singh, M. Bira and H. Romain Singh. (2007). "Manipuri Drama and Theatre." *Indian Drama in Retrospect*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, p. 56.

movements followed by a spear dance performed by two men. The other people also take part in it believing that the spirits of the gods have arrived. The movements of the dance suggest the birth of a child and the various stages of the creation of life. It further suggests the building of a house. The dance depicts that the god (Lord Siva) comes out of the house to meet goddess Parvati and they engage in amorous gestures, dominated by the erotic sentiments interspersed with songs.¹³³ It is followed by the portrayal of both the god and goddess going to a hill to grow cotton. The performance of *Lai-Haraoba* describes through dances all the stages of growing cotton up to the weaving of clothes. The *maibis* then go into the state of trance and are believed to have attained the capacity to predict the future of individuals or the village. Later, pigs are sacrificed before the deities and different types of cooked food are offered to them.

On the next day, musicians play on their respective instruments to wake up the deities while the *maibis* once again go into the condition of trance and predict the future of the people who approach them for some kind of help in this regard. After that the deities are prayed for their blessings so that the ceremony goes over without any trouble and also for their permission to allow the villagers to present their dance and dramas. During the course of celebration plays on some legends of the kingdom are presented by the participators of *Lai-Haraoba*. On the third day of its celebrations, after the performance of a ritual called *Laibou-chongba* (a kind of dance) by the *maibas* and *maibis* and few followers, the performance of the same kind of dance along with other forms of dance and dramas by others are allowed to be organized every evening till the last but one day of *Lai-Haraoba*.

In the subsequent days till the second last day of *Lai-Haraoba* the deities are woken up every morning in the same manner. However, the pots are filled with fresh water and the deities are offered with fresh fruits also.

All the programmes organized for entertainment are stopped on the last but second day, and on the concluding day the rituals begin with the usual way of greeting the deities with music followed by offering of fruits and vegetables. The celebration of

¹³³ Singh, E. Nilakanta. (1961). "Lai Haraoba." *Marg*. Vol. XIV, No. 4, September, p. 34.

Lai-Haraoba comes to an end with a feast by the people who take part in it followed by a ritual in order to drive away the evil spirits assumed to be present during the celebration.

3.2 Rasa Lila

Among the other traditional art forms of Manipur, *Rasa Lila* occupies a very important place. The reference to *Rasa Lila* brings to mind the concept of joyous love and exploits of Lord Krishna with Radha and other Gopis at Brindaban garden.¹³⁴ It is believed that Lord Krishna showed his Rasa dance form to Karta Maharaj of Manipur and his daughter Laimalairoibi was the first to play the role of Radha at the temple of Govindji built in Imphal by Karta Maharaj.¹³⁵ It represents the form of court theatre prevalent in India. *Rasa Lila* is primarily a dance drama that is full of religious sentiments as it revolves around the mythical divine play of Lord Krishna with his *gopis* (milkmaids).

The form of *Rasa Lila* as found in Manipur emerged only in the 18th century as a result of the embracement of Hinduism by Chingthangkomba who ascended the throne in 1759 after the demise of the previous king Garibniwas in 1748. The new King changed his name to more popular Joy Singh or Bhagyachandra. Though Hinduism had already set its foot in Manipur centuries back yet it was not made the state religion till the appearance of Joy Singh. He “was a dedicated worshipper of Krishna and he again made Vaishnavism of Bengal the religion of the people. He was inspired to compose the now famous *Rasa Lila* and also set up statues of Radha and Krishna which are still worshipped in the Govindaji’s temple.”¹³⁶ In the year 1776 King Bhagyachandra built Shree Shree Govindaji temple and installed the idols of Radha and Krishna. The King desired to establish the new religion more authentically in his land and through this, to bring in a change to the way of life and attitude of people towards it. In order to achieve this purpose he tried to introduce the dance form that is believed to have found by him in his dreams and sought to produce dance-dramas representing the rejoicings of the Lord. To this end he picked up essences of the texts from chapter twenty ninth to chapter thirty third of the *Raspanchadhyaya* of Shrimad Bhagavata Purana. The first of such performances were held five days ahead of the full moon in the month of November,

¹³⁴ Bowers, Faubin. (1953). *The Dance in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 131.

¹³⁵ Devi, Ragini. (1972). *Dance of India*. N. Delhi: Banarsidass Publishers, p. 78.

¹³⁶ Singh, Ch. Manihar. (1996). *A History of Manipuri Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 110.

1779 and the *Rasa Lila* continued for five nights. It is to be noted here that King Bhagyachandra was so ardent a devotee of Lord Krishna that “he dedicated the country to the Lord while he ruled it in his name.”¹³⁷

While devising the form of *Rasa Lila* dance-drama King Bhagyachandra had to take into account the dissensions of the large number of people who were apprehensive about the impact of newly introduced Vaishnavism over their own traditional belief system. In order to sort out a passage to peace the exponent aimed at a compromise between the two different cultures. On the one hand was the traditional slow, soft yet grandeur dance movements inspired by the traditional dance form of *Lai-Haraoba* while on the other was the principles of Vaishnavism with its emphasis on the glorification of Lord Krishna through dance and songs.

The performance of *Rasa Lila* is usually held in a *mandap* or stage with four sides of it opened for the view of the audience though in the early times such performances took place in an open space. The performance involves the Guru, the Sutradhara and Gopis who with the assistance of the musicians on the drums describe the inner *gunas* or qualities of Lord Krishna. It also illuminates on the relationship of love, separation and reunion of the devotees with the Divine.

The *Rasa Lila* of Manipur has a number of varieties of the form that are presented depending upon the seasons of the year.

a) Maha Rasa

This type of *Rasa* is celebrated on the full-moon day of the month of October every year. The theme is taken from the *Rasapanchadhyayi* of Bhagavata Purana wherein the Lord Krishna appears simultaneously as many numbers of Gopis present and dances with all of them at the same time.

b) Vasanta Rasa

It is performed from the beginning of the full-moon day of the month of April and lasts till the full-moon day of the month of May. In this kind of *Lila* the story revolves

¹³⁷ Singh, Ch. Manihar. (1996). *A History of Manipuri Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 110.

around the time of celebration of the festival of Holi. The divine Lord plays holi with his gopis including Radha.

c) Kunja Rasa

In this form of *Rasa Lila* Lord Krishna is shown to have spent intimate moments with Radha as both being separated momentarily from others. It is celebrated on the full-moon day of the month of November.

d) Nitya Rasa

This particular form of Rasa can be played on any auspicious day of any month of a year except the months of April and November.

Even though these four varieties are different from one another yet there are several resemblances among them. As for example all these forms are participated by both the men and women of the society thus facilitating a more liberal platform for the women. In all these Lord Krishna disappears and reappears to dance in joy with the gopis.

e) Gopa Rasa or Gostha Rasa

The *Goparasa* or *Gostharasa* is also observed in the month of October. It deals with the story of Lord Krishna who goes into a forest along with his brother Balram and other gopas (milkmen) to make the cattle graze. But, inside the forest they meet with the demon Dhenukasura who is later killed by Balram. But the dreaded demon reappears and this time he is killed by Lord Krishna.

f) Ulukhala Rasa

Like few other Rasa forms the Ulukhala Rasa is also performed in the month of October. It usually takes up stories from the childhood of Krishna, particularly the mischievous acts such as the stealing of butter, teasing the gopis, etc.

There are again different patterns of dancing the Rasas. While one of the forms is performed by clapping hands to the beats of the accompanied music another is done by

using sticks. The music of the *Rasa Lilas* is classical in nature and is provided with the help of the *khol*, flute, cymbals, etc. In the beginning of a performance the priest chants some slokas in the honour of Sri Krishna or Govindaji. With this ritual is over “the men and women of long and arduous discipline of body, and fired by devotion to lord Krishna and Radha, perform *Rasa Lilas*. They literally dance away the fleeting witches of the night, uplifting their spectators to a mood of religious ecstasy where the space ceases to matter and the time stands still.”¹³⁸

In Manipur the *Rasa Lilais* considered very pious and holy, and the Manipuris “look to its heroine and hero, Radha and Krishna, as a personal husband or wife, intimate and private.”¹³⁹

3.3 Shumang Lila

Shumang Lila has long history in Manipuri theatre which is believed to have started as a comic skirt by the entertainers of the royalty early in the nineteenth century. The etymological meaning of the term *Shumang* refers to ‘courtyard’ and *Lila* to a play or performance. It is sometimes referred to as *Jatra* or *Jatrawali* also which points out that it must have come from Bengal to Manipur. In other words *Shumang Lila* refers to a performance or play that takes place in the courtyard. The objective of such performances in the past was to ridicule the snobbishness, the foibles and weaknesses of the nobility. Till as late as the 19th century Manipur had a system of slavery “though it was different from that of other parts of the world...many became slaves voluntarily, some for discharging a debt, and some sheer laziness.”¹⁴⁰ These slaves in their attempt to express their anguish took up the *Shumang Lila* as a means of protest. However, the masters of these slaves, interestingly, instead of showing any contempt, loved the jokes, puns, acrobatics or the other antics presented by the slaves. Today, *Shumang Lila* is accepted as popular touring theatre that is accepted by all classes, communities and categories of people.

¹³⁸ Jhaveri, Ranjana. (1961). “Rasa Lila.” *Marg*. Vol. XIV, No. 4 September, p. 39.

¹³⁹ Bowers, Faubion. (1953). *The Dance in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 131.

¹⁴⁰ Dubey, S.M. (1978). *North East India: A Sociological Study*. Delhi: Concept Publishing House, p. 62.

The history of the development of *Shumang Lila* is usually divided into three phases. The first of these phases was the one that preceded the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti, while the second covers the duration of the King up to the end of the Second World War. The last phase dates from the end of the World War second till the present times. The first of the two phases represent the state of development of *Shumang Lila* when the society was very little literate while the last one corresponds to the recent times of high literacy. The seed of this form of theatre lies in Phagi Lila which was performed during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti which was in turn a development of another important traditional theatre – Lai Haraoba. Gradually, during the rule of Maharaja Churachand (1891-1941) *Shumang Lila* further developed to present the famous Moirang Parva (1894-95), an epic story of love between Khamba and Princess Thoibi, which is regarded as the first formal *Shumang Lila* performance. It was later on followed by another very significant play on the famous story on Harischandra in 1918.

By the end of the World War II there appeared a lot of changes in terms of subject matters of *Shumang Lila*. Along with the legendary or mythological themes it began to include stories from the contemporary society as the form was flexible enough to handle a variety of issues concerning the lives of the common people. It was also the same time when the tradition of written script was introduced for the first time.

Shumang Lila is a highly evolved form of theatre, which is structured under the format of total theatre. The true essence of total theatre lies in the interweaving of many elements. These are poetry, music, dance, song, mime and pantomime. The intermingling of the epic and lyric poetry with narrative and dramatic elements, freedom from the units of time and space, emphasis on imagination, a highly stylized and choreographic poses and movements of actors, conventions of speech such as alteration of prose and verse dialogues, a stylized recitative and rhythmic mode of delivery and multiplicity of delivery patterns are also important facets of performance.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Ningomba, Narendra. *Shumang Lila in Manipur: A Traditional Performing art form of Manipur*. Unpublished thesis submitted to the Dept. of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Govt. of India. Chapter-3, P. 3.

Traditionally, *Shumang Lila* performance is held in any open space; it could be a courtyard of a house, a playground or the congregation hall of a temple dedicated to the local deities. However, in today's context such performances are presented on a raised platform to facilitate better viewing for the spectators. There is hardly any use of stage designing, heavy props, background scenery, or such other materials. Only a table with two chairs are usually kept on one side of the stage to serve the purpose of communication. The whole space meant for the performance is surrounded on all sides by audience except one passage left for the entry and exit of the actors from the stage to the assumed green room which is different from that of the ones found with other traditional theatre forms. Two poles are erected at the middle of the performing area joined at the upper ends to hang lamps or petromax and also microphones needed for a show.

However, in the modern times, particularly in the context of stage lila, with the availability of so many tools and techniques at the disposal of the people involved in the production of *Shumang Lila* it has become quite easier for them to create a naturalistic tone in the play. For example, in stage Lila a scene of evening or night can be easily created with the help of lights along with other technical supports whereas in traditional format actor/s has to create the same environment through his expressions only which indeed requires tremendous talent on the part of the performers.

Unlike the other traditional Manipuri theatre forms like *Lai-Haraoba* or *Rasa Lila*, *Shumang Lila* is entirely secular in content. It is for this reason that many consider it among the first of the secular theatre forms that emerged in India when most of the other theatre forms display or represent some inclination towards a particular religious belief. It is further different from the other traditional Manipuri theatres, in the sense that unlike the others *Shumang Lila* does not have to rely on any specific season for the presentation to take place. However, during festivals like the Holi or Durga Puja the frequencies of performances are higher than the other times of a year.

The troupe of a *Shumang Lila* usually comprises of 12-15 performers who are excellent at improvisations, crosstalk and are masters of humorous expressions. There are two kinds of *Shumang Lila*s that are based on gender- *Nupi Shumang* (*Shumang Lila*

by female artists) and *Nupa Shumang* (*Shumang Lila* by male artists). In each of the types characters opposite to their real gender identities are performed by the actors themselves. Thus, in *Nupi Shumang Lila* female actors assume the roles of male characters with as much make-up as needed to represent them truthfully. Similarly, in *Nupa Shumang Lila* also, male performers assume the roles of female characters who put on a feminine outlook augmented by make-up. Traditionally, till the 70's *Shumang Lila* performances were held at night for few hours but in the present times due to the facilities available with the people involved with the art form as well as the audience and organizers it is sometimes presented in the day time also.

With the introduction of the written script there was a decline in the art of the traditional clown. The role of the clown was absorbed into the narrative, situational and character interactions of a performance. Although there was modification of the traditional form of *Shumang Lila* yet the spirit of fun and laughter was retained by the modern dramatists. But while doing so the prominence of the clown which it enjoyed in the past got diluted to a great extent.

The art form of *Shumang Lila* has also faced the imminent threats from the ever mounting pressure of globalization. But it has still been able to keep it alive by dint of its ability to adapt to the changing situations to accommodate themes, characters relevant to it.

3.4 Manipuri Theatre in the Modern times

With the arrival of the British on the land of Manipur in the last decade of 19th century the traditional theatre forms which had for so many ages been the source of entertainment as well as knowledge began to be undermined and a new approach to theatre built on the principles of British ideas was adopted similar to the introduction of a new social order based upon the British perceptions.

In Manipur literature, art and culture were traditionally patronized by the Royal palace and the writers in order to express gratitude to the King wrote anonymously till the middle of the eighteenth century. The writers perhaps considered it their revered

duty to devote whatever they produced in the name of the King that they owed their allegiance to.

Theatre in Manipur: From the beginning till sixties

The earliest traces of Manipuri language is believed to have been found in the copper plate of Khongtakcha, King of Manipur of seven century while Manipuri literature is claimed to have existed from the twelfth century onwards. In the earliest phases of its existence a kind of hymn addressed to the King and known as *Gugri* was sung by the musicians of the Royal court. For more than five centuries from the start of it Manipuri literature continued to be produced without the writers' names put to their productions. The literature of Manipur, till the eighteenth century, was centred on mythology, legends and some history which is usually referred to as *Puya* literature.

But the entry of the British in 1891 marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Manipur as a number of major changes in the domain of social, political , cultural and even educational were brought in. The long span of the reign of Maharaja Churachand Simha who governed the land from 1891 to 1944 is considered as the era of renaissance as region of Manipur witnessed great amount of progress in various fields. During this period the first school named Johnstone Middle English School was established in Imphal in 1895. In 1926 Manipuri was introduced for the first time as language was included in the Matriculation examination conducted under Calcutta University which later on inspired many to write in their own language heralding a new beginning for the literature of Manipur. Parallel to the development of literature during the rule of Maharaj Churachand Singha, Manipur made remarkable progress in the field of culture as well. The martial art, dance and theatre in Manipur had undergone innovation and changes to be known worldwide. As far as Manipuri language is concerned it has always been the court language of Manipur having a distinctive script of its own. But unfortunately enough after the coming of the British and the Bengali Vaishnavism, the Manipuri script was gradually replaced by Bengali script. In 1935 the Manipur Sahitya Parishad was formed in order to promote Manipuri language and literature.

The theatre in Manipur had undergone drastic changes not due to the coming of the British alone but more because of the Bengali people who were brought along to do the official works under the British government. It was during this phase that Manipur had for the first time experienced the taste of proscenium theatre. Manipuri theatre, for more than two decades starting from 1902, remained close to Bengali drama. Interestingly, the modern era of Manipuri theatre began with a Bengali play entitled *Pravas Milan* that was both directed and acted by Manipuri people. It was staged in the courtyard of Sri Govindji temple, adjacent to the royal palace of Maharaj Churachand Singha. The emergence of proscenium theatre also indicated the advent of the rising western educated elite class of people from the landed gentry. This new class of people along with the deeply traditional yet open and generous class of royal palace provided the required boost for the growth and development of proscenium theatre. Theatre at this point of time was being presented on the model as found in the erstwhile Calcutta. Likewise in many parts of India, the Bengali people who had gone to Imphal as teachers and also to jobs under the British also initiated theatre in Manipur. With an objective to practice and expand the form of theatre in Manipur the Bengali community of Imphal established a dramatic society under the name *Bamacharan Mukhopadhyay Bandhav Natya Shala* in 1903.

It was followed by *Friends Dramatic Union*, another theatre group founded in 1905 by the emerging elites who had the time and resources to take up the responsibility to propagate theatre and generate interest in the new proscenium theatre. This group was formed both by Bengalis and Meities and had a stage of their own though not an auditorium.

The group came up with their first drama with a regular plot, divided into acts and proper scenes in 1905 entitled *Pagalini*. It was written in Manipuri language by Bihari Singh, a teacher in an L. P. School. The play by and large was in Manipuri language except the songs that were sung in Bengali. In the year 1910 *Victoria Club*, a cultural organization, was formed and plays were regularly presented on the stage which the group had of its own. It was participated by both the Bengalis and the Meities together. The plays were primarily taken from the repertoire of Bengali drama of Calcutta of that time and many of them were translated into Manipuri. Some of the plays that were

staged during this phase were *Bilwamangal*, *Tipu Sultan*, *Kedar Roy*, *Chandragupta*, *Savitri-Satyavan*, *Sita*, etc.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century Manipuri drama was chiefly dependent upon the adaptations and translations of plays from other languages but mainly from Bengali language. The proscenium theatre gradually replaced the traditional open type of theatre space where plays based on the religious themes adopted from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata were presented. Theatre turned into an affair that take place within encircled space with proper arrangement for seating. The long heritage of Manipuri theatre being patronized by the royal court ceased to continue anymore and it remained as part of the regular assembly of the spectators only. For long theatre activities remained limited within the town of Imphal. But even though it operated mostly within a town there were a good number of theatre halls being set up. Some of them were set up in temples while some were founded in the court-yards of rich people. Maharaja Churachand himself an ardent lover of theatre provided the necessary patronization for the growth of this form of art. He took personal interest to ensure that the art is practices right from the days of school by the children and encouraged them to come up with a play every year on the day of Saraswati Puja.

As has been mentioned earlier theatre in Manipur till 1924 were based on the plays borrowed from the Bengali dramas. However, with the inputs received from various sources the first ever original Manipuri drama titled *Narasingh* by Lairenmayum Ibungohal Simha (1895-1966) was staged in 1925 though it was written three years before in 1922. It is based on the historical figure of King *Narasingh* which deals with the grandness, the ideals of sacrifice, nobility and great achievements of the King himself. King *Narasingh* is greatly admired for his accomplishment to defeat the notorious Burmese army which entered the region and created havoc upon its people. The play marks a new beginning for the theatre in Manipur as it paved way for the other dramatist to try their hands with themes that had direct attachment to their life and culture. L. Ibungohal was followed by several dramatists like Lamabam Kamal (1900-1934) who came up with his play *Devajani*, a play based on the mythical story of Devajani and Sharmistha. The play depicts “a strong protest against the social system of the period in Manipur, the reign of Maharaj Churachand, which was a period of severe

exploitation in the name of religion. The Brahmasabha (a Congregation of Brahmins) under the patronage of the king introduced the practices of *Mangba* (pollution) and *Sengba* (purification). The ordinary people who were making even the slightest mistake were charged huge fees by the Brahmasabha for *Sengba* (purification) and the ordinary folk were groaning under oppression.”¹⁴² **(Dr. N. Das)** Sorokhaibam Lalit Singh (1893-1955) is another dramatist whose plays such as *Satikhongnang* (Sati, the Banyan Tree) and *Areppa Marup* (True Friend) contributed to a great extent towards the development of Manipuri drama. In the first of these plays he brings in the topic of *Satidah*, an ancient Indian tradition in which the wife of a man is burnt alive in the same pyre of her husband. Lalit Singh was a devout believer in Vaishnavism and one who had advocated in favour of *Satidah*. His other play is a social tragedy that is concerned with human lust and morality. In 1935 Dorendrajit Singh (1907-1944) wrote *Moirang Thoibi*, a drama based on the traditional love-story of Khamba and Thoibi. He wrote two other plays titled *Bhagyachandra* and *Kourav-Parajay*. In the former he deals with King Bhagyachandra during his exile in the Ahom Kingdom and the subsequent reclamation of his Kingdom and the installation of Shree Govindaji's image in his capital Canchipur. The latter play is about the defeat of the Kourava's in the battle of Kurukshetra as depicted in the Mahabharata. Apart from this Hijam Angahal (1892-1943) also wrote *Gouranga and Thabal-Chongbi* in the early thirties. They were followed by *Poktabi* and *Ibemma* both produced in 1939. They deal with social situations and interactions of individuals that are defined by the prevalent situations of the time. The feature that binds all these playwrights is that they were all wonderfully acquainted with the literatures of the West as well as with Bengali and Sanskrit literature. Although most of these writers had received the new Western education yet they could find out ways to focus on themes which belong to their roots and this made their plays and Manipuri theatre, in general, more popular. The audience could taste and enjoy both traditional as well as modern experiments with drama. The activities of drama had been a source of pleasure for both the performers and the audience in the thirties and forties of the 20th century. The

¹⁴² Das, Nigamananda. (2013). "Contemporary Manipuri Drama." *Indian Drama: Tradition and Transition*. (Eds) Gitli Saikia and Subrat Jyoti Neog. Jorhat: Bedakantha Publishers, p. 39.

passion and enthusiasm of the audience who would wait in a modest auditorium with minimum facilities till the end of the show, in turn, used to inspire the actors and others associated with the production to provide as much entertainment as they could. Overall, the very act of theatre of Manipur at that point of time had been a fervent feat, something that provided satisfaction to both the audience and the performers.

But this atmosphere, conducive for the growth and development of theatre in Manipur, did not last long as the Second World War began and on 10th May of 1942 Japanese planes dropped bombs on Imphal. The people of Imphal and the neighbouring region had to leave their homes and look for shelter in the distant areas. The War created a lot of havoc among the people which resulted in dramatic activities being stopped for quite some time. The situation changed only when the war was over in 1945.

During the period from 1925 to 1942 theatre movement in Manipur saw the rise in popularity only to the next of Shumang Lila. Several theatre halls established in the early thirties had greatly contributed to the growth of theatre in Manipur. Among them *Manipur Dramatic Union* (1931) which was earlier known as *Meitei Dramatic Union*, *Aryan Theatre* (1935), *Society Theatre* (1937) and *Rup Mahal* (1942) are notable ones. The concept of theatre as a commercial activity first began with the presentation of shows by *Manipur dramatic Union* as tickets were issued, large make shift proscenium arch stages were used for such performances. The period of the second quarter of the 20th century “showed the maturity of Manipuri drama with complete Manipuriness in style and form. Many other theatre organizations such as Imphal Theatre, Prabhat, Rangashree, Metropolitan, Rja Dumbra Memorial Theatre, Roxy, , etc.put up their shows, though sporadically, in Imphal and its suburbs.”¹⁴³

Meitei Dramatic Union

In the second decade of the 20th century Manipur was going through a phase of linguistic nationalism that resulted in the emergence of Manipuri drama of a kind which was more focussed on the traditional principles yet blended with modern concepts of drama. Some key Manipuri personalities including Ngangbam Shyam Kishore, the

¹⁴³ Somorendra, Arambam. (2000) *Manipuri Drama*, Indian Literature, Vol.196. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p.35

brother-in-law of the King, Sorokhaibam Lalit Singh, Chingakham Mayurdhwaja Singh and Hijam Irabot got together to establish the first proscenium theatre. Later on Khomdram Dhanachandra, the actor who played the leading role in *Narasingh* was also invited join them and in 1930 a group dedicated to the presentation of dramatic shows was formed under the name of *Metiei Dramatic Union*. The troupe came up with their first ever play titled *Sati Khongnang* written by S. Lalit. This development in Manipuri theatre is very crucial for the fact that it was the beginning from when Manipuri theatre gradually made a start to disengage itself from the influence of Bengali theatre traditions and act independently.

The formation of *Metiei Dramatic Union* also began the trend of presenting naturalistic plays on Manipuri stages. In the mean time the name of the group was changed to an all inclusive *Manipur Dramatic Union* and present dramatic performances under the new identity.

Chitrangada Natya Mandir

Another theatre group with the name *Chitrangada Natya Mandir* was formed by Hijam Angahal who was a key member of the *Meitei Dramatic Union* in 1939 after he left it. The theatre group was patronized once again by Ngangbam family with the stage for the performances being set up at the same old place. The first production from this group was *Ibemna* (Maiden) which was written by Hijam Angahal in 1939. Although both these theatre groups are located close to each other yet they used to come up with plays that are able to reflect upon the society of that time. However, the existence of *Chitrangada Natya Mandir* turned out to be a short lived one. The playhouse could not survive the War and as a result the playwrights as well as actors joined some other groups, particularly the Rupmahal Theatre.

The Manipur Dramatic Union

As has been mentioned earlier the *Manipur Dramatic Union* was previously known as *Meitei Dramatic Union*. It was located in the residence of Ngangbam Shyam Kishore, the brother-in-law of the King. But it had to be shifted from there to the nearby residence of Mayurdhwaja due to the objection of the Maharani Dhanamanjuri when the

trend of collecting money was started for the dramatic shows. She did not like the idea that money be extracted from the general people at her maternal home and she considered it below her dignity. In order to save the Queen from her own discomfiture and at the same time to continue with the ticketing system that was required to support the financial needs of the group it was shifted to the outhouse of C. Mayurdhwaja Singh before it was finally shifted to its permanent place Yaikul Police Lane. A stage was built on the top of a pond with bamboo and mud in the traditional manner. The chief architect in this regard was Irabot himself. He was also instrumental in designing the insignia of the group with two ploughs being criss-crossed suggesting the ploughing of the cultural field of Manipur for treasure.

The main idea to form the drama group was to provide the audience with better taste of the proscenium theatre. With this objective ahead of the group it tried to introduce to the stage melodramatic presentations assisted by vast numbers of characters, extension of the stage, installation of sets with painted designs and scenes. Sometimes even sets on wheels were also used during the performances. Apart from this, modern lighting techniques such as colourful, glitzy lights with variable patterns and much improved sound system were also employed to enhance the appeal. The presentation of the plays were made attractive further by the unfolding of, in a typically grand but slow paced movements, the plots of the plays.

The *Manipur Dramatic Union* was responsible for the large gathering of audience to witness the impressive productions. Due to its magnificent arrangements for the production it required a huge number of artists to work in various divisions of it. As such the troupe provided a huge platform for a lot of the artists to showcase their talents and skills.

The first play under the new dramatic union was S. Lalit Singh's play *Areppa Marup* (The Abiding Friend, 1931). It tells the story of a man named Chandra Singh who is the only son of a wealthy trader. Being raised as a pampered and school drop-out he later falls in love of a woman called Rajani and because of her demands he eventually loses all the wealth of his parents. He later moves to Guwahati in Assam and finds a job as a clerk in brick field. But even then misfortune did not spare him as he fell into

another trouble dealing with theft. In this moment of crisis he was helped by none other than Pratap, one whom he had ill-treated while they were in Imphal. Tormented by his deeds in the past and his present situation he loses his patience and jumps into the Brahmaputra no longer to be found ever. In contrast to his gradual fall from comfort to misery, his old friend Pratap rises from despaired conditions to lead a successful life due to his hard work and perseverance. The play, since it had relevance in the contemporary society of that time, had received warm acceptance by the audience.

During the same time Angahal who wrote around four plays is another is notable playwright. He wrote *Thabal Chongbi* (Moonlit Night Dance, 1931), *Nimai Sanyas* (1932), *Ibemma* (1936) and *Poktabi* (Step-mother, 1939). Although the first two of his plays unfortunately seem to have lost he is best remembered for the latter plays. "But in the plays, Angahal cannot prove his worth so much and it seems he is an ambidexter in relation only to verse narrative and the novel. The plots are contrived and the characters have not the usual froth of life as found in his other works. Perhaps he was more inclined to giving out vent to the displeasure he found in the ugly fall-out of the changing society."¹⁴⁴ In the play titled *Ibemma* the playwright deals with the tragic story of a lady who is left by her husband for another lady, though only to be recognized the fault at the end. The husband of Ibemma, Bijoy, is yet again the son of rich man who is unable to complete his studies in spite of spending a lot of money for that purpose. But, on his return from outside the state he marries an upright and honest girl, Ibemma. However, the marriage is threatened by Bijoy's association with his old love Leimaton. He deserts her to live with Leimaton and wastes his father's money on her. During the entire period of crisis Ibemma remains faithful to her husband and tolerates all the ill-treatment of him. At the end all those who wanted to harm Bijoy are put into jail and his disillusionments come to end. But before he could ask for forgiveness from his worthy wife for the all wrongs he did to her, she collapses and leaves Bijoy alone to repent for the rest of his life.

¹⁴⁴ Singh, Ch. Manihar. (1996). *A History of Manipuri Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 238.

The play gives a glimpse of Angahal's ability to employ the colloquial Manipuri language to enhance the dramatic effect of the play. But, this could not raise the intensity of it due to the weaknesses in plot and character.

The other play *Poktabi* also centres round Ibemhal, a woman who showcases her resoluteness and determination in withstanding all the hardships of life. She is married for some time to Kumar but gets separated from him because of the conspiracy her step-mother. The step-mother intended to marry her off once again to a wealthy man Lukhoi in exchange for money. But, she resists all the evil attempts of both her step-mother and Lukhoi although she had to suffer a lot before the trouble makers are punished for their deeds. Towards the later part of the play Kumar becomes aware of the constancy of Ibemhal and is about to accept her again as his wife but Ibemha rejects as she feared that her ill reputation would affect him. This play is also marked by Angahal's occasional spark of his ability to create a lively discourse and except few scenes of the play, particularly the court scenes, it lacks strong characters and plot structure.

The Manipur Dramatic Union has been performing plays for the longest time in the history of Manipuri drama. But it has faced difficult times in its journey from the beginning till present. On many occasions some of the members have left the troupe either to join other groups or to venture into a different genre of drama. One of the key figures of the group, Elangbam Jouychandra left the troupe to become a spreader of drama in rural areas while Huiem Motilal, too, in a similar way decided to leave the troupe to serve the society as a teacher and a director.

On the other hand, Hijam Irabot also left the group in order to work in the field of politics. In such circumstances it was S. Lalit Singh, who remained the guiding spirit for the Union to continue its journey with a rekindled spirit. Lalit was able to employ a greater representation of Manipuri culture including its folk tales in dramatic performances. Various factors such as the consciousness about the value of Manipuri language and art and culture gave an impetus to the introspective outlook of the workers in the field of drama in Manipur and at the same time contributed towards the emergence of folk drama and love for the things of the past. Lalit was the pioneer in

introducing traditional form of drama with the modern concepts and bring out a new identity of Manipuri theatre.

The endeavour that Lalit was consistently putting in to register Manipuri theatre with a new identity in the map of national theatre finally brought forth a positive result. The play *Haorang Leishang Saphabi* presented by Manipur Dramatic Union under the direction of Lalit was adjudged as the best drama in the All India Drama Festival organized by the Song and Drama Division of the Govt. of India in 1954.

The growth of Manipur Dramatic Union coincides with the change of content or the themes that they picked up for presentations. In the 50's also a diverse kind of themes were taken. Sometimes they were taken from the Meitei folktales, sometimes Manipuri adaptations of Bengali originals relating to mythology or religion were also considered for the plays. But by 1960's and 70's the focus was more on the issues relevant in the contemporary society. The group so far has, in different categories, produced more than 150 numbers of plays and has brought laurels to the state by winning accolades from national and international bodies.

The Aryan Theatre

The group that stands next to the Manipur Dramatic Union is the Aryan Theatre which was established in September, 1935. It was first established at the residence of Atombapu Sharma, a great Manipuri scholar and the chief patron of the group, along with the direct support of some theatre enthusiasts and educated young people. The chief objective of the group was to promote the art of theatre and Manipuri culture through theatre itself. With such objectives in view a stage was erected with bamboo and wood. The name Aryan was given to the group after Atombapu's faith in Aryan culture.

The group started with the play titled *Rezia*, a Bengali play in origin by Manmohan Roy and adopted into Manipuri by Arambam Dorendrajit Chirom as their first production. During the first few years Aryan theatre dealt with mythological or historical themes, drawn mostly from the Bengali literature and translated in to Manipuri language. With this trend in plays like *Shah Jahan* by D. L. Roy, *Debala Devi* by Nisikanta

Basu Roy, *Sri Krishna* by Aparesh Mukhopadhyay were enacted on the stage of Aryan Theatre. Although Aryan Theatre initially came up with the translated versions of Bengali plays it gave the native writers a scope to attempt at writing plays independently on themes adopted from their own tradition and culture. Consequently, in 1939 the first play, *Bhagyachandra*, of Manipuri in origin by Dorendrajit was produced on its stage.

The Aryan Theatre had become very popular from the time of its inception due to its professionalism and its attempts at bringing refinements to the art. The group had its finely built permanent theatre at Sagolband in Imphal in 1945 at a time when the region was horror of the World War II was looming large. With over 110 numbers of plays between 1935 and 1977 the Aryan Theatre has been one of the most important places where many renowned theatre personalities of Manipur had received training as students in the early fifties and had become teachers themselves in their later life. Among the key figures that can be mentioned in this context are A. Somorendra, A. Shyam Sharma and G. Ravindra Sharma.

Rupmahal Theatre Society

In the year 1943 some artists, intellectuals and social workers came together at the residence of Leishram Netrajit and formed the Rupmahal Theatre Society. It is interesting to note that the society was initially formed by six Brahmins and five Meities each group decided to perform distinctive field of work. As per the arrangement the Brahmins would look after the management aspect of the group while the Meities took up the responsibility to produce drama.

The prominent members of the group were Netrajit, the actor and director; Hawaibam Nilamani Singh, M. Bira Singh, actor and writer; and Ayekpam Shyamsunder, a playwright. All these members contributed in their own ways to make the group one of the most successful theatre groups of Manipur.

At the beginning the group did not have a theatre hall of their own and in order to stage their plays a temporary arrangements were made at the outhouse of Tonsana Sharma, a royal priest. The group came up with their first play *Ningamdaba* (Repentance), a social drama written by Netrajit. But, things turned out to be disturbing

when the Second World War began and the military took possession of the temporary theatre stage. However, when Rupmahal Theatre was forced to use another hall that was close to the Royal Palace it became a boon for the group as it helped to establish direct contact with the Royal palace which eventually came forward to patronize the group. The erstwhile King of Manipur Bodhchandra was the chief patron of the group helping it to perform their plays at different places and thereby to increase its audience base also to hone the skills of management of the people involved with the production of the same. The group was finally able to acquire a plot of land in Imphal in 1948 from the authority and subsequently built a theatre hall following the pattern of Star Theatre of Calacutta of that time.

The plays presented on stage by the Rupmahal Theatre grew to bear distinctive features of its own. Through the enactments of plays such as *Yaithing Konu*, *Sita*, *Mainu Premcha* and *Moirang Thoibi* the group developed its own style of slow, painstaking, the traditionally classical kind of acting, rich stage arrangements and thrust on the projection of delivery of dialogues, modulation of voice, the group earned a name for its craft.

One of the most successful and significant plays produced by Rupmahal Theatre was *Bir Tikendrajit*, a Manipuri patriot who fought against the British in 1891 and later on hanged by them. It was directed by M. Bira Singh and he could well portray the pride, self-believe and the aristocratic sensibility of the hero, Tikendrajit through his actors. The play was for the first time staged on 13th August, 1951, on the day when the martyr was hanged. From the very first show the play went on to become one of the most popular plays which can be gauged from the fact that by 1966 it was staged for about hundred times.

Apart from this historical play the Rupmahal Theatre focussed on presenting plays on social issues which had the potential for being commercially successful also. As part of this intent plays were staged on materialistic attitude of women, socio-political problems like the erstwhile demand for statehood and so on. Rupmahal Theatre was instrumental in creating a conducive atmosphere for artistically appropriate production of plays.

Other Prominent groups and playwrights

During this period which is commonly regarded as the golden period for Manipuri theatre a good many theatre enthusiasts came forward to engage themselves with whole hearted dedication. Among the most prominent of this period were G. C. Tongbra and S. Boramani Singh.

Gitchandra Tongbram Singha was closely associated with the Society Theatre which was able to earn a place for itself in the crowded field of Manipuri theatre. It was formed in 1937-38 as a touring theatre which produced mainly realistic plays on social issues. G. C. Tongbra was the chief playwright of the group as he wrote about 35 full length plays, almost equal number of one-act plays and around 40 radio plays. Tongbra dealt with the basic human temperaments that unfold slowly over a number of scenes. He also makes use of witty speeches to convey his ideas. Some of his plays like *Leibak Houba Andolan* (Earth-Shaking Agitation) did not go well with the establishment and as a result he had to bear the ire of the authority. With such a huge number of plays to his credit Tongbra remains one of the most gifted playwrights of Manipuri literature and also someone who could be regarded as an institution itself.

Sarangthem Boramani Singh is another playwright who had enriched the Manipuri theatre through his plays. His works are usually steeped in traditional folk and mythical themes. *Haorang Leishang Saphabi*, a masterpiece of Boramani Singh and directed by S. Lalit Singh was adjudged as the best play in the category of folk play at the National Drama Festival held in New Delhi in the year 1954. His other important plays *Tonu Laijing Lembi* (1957) and *Kege Lamja* (The Orphan of Kege, 1958) were based on the folk story of Moirang.

Another very important group that emerged in the sixties was **Theatre Mirror**. It was formed on 1st May, 1965 by a group of accomplished theatre lovers under the leadership of Wareppa Naba whose main objective was to work for the promotion of the Manipuri drama. The group has produced many successful plays which have won national and international fame and awards.

The theatre of Manipur in the post-independence phase showed tremendous progress with the writing of plays on national integration, family planning and the philosophies of Gandhi. During the late 60's when the centenary of Gandhiji was celebrated a number of plays based on the ideologies of Gandhi were produced, the notable among them are *Mangal Ado* (That Light) by G. C. Tongbra, *Meitei Khungang* (Manipuri Village) by H. Motilal, *Chingda Satpa* (Flowered in the Hills) by S. Krishnamohan. It was for the first time that Gandhi and his ideologies were considered seriously by the playwrights as well as the audience alike of Manipur.

The situation of Manipur from the 60's began to change. On the one hand, with the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) that allows the armed forces even to kill a person without being prosecuted for such killings, the armed force have the upper hand over all other institutions. On the other, the various armed opposition groups claiming for their respective communities a greater autonomy created a scenario of uncertainty as well as extreme insecurity for the common people of Manipur. The menace of growing influence of drugs, corruption at all levels brought further troubles to it. Under such circumstances, there emerged among the youths a sense of discontent against the 'Indian' governance and a desire to establish their identity and indigenous spirit. As a result of this urge, theatre in Manipur also began to undergo changes with new directors and playwrights inspired by the likes of Badal Sircar of West Bengal who tried to experiment with the existing theatre and even dared to bring in radical transformation to the medium. These new breed of theatre lovers looked for replacement of the conventional rigid, controlled presentation of expressions and feelings for a resurgent indigenous spirit to describe new images and play structures.

Within this period there emerged a few theatre groups who had a shared view of considering innovation and experimentation with the genre. The most prominent group formed in the late 60's was Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union.

Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union

The Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union was established in 1968 by a group of young theatre activists at Wangkhei Thangjam Leikai in Imphal. The formation of the group

actually marks the beginning of a renaissance of Manipuri theatre. The idea behind the group was to work on developing a theatre style which would be combination of both the traditional and modern notions of theatre. The members of the group, in an effort to innovate something new out of the available resources, adopted a dynamic approach to infuse various art forms of Manipur such as indigenous martial arts, dances of both Manipuri and Naga people, folk songs and music, etc.

The group apart from staging plays that are primarily based on folk tales or mythologies also conducts workshops on the various divisions associated with the art form. Some of the major plays that have been produced are *Devil and Mask* and *Draupadi*.

The highlight of the period is that a number of playwrights and directors took up the challenge to carry out experiments with the scripts and their styles. The young theatre enthusiasts attempted to explore what was not tried in Manipur before, whether it was related to form or content. The period also noticed an increase of desire among the young people to receive proper training in various divisions of theatre production such as acting, direction, lighting, stage decoration , etc.As a result there has been a continuous flow of artists since then to the premier theatre school-the National School of Drama, New Delhi, who have later given Manipuri theatre a distinctive identity and established it at the global stage as a home to powerful tradition.

Manipuri theatre in the Seventies

Theatre of Manipur in the seventies witnessed the influence of the Western theories about theatre affecting its stage productions. Early in the seventies N. Sri Biren wrote a short play *Khongchat* (Journey, 1970) followed shortly by *Hallakpa* (Return, 1971) and *Ani* (Two, 1971). These short plays demonstrate the tendency to echo the quest for identity, meaninglessness or absurdity found in the works of Eliot or Ionesco and Becket. The plays have appropriately portrayed the general mood of restlessness and concerns that permeated through all aspects of life in Manipur whether social, political, economy or cultural. The growing demand for statehood through agitations, the resurgence of the youth of Manipur in search for a pan-India Manipuri identity and

prevention of cultural misrepresentation, the surfacing of underground groups under the banner of the Pan Manipuri Youth League (1968) created an atmosphere when Manipuri theatre was ready for experimentation with both form and content. The change in the approach was led by the *Hallakpa*, a play dealing with existential questions under the direction of Lokendra Arambam and paved the way for development of Absurd theatre in Manipur.

Theatre of Manipur in the seventies did not remain a mode of mere entertainment but grew beyond it to become an expression of protest also. **Arambam Somorendra Singh**, a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1995, is considered to be one who had attempted for the first time to take theatre seriously deal with contemporary issues critically and rationally. His plays *Judge Sahebki Imung* (Judge Sahib's Family), *Mirang* (Cobwebs), *Hingnanaba Hingba* (To Live for the Sake of Living) and *Eigidi Cabinet Oina* (Me as Cabinet Minister) representative of the times truly reflect the painful quest for individual identity in a society which is plagued by human and social problems. His other plays *Tirtha Jatra* and *Dasha* (Misfortune) also deal with the conflict between the old and new values in a society that was undergoing tremendous changes. The play *Karbar* (Business) reveals the false impression that in the modern times money and business is everything that people should look for in life. The plays of Arambam Somorendra raise questions on the contemporary social system and at the same time initiates a process of introspection. The hero, in most of his plays, is a young man just as Mohan in *Judge Sahebki Imung*, and representative of the alienated lot who fail to act like bringer of change.

The Manipur State Kala Akademi was set up by the Government of Manipur in 1972 to promote and preserve the arts and culture of the state. The Akademi was formed to look after the activities in the field of music, dance and dramas, literature and fine arts also. The Akademi publishes books on these fields in addition to organizing workshops, conferences, festivals, etc. required for the promotion and preservation of art and culture. In 1976, the Akademi instituted the Manipur State Kala Akademi Award for the outstanding original Manipuri creative writing published within three years of the year of presentation. The Award, for the first time was given to G. C. Tongbra for his drama *Kekulopti*. In the seventies the Akademi even facilitated the visit of one the most

innovative theatre troupes of India- Badal Sircar's troupe *Satabdi*. It gave the theatre activists of Manipur an opportunity to interact with the troupe and gain new ideas out of it which later on benefitted the improvement of Manipuri theatre at large.

Heisnam Kanhailal and *Kalakshetra Manipur*

Towards the later part of the sixties the theatre in Manipur was showing signs of radical transformation due to the arrival of new ideas from the West and also from the seat of theatre movement in India- Calcutta of that time. The influence of *Intimate theatre* as practised by Richard Schechner, Grotowsky and Sircar's *Third Theatre* could be visible in the works of the new dramatists and directors who were ready to experiment with the prevalent theatre tradition.

Among these frontrunners H. Kanhailal was one who wanted to practise experimental theatre and in 1969 formed *Kalakshetra Manipur* though its regular theatre productions began only in 1972 with the staging of a short play *Tamnalai* (The Haunting Spirit). Developed a kind of theatre rooted in his own tradition Kanhailal produced a number of short plays like *Wahang Ama* (A Question), *Kabui-Keioba* (Half Man Half Tiger) , etc. These plays deal with themes of rootlessness as well as restlessness- conditions that prevailed in the late sixties and early seventies.

The faith of Padmashree Awardee Kanhailal in the alternative theatre was strengthened further by his interaction with Badal Sircar when the later visited Manipur in 1972 and staged four of his plays there. It made such an impression upon Kanhailal that he decided to go to Calcutta the next year and spent around three weeks time to receive training on Sircar's style of the art form. During his stay at Calcutta Kanhailal learnt the ways of Sircar's third theatre involving psycho-physical exercises. This helped him to improve upon his theatre art and develop a style of theatre expressed through sharper sense of image and movement. *Kalakshetra* opened up a new chapter in Manipuri theatre laden with an expression that is both modern yet traditional appealing to the global taste. The plays are focussed on the social discontent and anguish of the people of Manipur. Kanhailal headed the new movement in the recognition of the body and its language. Kahailal was instrumental in bringing in a spirit of change and revolt in

art of theatre and his insistence on the potentials of the human body as the medium of expression encouraged other theatre workers to give away the fixed methods of proscenium for a more flexible, open, physically more demanding and accurate kind of theatre.

The history of Manipur is impacted by various factors such as the enforcement Vaishnavism on the people of Manipur without the whole hearted willingness to do so, the political conflicts in the post-independence era, the negligence of land and its people by the mainland – all contributed to the feelings of anger and disappointment. His plays have been treated as the expressions of the larger mood of the society though at times criticised for being too radical.

One of the important productions was *Tamnalai* (The Haunting Spirit) which is based on the popular folk tale. In this play Chandra Kangal, a son of widow, gradually prospers after he marries a princess. From a lazy boy he was transforming into a hardworking, honest person but he had his misfortunes stored as his hopes for a better future were destroyed by few goons. When humiliated Chndra becomes so enraged that at the spur of the moment he kills the goons. The play portrays in a bleak manner the despair that emanates out various social menaces including unemployment.

His *Kabui-Keioba* is another very significant play that moves around an archetypal figure in Manipuri folklore where the necessity of sacrificing member of the society for the protection of it is shown. In the play the protagonist *Kabui-Keioba*, a predator, abducts a girl named *Thaba* on some sort of instigation by an old woman. However, at one point Tha ba is able to run away from the abductor after putting the house under fire and killing the child she had from *Kabui-Keioba*. The act of killing the child and the women's handing over the girl to the abductor are both justified by the respective characters. In the former's case the murder of the child seemed essential since she was not of pure origin and had she lived she would have brought danger to the tribe. On the other hand, the latter's action is justified on the ground that had the girl not been handed over, even if it is done through trickery, to the evil spirit, he would have caused trouble to the rest of the society.

In *Khomdon Meiroubi*, written by W. Kamini and directed by Kanhailal, is shown how the economic corruption practised by the corrupt traders and politicians affect the common people. Likewise the other plays this one is also based on a traditional folk story. It employs a traditional fold game called 'kwak kwak' to put forward its argument. It also uses the technique of personification in a scene where a rice bag played by an actor follows the instructions of the traders from outside of Manipur without paying any heed to the cries of the people in distress.

In his quest for innovative theatre practices and his effort to bring in freshness to the medium, Kanhailal experimented frequently with non-actors. Way back in 1978, he produced *Nupi Lal* (Women's War) with the help of nearly 70 women who usually do business in the local markets of Imphal. The story of the play is based on the historic *Nupi Lal* that took place twice in 1904 and 1939-40 respectively. On the both the occasions the women traders rose against the injustice caused to the Manipuri people by the British officials. These popular uprisings by the women, though lived for a very short period, have left an indelible mark upon the history of Manipur. The performance took place not on proper stage but out in the open at the campus of Janasthana Higher Secondary School. The play was divided into three parts- the first part of it is based on the traditional Lai Haraoba depicting rituals through dance and music which is fused with the next part of 'women in the bazaar' representing the hustle and bustle of a crowded market. 'The effervescence of the second part of the show was, once again, juxtaposed with militant images and episodes representing 'Women in the War.'¹⁴⁵

After the successful presentation of *Nupi Lal*, Kanhailal was inspired to carry on his experimentation with another group of people belonging to rural village called Umatheili. During his interactions with the people who were treated as outcasts and formed the poorest section of the village he had come to know of a different kind of exploitation. He learnt that the elite class of the village used to oppress the poor villagers in many ways and out of his session of listening to stories he picked up one with the title *Sanjennaha* (Cowherd). "In this acute political fable, an unemployed cowherd seeks support for a job during the ploughing season. He gets the jobs but only after he has

¹⁴⁵ Bharucha, Rustom. (1991). Politics of Indigenous Theatre: Kanhailal in Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 265, No. 11/12, p. 753.

been blackmailed, cheated and threatened by various villagers. At the close of the play, he accumulates an enormous amount of grain through payments for his work, but little by little all the grain disappears as people come forth to demand their share on one pretext of the other. At the end, the cowherd is as hungry and poor as he was before getting the job.”¹⁴⁶

It was followed by yet another venture wherein he associated himself with a small community of Christian people known as Paite tribe and collaborated with them to produce a play titled *Thanghou leh Liandou* (Thanghou and Liandou). The play was intended to point out to the youths of the state who had come under the invariable influence of the West, about their own culture and heritage and also to show how important it is to preserve them for the future. Although his approach was not approved of by the Christian missionaries as it confronted to what they were preaching yet Kanhailal was able to receive the support of the community as they had joined him even on Sundays on which they would usually go to Churches for their prayers.

But, apart from these Kanhailal has produced two other plays that are considered as more significant ones- *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*. In the first play Kanhailal has attempted to unearth the undertones of oppression through a traditional Metei grandmother’s folk tale. He chose a story which is deeply etched in the minds of the Manipuri people in order to comment on the prevalent political and cultural scenario of the state. Kanhailal uses the *Pebet* meaning a small bird that is rarely seen, possibly on the verge of extinction, therefore, precious and relates it to the traditional beliefs and cultures of Manipur that are also equally threatened by various factors and needs to be protected. The story of the play revolves around a mother Pebet who guards her family by thwarting the rapacious intentions of a Cat. Being aware of her lack of the physical strength to overpower the Cat the mother Pebet tries to dissuade the predator by flattering the Cat and lifts its ego. Through her actions the Pebet was buying time so that her children grow up to be able to protect themselves. But when they grow up in spite of her resistance to the aggressiveness of the Cat, it captures the youngest in her family. However, at the end after much tactful handling of the predator the mother is able to

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 753.

rescue the child from the clutches of the Cat. The family of the Pebet is reunited while the Cat moves away due to its defeat though temporarily.

The play, though apparently looks simple, is replete with symbolic undertones. The entire scheme of the plot is used to comment on the controversial Vaishnavisation of the people of Manipur. The play was criticised for being anti-Hindu but Kanhailal's objective was to show how cultural formations occur and certain concepts that were not part of one's culture are imposed. The fear of the Pebet is not that the Cat would kill and eat her children but rather the fear that it would convert her children into the culture of the Cat.

The second of the two most significant productions of Kanhailal was *Memoirs of Africa*. The play is based on the original poem *Africagee Wakhanda Gee* by A. Somorendra Singh. Although Kanhailal has focussed on the theme of oppression in this play as well, the vision of the oppression here is different from the one found in Pebet. *Memoirs of Africa* transcends the spatial treatment of the theme of oppression in relation to Manipur alone and presents it as something to be found everywhere. The play demonstrates the idea of survival in the face of violence to show to the world that the spirit of survival in human beings cannot be destroyed however forcefully they are put under attacks. In the play 'the predominant figures are Mi, an epic figure of humanity, who could be either male or female, nourished by two Nupis, young women embodying the deepest sources of creativity. The 'drama' of this intensely lyrical, half-hour theatre piece comes from the relentless persecution of Mi by three predatory men, the Mimanu, those who cannot be destroyed but are capable of destroying. Drawing on stereotypes of terrorists, insurgents, feudal landlords, Bruce Lee, and the 'churang-thawa' (child snatcher), the animality of the men is countered against Mi's unfailing capacity to survive their attacks.'¹⁴⁷ The play does not provide any solution to the issues it deals with. It rather affirms the fortitude of mankind and his capacity to absorb the constant assaults from different quarters.

¹⁴⁷ Bharucha, Rustom. (1991). Politics of Indigenous Theatre: Kanhailal in Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 265, No. 11/12, p. 749.

Ratan Thiyam and his Chorus Repertory Theatre

Ratan Thiyam, with a number of enormously successful plays to his credit, is often considered as synonymous with Manipuri Theatre. He is not only a pioneer theatre personality in Manipur or Northeast or India, but all over the world. His plays have been staged in more than forty cities in different countries of the world. These plays present a remarkable juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. Through the presentation of opposites and conflicts, he asserts clear message that unless the mankind resists war, halts the rat race of a frenetic existence and reverses the destruction of the planet, we live on; the fatal doomsday cannot be avoided. A staunch patriot in Thiyam voices the environmental concern, when he says, “The human race has come a long way, especially due to technological advancements, but in the course of our development, we have somehow lost touch with our emotions. The more we become advanced, the more our society is forgetting its traditions, roots and the importance of human relationship”.¹⁴⁸

Born to parents who were dancers of repute Ratan Thiyam was always drawn to the world of art and culture. In the early phase of his life Thiyam showed greater interest in literature, in particular poetry and painting. He was deeply influenced by the literary movements of the seventies when creative expression was at the peak and the whole Manipuri society was driven by the urge to find out the true Manipuri identity. Later on, he went to New Delhi and joined the premier institution of theatre studies, the National school of Drama in 1971 and passed out from there in the year 1974. Two years later he formed his own theatre group named *Chorus Repertory Theatre*. The first production under the banner of the new group was *Sanarembi Chaisra*. It initiated a new style of theatre with greater emphasis on the folk element along with a touch of humour, pageantry and spectacle. He developed his trademark feature of his dramaturgy out of his disciplined and serious method of practise of the form, execution of strong visual sense through sound, colour, etc. for which he is known throughout the world.

Ratan Thiyam worked out to bring in the concept of *Total Theatre* that subscribes to a concentrated and holistic style of theatre wherein all the members of the troupe are

¹⁴⁸ Gardner, Lyn. (2008). ‘Review of *Nine Hills, One Valley*’: *Manipur Trilogy*. Guwahati: Wordsmith Publishers. pp. 110-11.

prepared to be proficient, if not masters, in all the aspects of dramatics such as acting, dance, martial arts, stage craft, music, etc. It also demands an understanding not only of the traditional Manipuri forms of theatre but the prominent forms of theatre of other cultures and traditions as well.

The emphasis on the movements of the body as given by H. Kanhalal was put by Thiyam also since his plays are evocatively designed and the actors must work in order to exceed the limits of a character. In addition to these aspects they are required to have control over their breath and voice. In the perspective of the vital requisites which Thiyam sets before an actor it may be assumed that he prefers a kind of theatre in which expressions are portrayed through the use of human body in rhythm.

Like many other sensitive theatre lovers Thiyam is also troubled by the socio-political problems but not restricted to Manipur alone rather by those that have affected the world over. He is pained to see how the so-called hi-tech advancements of the present world have eroded the traditional system of values and culture threatening the very existence of the society. It is through his plays that he expresses his deep concerns for the overall welfare of the people and at the same time longs for some kind of spiritual emancipation. The plays of Thiyam are representative of Indian tradition coupled with universal appeal.

Among the most notable productions of Thiyam mention may be made of *Urubhanga* (1981), *Andha Yug* (1984), *Chakravyuha* (1984), *Lengshonnei* (adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*), *Karnabharam*, *Uttara Priyadarshi*, *Ritusanghar*, *Hiroshima* and the Trilogy comprising of *Wahoudok* (the Prologue), *Chinglon Mapon Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills and One Valley) and *Hey Nungshibi Prithibi* (My Earth, My Love).

After the presentation of *Sanarembi Chaisra* which is a tale of the feebleness of innocence and its exploitation, Thiyam offers another play entitled *Uchek Langmeidong* (Birds of a Crane Family, 1978). It deals with the worlds of birds and men and reveals the inherent cruelty present in human relations. In the play when the poor girl is ill-treated by the society of human beings the relief comes from a totally different corner- the world of birds. The birds, out of their sympathy, transform the girl into a bird.

But his closeness with the Classical Indian dramaturgy built on the principles of the *Natyashastra* led him to experiment with Bhasa's plays. Thiyam took up Bhasa's play *Urubhangam* which is based on Duryodhana from the Mahabharata. Thiyam was provoked to do play as he was immensely influenced by Bhasa's style of dramaturgy which many a time reversed the concepts of a hero as laid down by Bharata in his *Natyasastra*. In *Urubhangam* the traditional notions about the character of Duryodhan have been repulsed and in place of it he is presented with multiple dimensions. On the one hand, he claims to have done everything for his own people as a worthy and dutiful King even though to many his actions would seem sins. But on the other hand, the arrival of the aerial chariot to take the soul of Duryodhan to the abode of heaven indicates the purity of his soul since by tradition it is believed that the God sends the chariot to receive the souls only of those who have purity in them. Thiyam was impressed with ability of Bhasa as a dramatist who had the greatness in him to provide the altered pictures of characters that are traditionally accepted as otherwise. "Precisely as Bhasa had envisioned, Duryodhana emerges as one more wronged than he deserved to be, but subtly Ratan made his *Urubhangam* look a tragedy of three generations- physically and spiritually blind Dhritarashtra, arrogant Duryodhana and his inexperienced son, Durajaya." ¹⁴⁹

The other play that established Thiyam as a remarkable playwright and director was the much acclaimed *Chakravyuha* (The Wheel of War). The play was formed under a scheme called young directors' scheme by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi in 1984. The intention of the Akademi was to promote young theatre artists located in various parts of the country. The play was immediately received with much appreciation and it went on to win many awards including 'The Grand Fringe Award' at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 1987. He used old ritualistic dance tradition along with mime, martial arts of the region contributing to the Indian contemporary theatre a distinctive form. Using the story of Abhimanyu's (worthy son of Arjuna and Subhadra, Krishna's sister) valorous fight and death due to his ignorance of the way out of the *chakravyuha*, a tactic to trap a warrior in a battle, Thiyam sends a warning message to the people of the world about the needlessness of violence.

¹⁴⁹ Ahuja, Chaman. (2012). Manipur. *Contemporary Theatre of India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p.280.

Ratan Thiyam continues his love for the plays of Bhasa as he picks up another of his brilliant plays- *Karnabharam* (The Burden of Karna, 1989). In this play Thiyam has attempted to show how Karna is torn within for being called the son of a low caste in spite of his knowledge of the fact that he belongs to the rank of high birth. The play proves an example of the genius of Thiyam in which he produces remarkable scenes of the sun arriving in a chariot and Karna leaving this world for the heaven in another.

His other plays *Andha Yug* (The Age of Darkness, 1994), originally written by Dharamvir Bharati in 1953, and *Uttar Priyadarshi* are expressions of his anti-war stand. In the former of the two the high pitched sounds of moving chariots along with the clinging of swords, drum beats, the blowing of conches produce a kind of pulsating energy. But what strikes the audience more is terrible silence that follows the crescendo of sounds. The play, once again based on the Mahabharata, deals with darkness at various levels and concentrates on the last phase of the war at Kurukshetra where both the parties- the Pandavas and the Kauravas are at loggerheads. The characters of the play Dhritarashtra, the King who was born blind but at the same time refuses to see the truth in things happening around him; his wife Queen Gandhari who blindfolds herself in solidarity of her husband; Sanjay, the driver of Dhritarashtra, who had the extraordinary power of vision and was able to give the detailed account of the war to the King; Yuyutsu, the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra, who out of his sense for justice sided with the opponent party, the Pandavas and later criticised by the King for his inability to turn a blind eye to the wrongdoings meted out to his half-brothers and Ashwathama, the son of the teacher of both the parties involved in the war, who is blinded by half-truth and followed by revenge- all of them are blinded either physically, morally, spiritually or intellectually.

The latter drama *Uttar Priyadashi* (The Final Beatitude, 1994) is also used to comment on the futility of violence and war. Thiyam has employed as in other plays of him the traditional Manipuri arts along with Indian classical tradition. The play deals with King Ashoka's change of heart following the devastating War of Kalinga and his decision to embrace Buddhism. But prior to his complete submission King Ashoka who is also known as Priyadarshi is seen to make attempts to break away from his own evils by creating a hell for the ghosts of the defeated souls in the war and to appoint the Ghor as

the lord of the hell. The play further reveals how a group of semi-comic monks are persuaded by a gang of succubuses and are later tortured in hell. There is an indication that the situation of torture would remain for the times to come with the help of guillotine and electric chair. The underlying message of the play is what it matters most as it appeals to accept and subdue the evils that lie within us instead of allowing them to come out as external forces of evils which might bring forth greater devastation. Although the play is able to send a meaningful message to the society at large, it is sometimes criticised for being too didactic and there is little for the audience to chew hard.

It is to be noted that even though Ratan Thiyam's plays are concentrated on war or violence in general, his real objective is to highlight or advocate peace only. His *Manipur Trilogy* comprising three plays- *Wahoudok*, *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* links myth with reality.¹⁵⁰ In his foreward note to the Trilogy, eminent writer Dharendra Nath Bezbaruah comments, "Ratan Thiyam's plays present a remarkable juxtaposition of traditionalism and the demands that a remorseless technological world makes on all of us. And through his presentation of opposites and conflicts, he puts across the clear message that unless mankind resists war, halts the rat race of a frenetic existence and reverses the destruction of the only planet that we have, there is only one doom in store for us."¹⁵¹

Wahoudok (Prologue) is a play of four scenes which explicates the creation myths as per the Meitei traditional folklore and mythology. How the Universe was created out of the Void with the very first utterance of the first Word by the Almighty and this complex world continued expanding exploiting the bounty of nature and how exploitative activities of the human mortals have brought about disasters and have dragged the whole humanity into difficulties. The play is profoundly prophetic in tone and it links myth with reality.

In his next play of the Trilogy, *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi*, Thiyam employs a series of powerful images which act as reminders of some of the most dreadful events in the

¹⁵⁰ Singh, T. B. (2008). Translator's Note. *Manipur Trilogy*. Guwahati: Wordsmith Publishers, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ Bezbaruah, D. N. Foreward. . *Manipur Trilogy*. Guwahati: Wordsmith Publishers, p. 1.

history of mankind. It includes events that have occurred not only in the history of Manipur but in the whole of the world. It discusses the crises due to the wars, attacks and harmful human activities that have resulted into the degeneration of the human society. The history of Manipur is a witness of the seven year Burmese devastation, when thousands of people being tortured mercilessly were dragged away as slaves and hordes of children had been suffocated to death with the smoke of burning chilies. The Germans packed lakhs of people in concentration camps and made them starve to death. To avenge killing of their five hundred thousand people at Stalingrad, the Russian soldiers raped fifty thousand German women. In order to retaliate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the Americans dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki causing unimaginable disaster. The genocide during the Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea is also the utmost disturbing accident in human history.

In the play, seven sisters, (celestial nymphs) weave a cloth, the traditional symbol of love, peace and honour, in a loom for offering to the Almighty with a prayer to put a stop to war and bring peace to the Earth. History is personified as an old man. The nymphs assuming the shapes of birds and human incarnates fly around the world specially to see the demolished Ottoman bridge on the Neretva river built by Suleyman, the Sultan of Mostar. The image of colossal Buddha at Bamiyan, and appearance of Mother Teresa to accept the discarded baby are symbolic of man's awareness of ecological humanism, which has sustained the religion and life in this world. About the play says Ratan, it "is a poem by birth, a collage of many thoughts and a presentation of contemporary ideas without a conventional plot-a document of a restless society and its political turmoil where the sufferers are only poor people."¹⁵² (qtd by Gardner 111). Chuck Berg praises Thiyam for his minimalist staging infused with wonderful tale. He says: "Thiyam, by reframing the issues of modernization through the lens of his native culture transcends the usual polarized terms of the globalization debate by means of the poetics of Manipuri speech, music, movement and myth."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Gardner, Lyn. (2008). 'Reviews.' of *Nine Hills, One Valley: Manipur Trilogy*. Guwahati: Wordsmith Publishers. pp. 110-11.

¹⁵³ Berg, Chuck. (2006). 'Indian Show proves worldly.' *Capital Journal*, 4 Nov. Dakota. pp. 123-25.

His play entitled *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley)* refers to the glory of the culturally rich Manipur, the mystical land comprising of nine concentric ranges of hills encircling a valley. Invoking the evil spirits and propitiating them for the peace and prosperity of the denizens is a way to realize the Deep ecology. This play of three scenes presents the cultural traditions of the land in propitiating the Evil in the animist principles. The seven wise men awaking from the ominous dream, go back to slumber again to dream of the same with pressing intensity. Time is personified as a demon that brings in the Evils which need propitiation for allowing better future for humankind. In the second scene the Seven Wise men wake up again to see their dreams turned into reality. Genocide, political instability, venality, unemployment and extortion by unlawful elements have disrupted the land. So the wise men come forward to protect and save their people from the miseries. In the third scene the seven wise men call upon the celestial nymphs and the mothers to help them write a new book of knowledge drawing upon the ancient scholars, ancestors and preceptors, who have been the pillars of wisdom. The completed book contains the wisdom of freedom, peace, religion, politics, economics, human rights and responsibilities for the present times. The seven wise men leave behind the book of knowledge for the younger generation. In the epilogue the mothers relate to their children the glory of the past, the evergreen world of nature along with the unwelcome changes of the recent times. Symbolic lights are lit on the hill tops and valleys to enlighten and remind the people of their past glory.

Manipuri drama during the seventies made tremendous progress as several of the theatre groups established in this period began to produce come up with innovative and yet traditional plays. Theatre groups such as *Kalakshetra*, *Chorus* or *Aryan Theatre* brought in revolutionary changes to the Manipuri theatre and were able to secure a distinctive identity for it. They provided the young artistes all the opportunities to identify and nurture their talents and which in turn gave directors like Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam the courage to carry out experiment with the medium.

The Eighties

The journey of the groups which were founded in the preceding decade continued to produce even better works. The important works that were produced

during this phase are- the *Mahabharata Trilogy* of Ratan Thiyam, Lokendra Arambam's *Phou-oibi-langon* and *Memoirs of Africa* by Kanhailal.

The eighties also witnessed the birth of few good theatre troupes and **Manipur Ensemble** (1986) is definitely one of the most well known troupes. In this centre for arts and culture a lot eminent people work in collaboration for the promotion and preservation of Manipuri culture. It has organized workshops on theatre since its inception in 1987 and produced a number of plays like *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *Nagamandala*, *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Manipuri language; *Good Woman of Stezuan*, *Numit Kappa*, *Henjunaha*, *Changyen Manja*, *Mathanggi Yeningthada* in Mao dialect and *Hundung Khullakpigi*, *Machanupi* and *Hringthem* in Tangkhul and Anal dialect respectively. The group is also engaged with producing plays for children and students from various schools and also from different social, cultural and economic background are associated with such activities.

Some of the well known theatre personalities of Manipur who produced plays either as a playwright or director are- L. Dorendra Singh, N. Premchand. L. Dorendra Singh, an actor and a director at the same time, has been associated with many eminent theatre personalities of India as well as outside of it. He was closely associated with the Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre and played some major roles in plays like *Urubhangam*, *Chakravyuha* and *Uttar Priyadarshi*.

On the other hand, being one of the founder members of the Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union L. Dorendra Singh began to direct plays from 1989 and later on went on to win many awards for many of the plays that he directed. Some of the notable productions by him are- *Meehat* (1989), *Kao Amasung Kei* (1990), *Chaoba Nongthon Senjaba* (1991), etc.

N. Premchand is also another young director who is well known for his production *Ima Keithel* (1987) and some other memorable plays. As a director he is closely associated with the Aryan Theatre as many of the plays of this group are directed by him.

In the eighties Manipuri theatre was gradually losing its soul as people of the state were struggling to find some balance in a society that was turning more violent and pitiless. With the installation of greater repressive measures by the establishment to curb the conflicts occurring in the state and also considering the socio-political and cultural domain of Manipur it was necessary on the part of the theatre in Manipur to play a greater role in confronting the situation. The alternative theatre had already done its job and the traditional theatres were still experimenting with taking up the prevalent issues for its presentations. Under such circumstances overshadowed by the moods of agony, cruelty and vagueness theatre of Manipur internalised its experiences and showed its reluctance to face the order of the situation and whatever it did in this direction it was not open or vivid.

The Nineties and later

The period of the nineties and later also has not brought any respite to the people of Manipur in general and theatre in particular from the precarious socio-political situation. The theatre in Manipur was keeping on with the conventional type of theatre with melodramatic productions as well as with innovative experimental theatre under the guidance of stalwarts like Kanhailal, Thiyam and others. Within the space of such divisions emerged another type of theatre called *theatre of resistance* under the leadership of Lokendra Arambam.

His play, *The Stage of Blood*, which is based on Shakespeare's Macbeth made a great impression on the Manipuri stage. It was produced under the initiative of the forum for Laboratory Theatres of Manipur and International Arts, London to mark the occasion of fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence in August, 1947. Interestingly enough, the same text of Shakespeare was adopted by his father Arambam Dorendrajit, one of the earliest playwrights to have produced, a play titled *Bhagyachandra*. However, whereas the senior Arambam's play turned out to be a eulogy of the erstwhile King, Lokendra Arambam's adoption was conceived as radical contention of dissidence. Through this play Arambam not only wanted to make Shakespeare's text relevant but also to rework it in order to satisfy his urge to make politically sensitive plays. "The polemics of rewriting of Shakespeare were rooted in local and even topical politics. Its

performative praxis was entirely governed by local beliefs, rituals and practices. The environmentalist staging- in the open air, on a raft, in a lake- which subsumed the whole play was symbolic of the Meities, the indigenous tribe of Manipur.”¹⁵⁴ (51-52).

After the successful production of the play *Stage of Blood* the *Forum for Laboratory Theatre* was invited to perform at the National Festival of Plays organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi in 1999. The group went with *Awang Nong Poklamgee Nawaa*, written and directed by Lokendra Arambam himself. Likewise the previous play it also made an attempt to draw focus on violence, exploitation, corruption of the contemporary Manipur. The play further takes a dig at how the seemingly advanced and modern civilization influences the traditional societies.

Theatre activities in Manipur has always been challenging not for its locational or economic disadvantages alone but for the prevalence of violence in the land also. Unfortunately enough Somorendra Arambam had to pay a high price for raising his voice in protests against such menaces with his own life. In June, 2000 he was shot dead from close range by some miscreants in Imphal while attending a cultural function. However, the march of the Manipuri theatre has been on with newer people joining the movement. Apart from the highly acclaimed plays staged by different prestigious theatre groups across the nation and outside also the scene of Manipuri theatre has been refuelled by many new theatre personalities.

In 2001 Ratan Thiyam’s masterpiece *Chakravyuha* was staged at the Abhimanch Theatre, New Delhi on the occasion of National School of Drama’s third National Theatre Festival. In the following year Kalakshetra produced *Border*, scripted and directed by Kanhailal. The play concentrates on a perception of terror between two communities that is borne out of hatred which in turn is due to politicization rather than any other genuine cause. It emphasises on the element of possibility for a solution for the feigned conflict in love and asserts to create a new reality.

¹⁵⁴ Trivedi, Poonam. (2005). ‘Local Politics and Performative Praxis, Macbeth in India.’ *World-Wide Shakespeare: Local Appropriations in Films and Performance* (ed.) Sonia Massai. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 47-54.

Another noteworthy play entitled *Numit Kappa* was presented at the same festival under the direction of a young promising director Kshetrimayum Jugindro Singh. In the play an oppressed people under the merciless rule of a tyrant had to stand up against him in the form of revolution. The protagonist who has a long name Khuwai Nungjeng Piba Yekma Haotangla meaning the giver of people's latent or inherent spirit for destroying the enemy or the oppressor by rising up in civil war or rebellion or revolution, takes a mission against two suns responsible for the oppressions that take place alternately through day and night so that the oppressed people are rescued. The play culminates with preparation and the shooting of Tao Huiheng, the sun of nights, by the hero.

It was followed by another play titled *Bhoot Amasung Maikhum* (Devil and the Mask) presented at *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* organized by National School of Drama in 2002. It was performed by Cosmo Drama under the direction of Loitongbam Dorendra. The story of the play is based on three poems of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, a winner of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1997. The play, with a broad theme of how man has destroyed himself due to his own misdeeds, has a didactic tone. The play centres around Ei who represents a man in the shape of a dustbin wherein people throw dust and dirty things. Being in the form of a half cut coal tar drum he turns out to be carrier of all the rubbish of the world and regrets at the loss of love and innocence which he had once. He wants to worship and enjoy love, kindness and truthfulness, but is not allowed to do so by the devil that surrounds him. The more he struggles to come out of the grasp of the dirty environment, the greater the torture becomes. Whenever he tries to tell the truth the devil would stop by increasing the grip around his neck. Unable to find a way out Ei finally discovers that the real evil is within him. With all the knowledge of the world which has made Man as powerful as a tyrant King, he kills himself. Man has become hollow, dark, greedy and has lost the credibility to call himself a Man.

The Chorus Repertory produced *Ritusamharam*, a play by Poet Laureate Kalidasa under the direction of Ratan Thiyam. The play was presented in the *Natya Parva* organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi and held at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai in 2002.

In the same year Kalakshetra came up with their play *Nupi* written and directed by Kanhailal himself. The play is about the politics of sex, the subjugation and exploitation of women which have been going on for ages and also how the society seeks for a change in the outlook and looks for the emergence of female leadership. The play along with two other plays that have been produced before viz., *Draupadi* and *Izzat* form a trilogy centring on the same theme. It recounts the history of the relationship between man and woman starting from the earliest time when the law of nature defined their relationship. But as human being entered the age of civilization she was subjected to the mercy of man. The relationship between man and woman which was once defined by the rule of nature is now determined by the concepts upheld by the men.

In *Nupi* three different versions on women are presented. The first of it deals with the story of Lord Rama's desertion of his worthy wife Mother Sita. Sita is subjected to a test by fire in order to prove her chastity which she successfully passes. But even this did not satisfy Rama's sceptic mind and he at last deserts her and exiles her to the forest.

The next part revolves around Marilyn Monroe, the famous heroine of Hollywood. She was considered the ultimate symbol of beauty in women and the dream merchants of the film industry used her to make profits having left her as a prisoner of the make-believe world. But, as a normal human being or a woman in particular she too had beautiful dreams of a happy married life and of motherhood. Unfortunately enough, at the end dejected with what life brought her she commits suicide.

The last part of the play brings in the story of Dopdi constructed on the character of Draupadi of the Mahabharata. Here, Dopdi is the wife of a revolutionary, Comrade Dulna who belongs to a tribal community of Jharkhand and was fighting against the establishment for their own rights. But soon in a fake encounter he is killed by the security forces deployed by the government. The situation turns more horrible when the security forces who are supposed to protect the people of this land forcefully strip and humiliate Dopdi representing the sadistic mindset of a section of men. But, in spite of all the atrocities meted out to her, Dopdi does not lose her spirit for justness inherent in the cause for their fight.

In 2003, the play *Kunti*, written and directed by young theatre artist Soibamcha Indrakumar was presented at the 5th National Theatre Festival organized by National School of Drama. It is based on the character of Kunti from the Mahabharata who is symbolic representative of the temperament of women in India. She is a Queen who accepts all the responsibilities wisely and boldly after the demise of her husband. The director of the play S. Indrakumar presents Kunti in a different perspective and places her in the political milieu.

S. Beeren's play *Eikhoi Kanano?* (Who Are We?) produced first in 2005 in Imphal and later staged in New Delhi is also a remarkable play on a marginalized section of people of Manipur. The play is based on the struggle of the people living in a small place called Molcham located on the border areas between Indian and Myanmar. It tells how troops from across the border enter the village and wield torture, loot and even molestation. There is hardly any presence of the nation state for the rescue of the people in distress. It reminds once again the sad reality that whereas India is spending thousands of crores of money to protect the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the same attitude is not adopted for the safety of the people living in the areas like Molcham. The director of the play S. Beeren attempts to find out through the play the root causes of the estrangement between the mainland and the periphery. It is ironical that the people of Molcham, although not given any attention by the power at the centre, still take pride in calling themselves Indians. *Eikhoi Kananno?* is an attempt to sensitize the people living in the comfort zones of the nation about the hazards involved in living away from the centre.

Theatre in Manipur has continued to grow every year as plays are staged on the occasion of National Theatre Festival organized by the prestigious National School of Drama, New Delhi. In the year 2013, on the 15th *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* as the festival is better known, as many as three Manipuri plays were accommodated. Among them the first one that was presented by Treasure Art Association was *9 Days Newspaper* which was devised from newspaper content collected over a period of nine days. Directed by Joy Maisnam it deals with the story of young film-maker, Robindro who wants to make a movie about the restlessness and dissatisfaction of the society. But when the views of him get spread in public he is highly criticised and even gets threatening from the

underground groups. The situation turns more violent when his home is bombed and he loses his whole family in the incident. Robindro, in utter shock, fails to show any emotion over the horrendous incident and stands silently questioning the meaning of freedom and human rights.

The next play that was staged in the festival was *Egi Khongthang Lephkhiroi* written and directed by Dr. S. Thaninleima under the banner of Khenjonglang, Imphal. The play highlights the prevalent social environment and the attempts to empower women in Manipur. The play presents the story of a woman named Sapna and how she faces difficulties while she tries to raise her voice against both psychological and physical harassment meted out to her by the society she exists in.

The third play that was presented by the group NT theatre, Imphal was *A Far Cry* written by Budha Chingtham and directed by Ningthouja Deepak. The play is entirely based on the prevalent socio-political situation of Manipur although the same can be experienced in other places as well. In the play focus is laid on the predicament of Kusum who becomes a victim of terrorism and loses her senses when she witnesses the deaths of her family members before her own eyes. Having lost her sanity because of the terrible shock she goes around in search of bodies and when she finds them she carries them around in her bullock cart.

Ever since the beginning of modern theatre in Manipur the traditional forms of theatre have also been equally given importance to and as a result of such practices forms such *Shumang Leela* is performed very often. Usually the traditional folk theatres deal with mythological or social themes and are didactic in tone. But in the hands of the new directors of stage they have also undergone changes to certain extent and under the shifting circumstances it has tried to accommodate issues like communal harmony, insurgency, drug abuse , etc.that are pertinent to the present times.

As part of the efforts to continue with the tradition Peace Marker, a theatre group, presented their *Shumang Leela* play entitled *Restaphen* (2005). It was performed at the Bharatiyam Cultural Multiplex, Calcutta on the occasion of National Folk Theatre Festival organized by the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre. The play was directed by Birjit

Nagangomba and is based on a folk tale but with modern setting. It gives an account of how a young boy, Restaphen, loses his parents during USA's counter-terrorism action in Afghanistan and its impact upon him. The play, as it deals with a very pertinent and significant matter, makes a meaningful comment on the socio-political situation not only of the local region but of the world at large.

The form of *Shumang Leela* was employed very recently at the 18th National Theatre Festival organized by the National School of Drama in 2016. The play titled *Huranba Ashingba Nate* was presented by Sangai Artists' Association. Directed by Laishram Iboyaima Khuman the play is based on a fictional story of Thoungamba, an honest and sincere ASO of the Manipur State Power Distribution Company. The entire plot of the play is spread over a period of more than thirty years' time. Thoungamba falls in love with Loktakleima, the adopted daughter of the chowkidar of his office and eventually he marries her. After a year the couple is blessed with a son whom they named Yaiphaba.

But the wife of Thoungamba's elder brother, Sheetal was jealous of Loktakleima as she did not have any issue even after four years of their marriage and was looking for an opportunity to harm her. One day, when Sheetal cannot find her gold necklace she deliberately accuses Loktakleima for a thief and banishes her from home. She leaves the home with the intention committing suicide. In the meantime it was discovered that the theft was done by the younger brother of Sheetal who is a drug addict. Thoungamba immediately goes out in search for Loktakleima but fails to find her and assumes that she is dead.

Thirty years pass on and the little Yaiphaba becomes a doctor and posted in a village where Loktakleima, now with a different identity, took refuge in the past. On the other hand, Thoungamba also becomes the Chief Engineer of the department and goes to the same village to inaugurate the newly installed transformer. As fortune would have it as soon as the electricity lightens up the village Thoungamba meets his lost wife and the child its mother. The play is a commentary on certain problems evident in Manipuri society. The play raises the menace of drug addiction very often found in wealthy section of the society and how it destroys the lives of many other innocent people.

Dance and drama form a very crucial part of Manipuri way of life. With the concept of the world as the sport of God, the Manipuri people give immense emphasis on the art of theatre which has been responsible for the enviable progress of theatre in the state. Contemporary theatre in Manipur has been able to create a niche for itself on the global platform with its distinctive style of presentation. Manipuri drama brings together the classical with the folk and modern elements and both the dramatists and the actors are very industrious to excel in their skill and art. Besides eternal human predicament, all contemporary issues have been incorporated in their plays. Moral, mythical and local and universal crises have been the major issues in the plots of contemporary Manipuri plays.

Chapter- IV

Rhythms of Theatre: Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram

4. Tripura

The State of Tripura is a constituent of Indian Union on her North-East region with a rich treasure of art and culture. Tripura has a long political and socio-cultural history that stands apart from the other states of the North-East region. It is geographically bounded by the Cachar district on the North and by Mizoram on the East. Tripura shares an international border with Bangladesh as two of its regions surround the western and southern areas of the state. Prior to the independence of Indian from the rule of the British, Tripura had been a Princely state. The *Rajmala*, a unique chronicle of the royal court, provides a lot of information not only about the socio-political and cultural history of Manikya Kingdom but mythologies concerning the tradition of Tripura. As per the chronicle *Rajmala* 184 Kings ruled Tripura in the ancient times. The five hundred years rule of the Manikya Kings in Tripura was followed by its inclusion in the Union of India on 15th October, 1949.

The gap of two years from 1947 to 1949 which the Royal Tripura took to join the Union of India left a huge effect on the socio-economic development of the state. In the post-joining era Tripura had to encounter huge number of influx from the erstwhile East Pakistan that changed the entire demographic pattern of the state.

4.1 Theatre in Tripura

The Beginning

Tripura had been inhabited by a number of indigenous people who lived in the remote hilly terrains of the state. They had their dances, songs, worships, rituals, etc. for various occasions which could have been developed into theatre as the origin of drama or theatre everywhere lay in the forms of dances. But, in spite of a very long extent of dynastic political and cultural history and existence of a number of folk dance forms, no

theatre, except Kokborok theatre which emerged as a distinctive form in the 80's only, of the people of Tripura in their own language emerged during the Manikya dynasties.

Under the circumstances, it may be maintained that the history of theatre in Tripura is almost the history of the Bengali theatre in Tripura. It may be traced back to the last part of the 19th century when Maharaja Birchandra Manikya (1870-1896) was in throne. It is to be noted here that the last part of the 19th century witnessed four Manikya Kings – Birchandra Manikya, Radhakishore Manikya, Birendra Kishore Manikya and Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. It was during the reign of these Kings that there was development in field of administration, politics and art and culture.

There are instances to show that the royal court had always patronized music, poetry and established good relationship with the neighbouring provinces through art forms of various kinds. However, it was during the rule of Maharaja Birchandra Manikya that the royal court had become a centre of literary and cultural activities where scholars, musicians, poets, artists had visited the Royal Court of Tripura and performed.

It was during this time that Bhakti Movement of the Manipuri culture had made its entry into the Royal family of Tripura who were very influenced by it. In the following decades performing arts like music, dance, acting or painting had been prospering silently but strongly in Tripura mostly under the patronization of the Royal Court. This development of the art forms was also due to the close friendship that the Kings had with the Nobel Laureate Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore. The friendship which started with Maharaja Birchandra remained till the demise of Tagore. Impressed even by the first book of verse *Bhagna Hriday* the Birchandra conferred the honour of best poet in 1882 when the poet was only 21 years of age. The relationship between the Royal family and Tagore had become more strong after the death of this generous King as Tagore had been always sought for guidance in every matter, whether political, financial or cultural.

As a result of this long association the literary and cultural activities had thrived in Tripura and it ultimately led to the genesis of a theatre troupe in Agartala in 1892. The troupe named *Ujjayanta Natya Samaj* was established by young Birendra Kishore Manikya and this can be treated as the beginning of organized theatre practices in Tripura.

The newly formed *Ujjayanta Natya Samaj* came up with the first ever presentation of a drama on the model of modern proscenium theatre titled *Kalyani*. However, according to available sources such as *Tripura Buranji* written originally by Ratna Kandali and Arjun Das, the emissaries of Ahom King and later translated in to Bangla by Tripur Sen as *Tripura Deser Katha*, in 1682 the first drama was presented when under the auspices of King Ratna Manikya II a religious drama *Kaliya Daman* was staged in the honour of the royal guests from Assam.¹⁵⁵ (Das, 2015) *Kalyani* was followed by another play *Bilwamangal* in 1894 by the students of Agartala high School on the occasion of a marriage ceremony in the house of Radharaman Ghosh , the Secretary of the Maharaja Birchandra Manikya.

Theatre in Tripura was moving on silently through such attempts and in 1897 a Kolkata based troupe named *Star Theatre* was invited to perform at the Court of Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya. It was for the first time that a troupe from outside of Tripura had been invited to perform in Tripura. They staged the play *Tarubala* which left a deep and long lasting impression on the minds of the spectators.

In 1897 *Ujjayanta Natya Samaj* presented its second play titled *Patibrata* written by Maharajkumar Mahendra Deb Barma. It was staged in the open premises of the royal Palace. *Patibrata* is recognized as the first play to have been written by a local playwright. The theatre troupe continued to produce quite a number of plays like *Chandbibbi*, *Ranapratap*, *Tripur Gaurav*, etc.

Early in the beginning of the 20th century the presentation of Tagore's *Visarjan* was for the first time was made in the premises of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya who had the opportunity to watch it in the erstwhile Calcutta. It was a remarkable experience for those who watched it.

Later on, in 1904 Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya took personal initiative to form a theatre group named *Puspabanta Natya Samaj*. The newly formed group that was patronized by the King himself came up with its first ever production of the play titled *Vrindavan Bilas*, written and directed by Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya

¹⁵⁵ Das, Subhas. (2015). "Tripurais Khaiyushnu Lokayatra o tar Punaruddhar." *Tripura Theatre*. Agartala: Tripura Theatre, p.68

himself. It is evident under the guidance and inspiration of the King himself both the groups - *Ujjayanta Natya Samaj* and *Puspabanta Natya Samaj* continued to produce plays.

Following the footsteps of the King a few more theatre groups were formed with the patronage of some members of the Royal family such as *andarmahal Natya Shala*, *Ranabir Kartar Theatre Party*, , etc. What is noticeable in the development of theatre at this stage is that it was actively participated not only by the King and several other male members of the Royal family but by female members as well like Maharani Pravabati Devi and Maharajkumari Lila Devi.

During this phase, the plays were based on either mythological or historical subject matters and although the troupes were amateur in nature they were able to present quality and elegant performances.

Theatre activities till the first two decades of the 20th century centred round the Royal Court. But, with formation of *Umakanta Academy Chatra Natya Sangstha* in 1923 theatre activities began to come out from the overwhelming ambit of the palace and marked a new beginning for it to become more common people centric. In 1925 *Umakanta Academy Chatra Natya Sangstha* produced their first play *Bhisma*. Within few years from the formation of this theatre groups few more of such groups were formed in and around Agartala. These groups tried to bring in new concepts and techniques into theatre. Among all the groups who were active at this point in time, *Tripur Natya Sanmilani* was the most important one which was successful in giving a new shape to theatre in Tripura through its developed stage-craft, make-up and other technicalities. With a good number of plays to its credit it became quite influential and inspired many others to seriously take up the art theatre making. Another which significantly contributed towards the development of theatre in Tripura was *Tripur Shilpayatan*- a theatre group established originally as *Matrimandir* by the one of the ministers at the Court of Maharaja Bir Bikram. This group made great efforts to take theatre to the midst of common people as they had gone to the small towns or places to present their plays. During the Second World War theatre activities were badly hit and except a few the

majority of the theatre groups became dysfunctional. However, despite the challenges the progress continued with newer zeal and changed outlook.

The Middle

The theatre of the period between post-independence and till 1960's was mainly of experimentation with the form of drama. A new era in Tripura began as there was huge influx from the erstwhile East Pakistan and from Bengal also with the result that there were people in the rural areas enriched with traditional culture and art forms on the one hand while on the other modern educated people in the urban areas.

Under the circumstances there appeared a number of theatre troupes, particularly in Agartala as both new comers and old settlers had come together to carry forward theatre activities. Among the important ones is *Loka Silpi Sambad* which pioneered the entry the women into the domain of acting. Prior to that women were not allowed to act in a play and the female roles were acted by the male actors. This middle period of the development of theatre in Tripura witnessed the birth of a number of amateur theatre groups who might not have continuously produced plays yet their plays vastly contributed to the larger movement of theatre.

As far as the subjects that these plays took up for a play is concerned the themes concerning mythological and historical events or figures were replaced by the varieties of issues of the contemporary society. The chief exponents of this great theatrical movement were Tripuresh Majumder, Anil Sengupta, Sukhomoy Sengupta, Shakti Halder, Shibdas Bandopadhyay, Ira Banerjee, Bela Majumder and so on.

Later Period

In the seventies not only Tripura but India at large witnessed many ups and downs in the political, social and cultural field. The neighbouring Bangladesh had won its freedom as an independent nation though after huge bloodshed. On the home front, in many parts of India including West Bengal and Tripura mass movements under the left started and subsequently governments were formed. The situation became worse when the nationwide Emergency was declared suspending the basic rights of the citizens. Under the circumstances, theatre in Tripura was also passing through a phase of change

and with the coming of a batch of educated people from Bangladesh and also from Kolkata to settle down in Tripura, the pace for that desired change got new impetus. It was further boosted by the *Gana Natya Andolan* (Mass Theatre Movement) that was spreading its roots throughout the country. It gave birth to the concept of Group Theatre in Tripura. This kind of theatre was formed to voice for the downtrodden and exploited people of the country. It demanded, through art, a change in the status quo and was in nature anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and prop-people. Such groups strongly believed that theatre could be used as a strong tool for fighting against oppressions and thereby, to bring in revolutionary changes in the society. Some of the key groups that worked quite seriously towards the set goals laid down by the movement were, *Tripura Sanskriti Parishad*, *Rupayan*, *Rupam*, *Little Drama Group*, , etc. to name a few.

In the later decades of the 20th century theatre in Tripura continued to move forward in the path set by the Group Theatre movement. The groups which were formed in the seventies had come out greater inspiration and commitment to uphold the interests of the common people.

Theatre which was, for the most part, active within the periphery of the towns now saw its growth in the remotest of villages also. Perhaps for the first time during this phase theatre in Tripura had really become an all embracing one. It can be noticed that in a state like Tripura which is inhabited by a diverse group of people each bearing its own distinctive language and culture, plays began to be written in their respective languages and also with themes that concern them. In the past even when the theatre movements were in their highest peak scripts for the plays were very often borrowed from other regions, mostly from the Kolkata based theatre.

4.2 Tradition of Yatra Gan in Tripura

While on the one hand, the kind of drama that was modelled on the Western dramaturgy was strongly prospering, there was another kind of theatre that was concurrently gaining popularity among the common people – the traditional *Yatra* of Bengal. The art form of *Yatra* to the people of Tripura was introduced by the Bengali people who always formed a part of the society in Tripura. It was perhaps presented

either by the Bengali people themselves or by others under the guidance of Bengali people.

Nevertheless, there is no clear information about the status of *Yatra* theatre between the first half of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century. But ample information about its presence from the reign of Maharaja Birchandra Manikya are found in various locations. During those times professional parties from Bengal were invited to perform in selected places to entertain select group of people. It was in the year 1897 that the first local troupe to present *Yatra* was formed at the market place area called *Kashari Pattir Yatra Dal* and another named *Acharya Para Yatra Party*, both were based in Agartala. The third *Yatra* party that emerged in Agartala was *Lakshminarayan Opera Party* during the rule of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya.

After the independence of Indian in 1947 many of the Bengali people living on the border areas came to Tripura to live and this added a new dimension to the prevalent form of *Yatra*. These migrated Bengali people living in the rural areas, in spite of the hardships faced by them, did not leave out their own tradition and culture. As a result, a number of *Yatra* Parties were formed in different places of Tripura, particularly in those areas where the Bengali people lived in large groups. Although at the initial stage a majority of the troupes were formed in Agartala yet towards the mid of 60's and 70's good many numbers of troupes of *Yatra* were formed in the rural areas as well. It is estimated that from the time of its joining the Union of India in 1949 and till the end of the 20th century as many as three hundred *Yatra* troupes have been formed in Tripura.¹⁵⁶

The popularity of *Yatra* did not remain restricted to the Bengali people alone; it was equally liked by the tribal communities who had alongside the Bengalis for years. The Jamatiya tribe, in particular, was perhaps the first who came into direct and close contacts with the Bengali people. As a consequence it is assumed that the influence of the Bengali *Yatra* was higher on the Jamatiya tribe than any other in Tripura. It can be perceived from the fact that among the tribes of Tripura a large number of *Yatra* troupes were formed in the areas where the Jamatiyas were in majority. These *Yatra* plays,

¹⁵⁶ Subhas Das. (2015). "Tripurai Khaiyushnu Lokayatra o tar Punaruddhar." *Tripura Theatre*. Agartala: Tripura Theatre, p. 70.

presented in Bengali language, were usually organized after the harvests are gathered. However, as mentioned by Nagendra Jamatiya the worth of Yatra among the Jamatiya people is very high. Every village would certainly have at least one Yatra group and sometimes if there are greater numbers of people than a team can accommodate then even two or three teams are formed. It shows the scale of popularity of the art form among the Jamatiya tribe. But from the 70's onward the educated people within the tribe began to protest against such practices alleging that it made it difficult to receive education. Gradually, the practice of Yatra Gan ceased to exist. Earlier in the 60's the plays were presented in Bengali language but later on in some areas Yatra performances were done in Kokborok language also.¹⁵⁷

Although Yatra Gan has faced challenges posed by various factors and it still enjoys the love and passion from the common people at large. In recent times there has been a revived interest in the traditional art forms which for a long time had been ignored on the pretext of being unsophisticated. But, it is this crudeness about traditional things that has re-created a new impulse towards them.

4.3 Tradition of Kokborok Theatre

The term Kokborok refers to the language that the majority of the tribes inhabiting the land of Tripura use for communication. The linguistic community is formed by the indigenous groups of people who are generally known as the Tripuris or Boroks. The group comprises of people from the clans of Deb Barma or Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Rupini, Koloj, Kaipeng, Molsom, Chorai, Uchoi, , etc. The The Manikya dynasty which reigned Tripura for several centuries itself belonged to tribal community. In spite of belonging to different clans these diverse groups speak the same Kokborok language. But interestingly enough, there was hardly any effort on their part to give a proper structure to their own language, and instead used Bengali language in every matter of life. As a result, people had to resort to another language that was not their own to give expression to their feelings or creativities.

¹⁵⁷Das, Subhas. (2015). "Tripurai Khaiyushnu Lokayatra o tar Punaruddhar." *Tripura Theatre*. Agartala: Tripura Theatre. p. 71.

But after the independence of India and the subsequent merger of Tripura with India in 1949 that was followed by multitudes of problems, mainly due to the large numbers of influx of people from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh and Bengal) there was a realization that the existence of tribal people are threatened.

During the fifties when the great *Janasiksha Movement* was launched to aware the common downtrodden people of Tripura about their true identity and rights Sudhanya Deb Barma wrote a play named *Egiye Chalo* which is regarded as the first attempt to write a play in Kokborok language though it was a bilingual one with Bengali being the other language. In the next decade very little was done to give a shape to the Kokborok theatre. However, it is found that Tagore's *Mukut* was translated into Kokborok by a school teacher Jadav Bhowmik and the same was staged in 1961.

The tradition of modern Kokborok theatre began on the 8th December, 1972 with the production of *Lamani Homchang* (Touch of the Road) written by Alindralal Tripura and presented by Kokborok Sahitya Sabha at Rabindra Sadan in Agartala. The practice of Kokborok theatre was not taken up as it should have been. It survived through the sporadic performances of such plays at different points of time. The next important Kokborok play was perhaps *Nobar Domsani Kothoma* (Story of a Storm) by Narendra Deb Barma. It was once again staged by Kokborok Sahitya Sabha in 1983 at Rabindra Bhawan which had come forward to produce such theatre in order to develop Kokborok language and bring the tribal people to the mainstream.

Till the nineties Kokborok Sahitya Sabha alone took up the production of Kokborok plays which amounted to about thirty all written and directed by Nanda Kumar Deb Barma. Among the important plays of this genre are *Mari* (Spot), *Kwpwlai* (Winner), *Rung* (Boat), *Ymangni Busarok* (Dream Children), *Yarikhi Dima* (Golden Eagle), etc.

In 1989 the first ever Kokborok theatre Festival was organized which marked a new beginning for it to develop. It stimulated the interest of the educated youths towards writing in Kokborok language and also to form theatre troupes in various parts of the state to spread the practice of it.

Among the many theatre troupes that were formed post-kokborok theatre festival Lampra is the most significant one. It is now known as Lampra Trust. The group came to limelight in 1993-94 with their production of *Chethuwang* (Chatim Tree) under the direction of Madhusudan Deb Barma. This group brought laurels to the state by winning the First Prize at All India Yuva Utsav held in Bhopal in 1995 with their play *Chethuwang*. Such recognition to Kokborok theatre inspired many others to take up Kokborok theatre seriously. Since then Lampra has produced more than 30 plays like *Ekalabya*, *Ghototkutch*, *Kokrang Shial* (Blue Fox), *Sukal* (Witch), , etc. which stand out among the best of the lot.

Following the footsteps of Lampra a number of theatre groups were formed. Some of the important groups are Tiari, Sampili Theatre Centre who have been greatly contributing to the growth and development of Kokborok theatre. They even organize annual festival on Kokborok theatre giving a platform to others as well as to strengthen its sway over people.

The Sampili Theatre Centre has been staging theatre performances at various places across the nation. One of their productions titled *Longtoraini Eklobya* has been staged in Agartala, Guwahati, Delhi and Mysore also. The play has been translated into several languages including English, Bengali, Assamese languages. It is based on the dramatisation of a poem written originally by Bijoy Deb Barma, a renowned poet. The play, to a great extent, is based on the story of Eklobya from the Mahabharata where Guru Drona in order to protect the future of his favourite disciple Arjuna demands the thumb from Eklobya as his fee. The story of the play changes its tune after Eklobya gives away his thumb to his assumed Guru Drona. The incident soon becomes known to people and soon all kinds of media, print as well as electronic, give large coverage thereby creating a lot of pressure on the concerned authority. Bhism who holds the power calls Drona and a representative from the victim's side. Accordingly they meet Bhism and after listening to both the parties involved Bhism takes sides with Drona which reflects the persistent denial of justice to the weak and the downtrodden.

In recent times the Tripura Tribal District Council has undertaken certain steps to make the form more popular among the public and for this purpose they have arranged

for the conduction of workshops at various places under their jurisdiction. The fifteen day long workshops held separately at ten different places have borne good results as various groups have come forward with their plays. The workshop concluded on 31st March, 2016 with a Kokborok drama festival with the best of the participant teams taking part in it. The plays made use of various available forms such as Yatra or realistic form with stories inspired by the day to day events, problems of modern lifestyle.

Kokborok Theatre now has become an indispensable part of theatre in Tripura and with every play presented under this genre the bond between the mainstream and Kokbork becomes even stronger and greater.

4.4 Puppet theatre

In Tripura the tradition of puppet theatre, known as Putul Dance, has come down from the areas of the neighbouring Bangaldesh and after 1947 when the nations were separated the ones who remained in the region continue with their tradition and formed own groups of puppet theatre. The puppets were earlier prepared out of solapith, but due to the non-availability of the material they were made with either the pulp of wood or paper. The puppets are small in size and the presentations are made in the well known Yatra tradition.

Traditionally, prior to the beginning of a show the puppet theatre troupes would present small playlets, called as News, on a certain specific character popularly known as *Mona* and its hardships and other events. There are, however, few other such characters like Vaisnav-Vaisnavi or Jagai-Mahdai on whom, too, such News containing humorous episodes are presented.

This form of theatre has been continued by one theatre group based in Agartala. The name of the puppet theatre group is *Tripura Puppet Theatre*. The group presents their plays through all the types of puppets namely rod puppets, glove puppets and string puppets. The form

The group was founded by Late Haripada Das, an employee of the Social Welfare department under Tripura Government. The department also had small branch of puppetry with the help of which it used to educate the rural folks about various

important issues. Inspired by the potentiality of the puppets he soon developed a deep passion for the puppet theatre and formed his own group which was named as *Tripura Puppet Theatre* in the year 1974. The main objectives of the group is to educate, entertain, and make people aware of social responsibilities, cultural heritage, tradition, moral values, , etc.

The first performance of the group was made in 1974 and the title of the play was *Lab Kush*, a mythological play drawn from the Ramayana which depicts the story of the two sons of Rama and Sita and the battle between the sons and the father. The xplay was performed with rod puppets. Two years later another play *Prithviraj-Sanjukta*, a historical one, was presented through the method of string puppet. In 1979 at the Rabindra Bhawan of Agartala The script for the play *Ekti Murger Kahini* was performed. It was an adaptation of a famous poem by poet Sukanta Bhattacharya that tells the sad story of a cock which symbolizes the downtrodden section of society. It was presented by using both rod and glove puppets. The presentation was highly appreciated by the audience present there.

Some of the notable plays that the group has so far made on various occasions are- *John Henry, Runner, Parivartan, Jadugar, Guptadhan, Hojagiri Dance, Bandhu- The Alien Friend, , ,* etc.

The play *John Henry* was first performed in the first International Puppet Festival held in Delhi. It describes the story of John Henry, a Negro labourer, who was engaged to lay railway lines on certain areas of America and fought against the onslaught of the machines over humanity. The play tells the sad story how the advent of machines has affected mankind. The machines were invented to assist man in his endeavour but not to dominate them. Another significant offer from the troupe was *Guptadhan* which is based on a folk tale and focuses on the need to save money or valuables in safe locations and the problems of early marriage.

Parivartan was a play that deals with illiteracy, intoxication and child marriage. it shows how poor family living in a village is affected due to the drinking alcohol. The father of the minor girl spends the entire earning of a day in drinking while her mother earns a little to run the household. Because of the financial crisis the father attempts to

marry off his daughter with an aged man in return of some money. However, towards the later part of the play the dawn arises up on him and understands the value of education and outcome of bad habit of drinking.

In 1995 *Runner*, written on the original poem by Sukanta Bhattacharya was presented with a lot of innovations. The shows was a combination of light, stereophonic sound along with the mixed usage of both rod and gloves puppets.

The *Tripura Puppet Theatre* has tried to experiment with the tribal tradition of Tripura thereby opening new doors to enormous possibilities. As a result of such attempts a production of the traditional Hojagiri dance performed by the Reang women was made in 1997 with the title *Hojagiri Dance*. The production was presented through rod and glove puppets. Following the same intention few other plays on stories adopted from the folk tales of Tripura were made. *Chengthungfa O Nathokbi* and *Tentai* are representatives of this type of plays.

Within the limitations of puppet theatre it has dared to try its hand on science fiction plays as well. In 2006, the group produced its first science fiction play titled *Bandhu- The Alien Friend* specially for the children with the help of rod puppets.

The group took active participation in the International Puppet Festival held in New Delhi on 15th March, 1987. It also participated in another workshop in the third National Puppet dance Festival in Guwahati organised by Sangeet Natak Akademi in collaboration with the Government of Assam in 1994. The festival was attended by nine states of the nation and Tripura was represented by the group. During the period the group presented their act on various stages in and around Guwahati. Since its beginning the group has been taking part in different workshops and imparting knowledge through training sessions on various occasions. Situated in a land locked area of Tripura the group has to face a lot of difficulties to showcase the rich treasures of the state through the medium. But, in spite of all the obstacles on the road as commonly encountered by such institutions everywhere it has continued its journey and has been successfully performing even now.

Theatre in Meghalaya

4.5 Meghalaya

The state of Meghalaya, the abode of clouds, is bound on the North by Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam while on the east by the districts of Cachar and North Cachar Hills also of the State of Assam. The south of Meghalaya is bordered with Bangladesh. It was carved out of Assam and an autonomous state was created in 1972. Meghalaya is inhabited by two main groups the Garo and Khasi tribes, both belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages along with the Jaintias.

The Garos, Khasis and Jaintias have matrilineal tradition at practice and as such the ancestry of person, either man or woman, is determined on the basis of his or her mother's side and subsequently a linkage is established with the common ancestress. These groups of people once had independent regions ruled by their own chiefs until their inclusion to the British administration in the nineteenth century. It was later in the year 1935 that the region was attached to the province of Assam. However, it was attached first in 1912 to the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam when the British had to re-structure the Eastern region following the huge protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905.

4.6 Development of the literature of the Garos

Although the language and the literature of the Garos have a very old tradition about them yet the language being reduced to a written form has been a recent phenomenon only. It was T. J. Keith, one of the first missionaries who established communication with the Gaors of the plains and took the initiative to develop the language. In his endeavour to give the language a recognition he first brought out the *Dictionary of the Garo Language: Garo-Bengali-English* in 1873 from Jalpaiguri and another book on *Grammar of Garo Language* in 1879 from Sibsagar (now Sivasagar), Assam. In the beginning the Bengali alphabets were employed to write Garo language and following this system a number of works related to Christianity were translated from

English into Garo. The first of such translated works were the Gospels followed by the New Testament and later on also Old Testament. During the initial phase of the development of Garo literature, it was seen that there was a greater production of school text books and religious books. According to the report of the Garo Hills District Administration for the year 1875-76, there were only two books in Garo- Rev. Stoddard's Garo Primers and Rev. Keith's Grammar, that were available for the Garo students written in Bengali script. The other necessary subjects were taught in Bengali language. Such a want for of proper study material in Garo language motivated both Rev. E. G. Phillips and Rev. M. C. Mason, to concentrate not only on the production of religious books but also on other books meant for school curriculum as well as for popular entertainment.

Such endeavour initiated by the two Missionaries resulted in the production of numerous books on various subjects which benefited the needy Garo people a lot. By the closure of the 19th century, "there were seventeen publications on Garo vocabulary, six Primers by four authors with reprints, four Grammar books with subsequent editions, one Arithmetic, two Mental Arithmetic, six books as Readers, seven books on Religious topics, four books on Catechism with reprints and two hymn books, apart from the publications of different books of the Bible. Books on secular topics, stories, drama, easy or a book of poetry, , etc. have not yet appeared by this time." ¹⁵⁸

However, towards the end of the 19th century the American Baptist Mission found it difficult to continue with the Bengali script and at the Conference of the Mission held at Tura in 1893 it was decided that the Roman script be followed for those languages of the Hills tribe who did not have written language.

Within the period starting from the year 1874 to 1924 "both the Missionaries and the educated Garo Christians were deeply involved in translations and publications of the whole Bible ...Despite the fact that these works have been carried on under great stresses and strains of life and the paucity of local experts, yet the works have remained

¹⁵⁸ Sangma, M. S. *History of Garo Literature*. (2014). Tura: D. I. Publication, p. 31.

above improvement with all the education and facilities that are available at present.”¹⁵⁹ Further it is observed that till 1924 Garo literature had not yet developed beyond the stage of school text books and a few publications on religious themes. Even these were of elementary in nature. Books on secular topics, stories, essays, poetry have not yet appeared. However, the one remarkable achievement in the field of literature during this period was the completion in the translation and printing of the whole of the Bible in Garo language.

Secular literature may be said to have begun in 1924 with the publication of books containing folklores, stories, social studies, essays, , etc.in Garo language. Though some publications on religious themes continue to appear but the publications on secular themes began to form a dominant feature from 1924 onwards. The writing of secular literature begun with the appearances of two books by Narayan M. Marak on learning Bengali, Hindi and Garo languages. It was followed by a book on the folklores and traditional tales of the Garos. The book titled *A-chik Aganani Baksa* was published by Jobang D. Marak and Simison R. Sangma in 1927. It pioneered the publications of books like this as in a quick succession of time several similar translated versions of folk tales were brought out which were secular in nature. Within a span of three years from 1927 to 1930 around six such collections of translated traditional stories were published which indicate the growing demands among the readers for such works.

The Missionaries at the initial stage was not giving enough attention to the publication of such story books as they were possibly more engaged with the publication of books related to Christianity. But in 1931 a series of readers entitled *Wetherbee Readers* prepared by Miss H. L. Wetherbee and edited by Miss C. A. Wright brought out by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. Almost all of the story books were meant for the young girls and boys and as such they were included in the school syllabus.

Apart from the books on folktales publications were made in the category of biographies of great people also. The book titled *Itihasni Kattarang* (Biography of Great

¹⁵⁹ Sangma, M. S. *History of Garo Literature*. (2014). Tura: D. I. Publication, p. 49.

Men) contributed both by local and Missionary writers. The list of the great men included both Indian and foreign origin.

The progress of Garo literature was further enhanced by the publication of books on the domain of science. The book published with the title *Nature Study* was an introduction to the different science subjects such as Biology, Botany, Astronomy, , etc. The concept and the contents of the book were adopted from English, Bengali and Assamese language by Modhunath Momin and edited and published by Miss C. A. Wright, an American lady Baptist Missionary.

Unlike the publication of the folktales in Garo, the Missionaries took the initiative in the publication of books both on the lives of the great men as well as the study of science subjects. Miss L. M. Holbrook took up the task of translating and publishing the Aesop's Fables which was followed by other publications of similar kind. These story books gave the opportunity to the Garo people to have a taste of the stories from other lands.

In the course of time with the increase of schools and up gradation of the curriculum there was a growing need for introduction of new subjects. As a result of it textbooks for those subjects were also were published in Garo language. Gradually, subjects like Geography, History, Social Study, , etc. were introduced. The first book on Geography titled *Garo Geography on Assam and India: An Outline* was written by Samson Sangma while the first textbook on the History of the Garos was published by Jobang D. Marak in 1930 with the title *Garo History* which was written on the basis of the traditional stories on the origin and migration of the Garos. The books that followed it were *Chengoni A-gilsak aro Chengoni Mande* (Ancient World and ancient Man) and *Odek Education* (Origin and Development of Education). These valuable books had helped the Garo people to look at their own tradition and culture from a new perspective. By the end of the thirties Garo literature had taken a definite course of movement from the religious literature to the more secular kind of literature. However, alongside the

publications of books on secular literature, books on religious topics were also being published.

The literature of the Garos, so far, was more or less influenced by the perceptions as upheld by the Missionaries from the West. It was produced with a prime thrust on the consolidation of the Christian values among the Garo people. As such the literature produced during this period is marked by moral, religious concerns and has a didactic tune. But there was a gradual change in the nature of the literature as many young men and women who were educated had come forward to write under the leadership of and guidance of Prof. Howard Denison W. Momin, the first Garo person to obtain a Master's Degree. Prof. Momin started a monthly literary journal in Garo language titled *A-chik Ku-rang* (The Voice of the Garos). The journal provided Prof. Momin and others a platform to write about their own tradition and culture. Such an initiative was "able to instil into the hearts and minds of the young men and women the spirit of renaissance. The young writers who were brought up in the cross-current of western civilization and traditional culture and who were leaning more towards western ways, now began to turn their minds to the study of their own culture and began to value and appreciate them more."¹⁶⁰

Prof. Momin was the key person who initiated the young educated people to join the new movement of writing for the Garo people about themselves. But before he could do more for the development of Garo literature he was taken away by death. Though he had not published any book but some of his poems appeared in different volumes of the journal. Besides it he also translated some of the best portions of Tagore's *Gitanjali*.

In addition to Prof. Momin there were a number of writers who through their variegated publications contributed to the growth of Garo literature. Among the important ones mention may be made of Rangam G. Momin who besides the publication of English Grammar book and an English-Garo Dictionary also ran a bi-monthly

¹⁶⁰ Sangma, M. S. *History of Garo Literature*. (2014). Tura: D. I. Publication, p. 55

newspaper named *A-chika U-iani* (News of the Garos) for five years from 1945 to 1950. He was followed by another very important writer and compiler named Dhoronsing K. Sangma who worked as a teacher in a school. Dhoronsing K. Sangma is well known for his relentless effort at preserving as well as highlighting the importance of the proverbs, phrases and wise-sayings in Garo culture. His endeavour resulted in the publication of three volumes containing folk-tales and the proverbs and other materials of Garo culture for which he is commonly regarded as the father of Garo Folklore.

On the other hand Kandura W. Momin is still esteemed high for his valuable contribution to the domain of history and lexicography in Garo language. In 1952 he published *Assami Katta* (History of Assam) and *Indiani Katta* (History of India) in the following year. He also brought out a Garo-English Dictionary in 1955.

Karnesh R. Marak, a teacher, an administrator and a Member of Parliament, is best known for his publication on *Garo Primary Schoolo Skiani Niamrang aro Bewalrang* (Methods of Teaching in the Primary School) and for writing *Macbeth*, an adaptation from Shakespeare's Macbeth.

The literature of the Garos was also introduced to children's literature by Sudhindra Marak. He independently published *A-chik Bi-sarangna Gitrang* (Songs for Garo children), a book on the folk stories and songs particularly for the children.

It was the time when the women writers also began to write on different field of knowledge and contribute to the development of Garo literature in their own ways. Among the most important women writers mention may be made of Mrs. Phobe W. Momin. She at first came up with a book on cookery followed by a book on the biographies of twelve great men titled *Itihasni Kattarang*. Inspired by what Mrs. Momin many women writers like Mrs. Jakme Shira, Mrs. Probinballa Momin Das, Mrs. Rosalind K Sangma and others came forward and brought out books on a diverse range of subjects such as Geography, General Knowledge, Astronomy, religion and so on.

Poetry of the Garos

The Garos have showed their potential and contributed more in the development of poetry than any other form of literature in Garo language. The Garos are traditionally lovers of songs and music. The earliest known poet in Garo language was Ramke W. Momin who wrote hymns and poems which were included in the school Readers. The next important poet among the pioneers in this genre is Tuniram R. Marak who, though produced very little, had left a great impact upon the later batches of poets. Kosan G. Momin was another poet of high standard. Among the women poets of the first generation Mrs. Phobe W. Momin is a notable one. Although she composed a number of poems she had published only two. The other important poets of the early period were Howard D. W. Momin, Evelyn R. Marak, Jonmoni D. Shira, DEwansing Rongmuthu, Karnesh R. Marak and so on.

Novel of the Garos

The genre of novel also witnessed a gradual development in the hands of few writers. The form of novel was never an unknown form since the Garos have a tradition of storytelling in their culture albeit in a different form.

The first novel that appeared in Garo language was *Khalsin aro Sonatchi* (Khalsin and Sonatchi) written by Redin Momin and published in 1972. This romantic novel is based on well known traditional story of love between Khalsin and Sonatchi. The novel apart from being a centred on the theme of love and faith also emphasises on the need of education not only for the men but for the women in particular. During the same time another novel *Sonabal Me-chik* written by Simison R. Sangma. The novel was an adaptation from Bengali novel *Swarnalata* by Taraknath Ganguli.

The drama of the Garos

Drama in Garo language was also beginning to emerge as more people who studied in various universities had tasted the pleasure of drama and a greater need for books on drama was created.

In Garo literature the first published work on drama was *Nokdang* (Family) written by Keneth M. Momin. The play was written in the year 1969 by him when he was working in the department of Political Science in Tura Government College. The play depicts the contemporary life in Garo society.

It was followed by another play written in the same year by Argison G. Momin, a Lecturer in the department of Economics in Tura Government College. The title of the play was *Kamni Bite* (Fruit of one's action). The play is about the life of a man who leaves his home but returns after twenty long years with his wife. Within the period of his absence in the place for so many years things at that place had changed. Since his return was not welcomed he had to stay in hotel during which he was poisoned to death.

In 1970 a play titled *Macbeth* adopted from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was written by Karnesh R. Marak. The play is best remembered for the employment of language. There was a gap of around decade before another play *Sin-kari* (Winter) was published. The play was written by Cartin R. Marak in 1981. Within the period of eighties quite a good number of plays were published. L. R. Marak brought out five plays, maximum that a Garo playwright has done so far, followed by both Karnesh R. Marak and J. R. L. Marak with three by them.

It is interesting to note that unlike in many parts of the North-East where the British had stepped in with dual intention to gain political control as well as religious supremacy and to achieve their goals introduced, apart from many other things, drama modelled on the Western principles, the same policy was not seen being adopted with the people of Meghalaya. The Missionaries, as is evident from the documents available,

were more interested in bringing out books on language, hymns, stories, different subjects included in the school curriculum, etc. “The Missionaries were motivated in developing this literature in order to enable the first converts to read and write in their own language...Besides, primers and readers were prepared and produced by the missionaries for the dissemination of education. The great disadvantage was that the missionaries ignored the indigenous ethical values, cultural traits and arts.”¹⁶¹

However, the Garos having a strong tradition of storytelling either with the assistance of dances or not, which may be taken together as performing arts, have always catered to the needs of its people. The performing arts in the form of music and dance have been a part and parcel of the Garo society and is related to the invocation and appeasement of their gods.

4.7 Theatre of the Garos

It is a matter of great curiosity that there is very little awareness among the Garos about the presence of theatre form in their culture, as they commonly view theatre as a form that is practiced with a set pattern with a proper stage and an audience to watch over the proceedings of the performance taking place before them. As against such notions of theatre radical Kenyan writer and educationalist Ngugi wa Thiong’o explains that, ‘theatre is not a building. People make theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama.’¹⁶² (Thiong’o 1996) The majority of the Garos who are Christians have failed to pay any attention to their own culture of the past which is called *Songsarek*. However, those Garo people who have continued to follow the age-old tradition of *Songsarek* still practice the varieties of rituals associated mainly with agriculture. In this way even without clear knowledge the practitioners of the indigenous religion have been in touch with traditional Garo theatre.

¹⁶¹ Bareh, Hamlet. (1977). *Language and Literature of Meghalaya*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, pp. 34-35.

¹⁶² Thiong’o wa, N. (1996). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: East African Educational Publishers Ltd, p.42.

The Garos of Meghalaya have many celebrations that are performed at different times of the year and most of the festivals are associated with cultivation. In his *Introduction to Folklore of North-East India*, Prof. N. C. Sarma briefly writes that prior to the sowing of the seeds they celebrate two festivals known as *Gitehi pong* and *Michiltata*. The first is a personal sacrifice and the rest is a collective ceremony. These festivals are performed to ensure the favour of the spirit *Rokime* i.e. mother of rice. On the other hand *Rongchugala* or *Gidingala* festival is observed before the starting of the harvest and fruits are offered to the deities to ensure the good harvest. But the most important and the biggest of all the festivals among the indigenous Garos is *Wangala* or *Gurewata* festival celebrated to mark the end of the cultivation for a season.¹⁶³

H. S. Shiva Prakash in his book *Traditional Theatres* views that everywhere in the world rituals hold the germs of theatre and that the greatest theatres of the world have evolved from rituals.¹⁶⁴ Referring to the widely held view of the relationship between drama and ritual and its attachment to myths present in a culture Theodor Gaster in *Thespis* writes, 'Ritual is one of the parents of drama. The function of myth is to bring our in articulate fashion the inherent durative significance of the ritual programme. Its method is to construe the punctual order of ceremonies in terms of an ideal situation involving gods or similar transcendent and preterpunctual beings. Its effect is to turn presentation into representation, to introduce the elements of mimesis and confer upon the participants the added and parallel role of actors, so that they are at one and the same time protagonists of a direct experience and impersonator of characters other than their own. Ritual and myth are thus correlatives in a single whole and it is their organic combination that, in fact, produces drama.'¹⁶⁵ The *Wangala* dance which deals with different facets is representative of life and possesses several elements of drama. The rituals of *Wangala* dance starts as a thanksgiving festival but concludes in celebration through dances. D. R. Sangma considers this dance form as 'dance acts' and emphasises on the point that "of all the ceremonial performances in connection with the Garo agriculture, *Wangala* has the widest scope for dance activities and for singing of folk-

¹⁶³ Sarma, N. C. (2011). *Introduction to the Folklore of North-East India*. Guwahati: Bani Prakash Ltd, p. 168.

¹⁶⁴ Shiva Prakash, H. S. (2007). *Traditional Theatres*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree Academic, p.9.

¹⁶⁵ Gaster, Theodor H. (1950). *Thespis: Ritual, myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*. New York: Henry Schuman, p. 55.

songs of great variety. More native musical instruments are used in the *Wangala* than in any other ceremonial performance.”¹⁶⁶

In his reference to the African theatre E. T. Kerby in his essay titled *Indigenous African Theatre* mentions of theatre as something involved with simple enactments, rituals, performances on stories, masquerades, ceremonial performances. (quoted in *Rethinking Folk Drama* Steve Tillis)¹⁶⁷ In the context of theatre of the Garos these elements may be derived from the varieties of folk songs, story-telling tradition known as *Katta Agana*, the myths concerning various ceremonies of the Garo people and so on. Being primarily an oral society the Garos have in their repertoire historical accounts of their origins, myths associated with their culture, tales of the great heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses, etc.

The tradition of epic narration or *Katta Agana* among the Gaors is very prominent. These songs which can be found in oral form deal with the adventures of exceptionally powerful people. The songs are narrated by employing an ornamental language to increase the grandeur about the story and at the same time heighten the excitement in the story. Dewansing R. Sangma in this context mentions of two varieties of epic songs. He describes that “*Katta Agana* means Epic Story Narration and *Katta Doka* means Epic Story Moulding; and the underlying connotation in both the terms is that Epic Story Narration or Moulding is lively, grand, naturally heroic, lofty and nobly elevated and that whatever is grand, lofty and heroic must be of necessity be given out only in superb poetry.”¹⁶⁸ The epic lore of *Katta Agana* describes a land inhabited by powerful heroes and beautiful ladies and also by people who were wise and courageous. This form of narration a range of varieties such as *Dokkotchua*, *Ring-badria*, *Katchi Doka*, *Katchi Ring-a*, *Dokmandea* or *A-beng Katta*, *Ruga Katta*, *Chisak Katta* and *Ring-dikgila*.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Sangma, D. R. (2015). *The Traditional Dances of the Garos*. Tura: D. J. Publication, pp. 47-49.

¹⁶⁷ Kirby, E.T. “Indigenous African Theatre.” *The Drama Review*, 1974, 22-35, Quoted in *Rethinking Folk Drama*, Steve Tillis, ed. 1999, p. 128.

¹⁶⁸ Sangma, D. R. (2008). “Introduction.” *The Epic Lore of the Garos*. Guwahati: Gauhati University. p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Sangma, Milton S. (2014). *History of Garo Literature*. Tura: D. I. Publication. p. 11.

Folk theatre has been categorized differently by various writers. Sailen Bharali while discussing the folk theatre forms of Assam has divided it into three categories namely, songs and dance specific, quasi dramatic and Yatra.¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, in a little different manner, Bharat Bhusan Mohanty in his course of discussion on the folk theatre of Odisha considers it to be of three kinds viz. song specific, dance specific and both dance and song specific.¹⁷¹ As a form of folk theatre *Wangala*, the theatre of the Garos, is represented by the rituals involved with its celebration and have several divisions of it. Garo theatre, betraying a greater extension, is divided into seven types by Barabara Sangma. They are explained as Prayer and incantations-oriented, Song-oriented, Narration-oriented, Dirge-oriented, Dance-oriented, Combination of both song and dance along with dialogues and Christian Devotional forms.¹⁷²

In the category of prayer and incantation oriented theatre the performance begins with the ritual of *cha-chat so-a* (Incense burning) in the house of the head of the village where it is celebrated. Prayers and incantations are chanted by the priest in the honour of *Misi Saljong Jobepa Rangrupa* and to *Meenma Rokkime*, divinities of light and fertility by employing distinctive tones of the voice, gestures, language and delivery of dialogues. The same ritual once it is over with the house of the head is repeated in every other house in the village.

In Dance-oriented theatre immediately after the chanting of the prayers and incantations are over the drum beats begin and a procession of young men, boys and girls under the leadership of a young man starts off. As the drum beats are played to a rhythmic tune the leader of the troupe (*A-king Nokma*), clad in traditional war dress and holding *mil-am* (sword) and *spi* (shield) in his hands, takes the centre of the line-formation and sings to the glory of the Garo people.

¹⁷⁰ Bharali, Sailen. (2000). *Asamiya Loka-Natya Parampara*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash. p. 28.

¹⁷¹ Mohanty, B. B. (2012). *Folk Theatre Beyond Boundaries*. Guwahati: DVS Publishers. pp. 13-14.

¹⁷² Sangma, B. (2013). "From the Rituals to the Stage: The Journey of *A-chik* Folk Theatre." *The NEHU Journal*, Vol XI, No. 2, p. 57.

The lead-dancer as he dances with his wild and forceful movements the *Grika* (War dance), he sings out in assertion and jubilation the significance of the achievements that he has attained so far for his land, his people including his mother and sisters. The real idea behind such self-proclamation is to exhibit both physical and mental power of a warrior. In the group both the boys and the girls form two separate forward looking lines and as they dance together they gently shout in unison the expression ‘*ahaea...ahaea.*’ The celebration of dance goes on through the entire village as the dancers perform at every household of the village amidst eating and drinking of traditional rice-beer.

In Song-oriented Garo theatre, songs that belong to the folk category are sung to have a laugh at each other during the celebrations. A song turns into a folk song when it is passed along and rephrased or used by others for whom it acts a means of expressing shared attitudes or feelings. A folksong does not become folksong merely because a lot of people like it or because thousands have listened to it, but more because of the fact that some have persisted in singing it among themselves and in their own way. In course of time the song picks up the colourations, nuances and styles of the group among whom it circulates, and gets continuously rephrased to suit their responses to time, place, rhetoric and performance.¹⁷³ There are a large number of folksongs which form a part of the *Wangala* and are sung by the people participating in it. They are usually sung amidst dinning, rhythmic sounds of the native musical instruments by some men and women who “engage themselves in twos in singing folk-songs such as *Doroa, Ajea, Ajebawila, Rerekal-a, Dani Ring-a, Kore Doka, Kabe Ring-a, Gosae Ring-a, Cherra and Gagae Ring-a.*”¹⁷⁴ The songs and dances are performed in order to ward off the evil forces that are believed to surround mankind and help them to be blessed by the divinities with good spirits, strength, courage and honour.

The Narration-oriented theatre of the Garos are better known as *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka* while the narrator of such epics is called the *Katta Agangipa*. The stories of the epic lore are primarily about mighty heroes and captivating ladies and the mighty

¹⁷³ Toelken, Barre. (1986). “Ballads and Folksongs.” *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, Elliot Oring (ed.). Logan Utah: Utah State University Press.

¹⁷⁴ Sangma, D. R. (1996). *The Traditional Dances of the Garos*. Tura: D. J. Publication, p. 53.

deeds of those people. The *Agangipa* sings describing the fantastic actions of the heroes and heroines including their ways of living, their passions for love and war. The *Agangipa* through his talents can transform the simple story telling experience into an entirely different experience and transfer its audience to live in a world of make-believe.

The epics have either *Dikki* or *Bandi* as heroes while *Giting* and *Sore* as heroines. The Narration based theatre has a variety of *Katta Agana*, such as “*Dokkotchua*, *Ring-badira*, *Katchi Doka*, *Katchi Ring-a*, *Dokamandea* or *A-beng Katta*, *Ruga Katta*, *A-we KAtta*, *Chisak Katta* and *Rin-dikgila*.”¹⁷⁵ The themes of these *Katta Agana* are based on subject matters that are either of romantic, tragic or of heroic nature and contain materials that can fill the audience with joy. It is reminiscent of the life of the Garos of the olden days as it describes with excitement the stories of war, adventures, love and hatred and splendour that the Garo people have had always associated with.

Another type of Garo theatre which belongs to the oral tradition is based on the songs of lamentation or dirge. In the Garo language it is known as *Kabe* although it is called by various other terms as well such as *Grapmangtata*, *Grapme-chisola*, *Kabe Sola*, *Grapme-chiwaka*, etc. The primary features of presenting the songs with their distinctive tune and intonations remain same although the content of the lamentations change in reference to the deceased person. It is strongly believed that with the help of the proper rendition of the songs the spirits of the dead persons can be led to a better life after death. In the performance of the *Kabe*, recitations or songs are sung about the good deeds of the deceased believing that it would earn him honour and appreciation. The lamentations or dirges are sung at various stages concerning the death of a person and the subsequent cremation and the final burial of the bones of the dead.

There are songs that are sung by the female relatives at the loss of a man and another kind that is sung at the death of a married man. Dirges are also there which are sung at the moment of cleansing the dead body by the female members of the family with rice beer. Dirges are sung when as per belief the soul of the deceased, after the

¹⁷⁵ Sangma, Milton S. (2014). *History of Garo Literature*. Tura: D. I. Publication. p. 10.

body is cremated, is guided into the house in order to help the spirit to roam around. At the time of collection of the bones from the ashes and the subsequent bringing of them into the house is also marked by lamentation songs. In the same way dirges are sung when the bones are buried at a particular place with the paddy seeds being strewn over it.

But the most sophisticated of all the varieties of Garo theatre is the one which involves diverse forms of songs, dance, dialogue and also acting. Under this category of theatre, plays that have been transformed into written format from the oral tradition are taken into consideration. Thus, plays such as *Serejing aro Waljan* and *Khalsin aro Sonatchi* are representative of this type of folk theatre in Garo language.

The folk theatre of the Garos is known by the term *Gahon* which has been derived from the term *gan* as in *Kushan Gan* of Assam. In her paper titled *Some aspects of the A-chik Culture in the Brahmaputra Valley*, C. R. Marak traces the origin of Garo theatre to a village called Benagong Budalong in Goalpara district of Assam. The Garo theatre developed out of the different drama traditions that were in practice along the border of Assam and Meghalaya.¹⁷⁶

The traditional folk dramas that have been given a written format are of romantic nature and it is the *Gaiok* (singer) who narrates the whole story with the help of certain characters in the plays. The breaks between the events in the story are filled by him giving it a complete meaning. The plays are based on the aspects of the social life and the saga of love between young men and women. The *gahons* or the traditional folk of the Garos have also taken materials from the other available sources for drama such as the Bible, the two great Indian epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and also from the theatre forms prevalent on the border areas of Assam.

¹⁷⁶ Marak, C. R. (2004). "Some aspects of the A-chik Culture in the Brahmaputra Valley." *Rivers and Culture: Focus on Garo Hills*. C. R. Marak and Sujit Som (eds.). New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, p. 10.

The most representative and also popular plays of the traditional Garo theatre, *Serejing aro Waljan* and *Khalsin aro Sonatchi*, were put down to written form by Julius L. R. Marak. However, the second play of the two has been transformed into a novel also with the same title by Redin Momin in 1972. It is usually accepted that *Serejing aro Waljan* is the first Garo play recorded into a written form. According to the playwright the play was first performed in around 1937-38 and turned out to be hugely popular in Dambo-Rongjeng in East Garo Hills District.¹⁷⁷

On the other hand, as per the playwright the material for the play *Khalsin aro Sonatchi* was collected in the early forties that was initially found in the form of verse. However, it was transformed into a play later in the mid fifties. Both the plays earned great popularity not only in Garo Hills but also in those areas of Assam where substantial numbers of Garo people inhabited, particularly in the Goalpara district of Assam.

Garo theatre at present

The place of theatre as conceived in the modern times with all the sophistications is hardly visible among the Garo society although it is always present in their rituals and traditions associated with their day to day existence. The dances, folk songs or the epic narrations which the Garo people practice are evident of the inherent elements of theatre. But the gradual loss of interest of the younger generation in learning the ways of the indigenous life of the Garo people has adversely affected the growth of theatre in Meghalaya. But at the same time, of late, there has been a renewed interest among the youths to follow the traditional practices.

As a part of such attempts some have already begun to take up the genre of theatre seriously through their association with theatre groups from Assam who have already made a mark in this field. As Barbara Sangma has noted that *A·chik Theatre*, an amateur theatre group, has produced two very popular plays namely *A·chik A·song* (Land

¹⁷⁷ Marak, J. L. R. (1999). "Introduction." *Serejing aro Waljan*. Mankachar: Dr. Julius L. R. Marak. pp. 6-12.

of the Garos) and *Du-kon* in collaboration with *Dapon, the Mirror*, a well-known theatre group based in Tangla, Assam.¹⁷⁸

The play is based on the life and sacrifice of Togan Nengminza, a young energetic, courageous and lover of freedom, who fought for the freedom of the Garo people from his grasp of the British rulers. It is a play on the socio-political history of the people of the Garo Hills during 1870-1872. In the beginning of the play a grandmother appears and recounts the heroic incidents found in Garo mythology and mentions about the time of the play. The play describes how the villagers prior to the arrival of the British were very happy to live their lives at their will until the British begun to impose their norms on the freedom loving people of Garo Hills. Dissatisfied with the rule of the British, Togan Nengminza decided to stand up against the policy of invasion which was endorsed by the more powerful opponent with a group of around forty young people. But as presumed earlier, the inadequately equipped small force of the Garo people was easily defeated by the British force which saw the ultimate sacrifice of Togan Nengminza, an act that has made him the most cherished hero of the Garo people. It was the first and the last armed struggle of the Garo people against the British.

The other play *Du-kon* brought up by the joint effort of the two groups was first staged in Tura District Auditorium. Although the story of the play has already been there in oral form yet the script of the same resulted out of a month long workshop conducted under the guidance of Pabitra Rabha, an alumnus of the NSD and the backbone of *Dapon, the Mirror*. The play relates to the contemporary social conditions which has been threatened by the lack of humanity, love, brotherhood, kindness and is placed with the ever increasing amount of hatred, violence and insatiable greed. The word *Du-kon* in Garo language refers to a magical plant stepping on which would infuse into one a sense of confusion. The person is so bewildered that he keeps on moving about the same place until someone touches the person to regain his senses. This idea of the *Du-kon* was adopted to point out to the modern situation where chances of getting lost in the wilderness of abundances are extremely high. The director, Pabitra Rabha, through the

¹⁷⁸ Sangma, B. (2013). "From the Rituals to the Stage: The Journey of *A-chik* Folk Theatre." *The NEHU Journal*, Vol XI, No. 2, p. 68.

play wishes to raise his concerns for the inability of human beings to maintain equilibrium under the increasing pressure that has arisen out of the ever expanding impact of competition against each other.

The traditional forms of theatre of the Garos are without any proper stage, setting or other properties that are usually required in modern times to present a play before an audience. However, it does not necessarily mean that there is no presence of theatre forms in their culture. The theatre of the Garos is specific to the community which is closely associated with rituals, songs, dances or chantings similar to many other theatre forms that are found elsewhere in India. Usually, all folk theatres, particularly in India, have a deep connection with temple and the related manners of worship. But, with a little difference, for the Garos they do not have a permanent building or place for their worship of the deities- *Misi Saljong*, the god of fertility and *Mima Kiri Rokkime*, the goddess of paddy. The site of worship may keep on changing depending upon the circumstances and requirements. The simple accommodation at one point of time becomes a temple like place to be used for praying while even the paddy fields, the stream-sides can also be used as place to worship the divine powers on occasions when it is required.

It is not the folk theatre forms of India only but in other parts of the world also that the dialogues of folk theatres initially were in verse form which were given prosaic form only in later periods. In the same way, the dialogues of the traditional *Katta Agana* are always presented in the verse form. Only in recent times, the activities of the theatre groups have been carried out in the form of prose dialogues. The ritual of Incense burning performed at the start of *Wangala* or the subsequent *War dance* (Grika in Garo language) are all done in verse.

As practiced in many other folk dramas where dances are performed in the honour of the respective divinity of a community of people, in the Garo society also, the *Wangala* tradition contains rituals that are presented in the honour of their deities.

The traditional theatre of the Garos or *A-chiks* represent a kind of theatre that is specific to the community and its rituals. The elements of traditional Indian theatre that manifest through a synthesis of music, dance and drama are evident in this form.

4.8 Development of Khasi Literature

The Khasis, very often like to be called by various other names such as *Khyndriams*, *Pnars*, *Bhois*, *Marama*, *Lyngngams*, inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya who have now mostly become Christians. They used to believe earlier in a Supreme Being, the Creator, U Blei Nongthaw. The Khasi people have a rich heritage in performing arts. "The people are music loving and express in songs their proverb, folk-tale and epic. In the past, victories in wars were celebrated with folk-songs or community singings when the victorious men returned. Folk-songs are sung to nature, to the wonders of creation and to the exhilarating scenes."¹⁷⁹ Written Khasi literature is not very old as they did not have a literature of their own. It was 1841 when for the first time Khasi alphabets derived out of the Roman alphabets were developed. But, in spite of the recent introduction of written form in Khasi language, its literature has made remarkable progress in every form of it. It is believed that the Khasi people had a script of their own but it was "lost during an incendiary at Nongkseh (old capital of Shillong State), but another story says that it was lost in a flood. The flood episode causing loss of their script is interesting. It tells that two survivors managed to escape the flood by swimming across. One swimmer was Khasi and the other was a person known as *u dakhar*. Both carried with them only the bundles of their respective scripts. The *dakhar* managed to retain his script while swimming through, but the Khasi swimmer swallowed his."¹⁸⁰ As a result of the consumption it is further assumed that the script got blended with the flesh and blood of the Khasis so deeply that it finally helped them to produce an oral literature with all the varied forms such as songs, folk-tales, poetry and incantations which emerged upon them as naturally as leaves would to trees. Prior to the adoption of the written script developed by the Baptist Missionaries, the Khasi people had to depend

¹⁷⁹ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 7.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p.13.

upon the Assamese, Bengali or Devanagari scripts in order to maintain communication with other counterparts.

The British administrators, even before their occupation of Meghalaya in the 19th century, had set up their base at Sylhet early in the eighteenth century, with the East India Company at the forefront. Sylhet was treated as an important centre for commerce with its ports of Sylhet that could strengthen the British economy. Since the region of Sylhet was close to the areas inhabited by the Khasis there were intermittent raids on their areas that led the British to reinforce the border areas through prohibiting supply of items from the Khasi people. However, the construction of the road between the Brahmaputra valley across the state of Nongkhaw and Kolkata in 1837 helped to ease the tensed situation to a great extent. The hostility between the British and the Khasi finally had come an end when a number of treaties were signed between the Khasi states and the British counterpart in 1861-62 and the later took over the administration of the region. The British administration decided to shift the head quarter from Cherrapunjee to Shillong in 1864. Ten years later in 1874, the British government created a united province with Assam and East Bengal and Shillong being designated as the capital.

But, much before the political contacts with the Khasi people were established the Missionaries had already made considerable efforts at bringing these people closer through religious and cultural exchanges. The Baptist Missionaries who had their head quarter located Serampore were indeed trying to send the message of God in the manner of the translated version of the scriptures into Khasi language. It was, however, done using the Bengali scripts since there was no Khasi script available till then. "At the initiative of Dr. William Carey stationed at Serampore, a translation of the New Testament into Khasi was started in 1813 and printed in Bengali characters in 1824, which was however found to be unintelligible to the native speakers."¹⁸¹ After this failed attempt another effort was made in 1831 once again by using the same Bengali characters which was published by the Serampore Baptist. It becomes clear that the New Testament could not be translated correctly in the first attempt. The first translation was done with the help of one who knew both the Khasi and Bengali languages but whose

¹⁸¹ Marak, C. R. and J. S. Shangpliang. (2008). "Introduction." *Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. iii.

identity is not known. However, in the following attempts it is assumed that two young Khasi students namely Bi Tham and Ram Singh Rani who were studying at the Serampore College that was established in 1819 had helped in translating the New Testament into Khasi language part by part. Both the translators exhibited great mastery over the two languages involved. “Bi Tham and Rani thus shouldered the gigantic task in Bible translation giving to the people the first and foremost kind of literature.”¹⁸²

From the perspective of Garo language the year of 1841 is very significant since it was the moment when Khasi language had its first script developed on the foundation of Roman script. The noble and arduous endeavour was taken up by Thomas James I, the first missionary of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission. Immediately after his arrival at the base in Sohra (Cherrapunjee) he began to learn the Khasi language and set out to translate certain works into Khasi. But, unlike his predecessors who attempted to do such works by using Bengali alphabets, Thomas Jones I decided to give the language a new identity and a certain amount of ease in both reading and writing. As a result of this intention in mind he developed the Khasi script which has now become the recognized script of Khasi language. Immediately after the introduction of the new alphabets of Khasi language Thomas Jones brought out the *Ka Kot Pule Banyngkong* (The First Khasi Reader) in 1842 which was printed at Calcutta Baptist Press. It was soon followed by *Rhodd Man* (Mother's Gift), a Welsh book which marked the beginning of Khasi literature.¹⁸³ Jones also published two very small books, in terms of their sizes only though not in importance, on Christian catechism and a translated version of St. Mathews.

The nature of the nascent literature of the Khasi language was chiefly Christian as the Missionaries took the initiatives in producing them. However, the foundation for the future writers was laid down through the efforts of the missionaries which includes apart from Jones I, William Lewis, Griffith Hughes, Thomas Jones II, Thomas Jarman Jones and Hugh Roberts. Because of the incessant efforts the first complete Bible was published in 1899 though its translation was completed in 1891.

¹⁸² Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 35.

¹⁸³ Marak, C. R. and J. S. Shangpliang. (2008). “Introduction.” *Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. iii.

During the middle of the nineteenth century the British government was gradually taking over the administration of the entire region under their control and as a necessity showed greater interest in learning the native language. Consequently, books on Khasi language and grammar were produced by the missionaries. As part of this programme W. Pryse published *An Introduction to Khasi Language* while his fellow Hugh Roberts published the *Dictionary (Anglo-Khasi)* and also a grammar book within the period 1855-1891. With all these books published there was an atmosphere which was in the mood of newer kind of creative literature based on the indigenous notions and cultural heritage.

In response to such demands from the people Amjad Ali, the son of Nawab Sheikh Mahammed Amjad Ali of Murshidabad, who studied in Shillong and imbibed into him the language and the culture of the Khasi people, attempted to write secular poems specially for the children. The work titled *Ka Myntoi na ka Boit* was published in 1888 and is regarded as the first complete book of poetry although poems had been published earlier sparsely in different places. In this monumental work Amjad Ali was able to infuse the varied forms of ethnic genius thus displaying his ability to give expression to his high intellectual insight and maturity of thought. In spite of him being a non-native he could well perceive the aspirations of the local people and called for the reformation of the dynamics of Khasi life. "He wanted to see the solidarity and united move of the tribe that should attain strength to rule themselves as well as to build the effective pattern of culture, art and religion on the basis of self-reliance."¹⁸⁴

The other notable contributor to the development of Khasi literature in its early stage was John Roberts, a missionary, who was quite well-conversant in the English classics as well as in the local language. His contribution to the Khasi literature mainly comprised of translated works, compilations of *Phawers* (traditional oral verses) and few Readers. He is best remembered for the textbooks which included lessons on moral and ethical aspects of life. In the Third Reader he included a few Aesop's fables while in the Fourth Reader there were translations of dialogues, parables and short stories taken from the *English Spectator*. It is interesting to note that unlike many other missionaries

¹⁸⁴ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 42.

Roberts produced more numbers of secular works than religious works concerning Christianity. Towards his later years he attempted to translate the famous *Pilgrims' Progress* of John Bunyan but he expired before he could finish the job. It was later finished together by his wife and Mondon Bareh.

As the new century set in there was a renewed energy that filled the domain of Khasi literature with vigour and self-consciousness. The approach which the writers of the past had adopted was gradually replaced by a new set of ideals and notions. The writers, awakened to the new call, begun to concentrate on the indigenous ideas and concepts. The writers were expected to produce original creative writings which would be blend of both traditional as well as modern ideas.

Among the pioneers who made great efforts to evoke this sentiment were Babu Jeebon Roy Mairom and Sib Charan Roy were the most notable ones. Jeebon Roy (1838-1903) was a very powerful figure during the rule of the British who began his career as an interpreter and concluded as a magistrate. It was he who for the first time infused the idea of Khasi identity that dawned upon him out of his experiences with the world outside and the studies of literatures in Sanskrit, Bengali and English languages. With a mission to stimulate interest in the Khasi tradition and culture Jeebon Roy established *Ri Khasi Press* at Umsohsun, Shillong in 1896. The press is dedicated towards the printing of works on Khasi society and has been serving the people of Meghalaya serving till date. Jeebon Roy was also instrumental in founding *Seng Khasi*, the most prominent organization for preservation and expansion of Khasi dance, music and art among its people.

As far as literature is concerned Jeebon Roy published his first book entitled *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (The Religion of the Khasis) in 1897 which provides information on the traditional rites, customs and other ways of Khasi living. In this book Babu Jeebon Roy appeals the Khasis to uphold the high values, beliefs and tenets which the religion offers to its people. He came out with another very important book on Khasi religion entitled *Ka Kitab Shahang Uwei U Blei* which is considered as a gem of monotheistic theology.

Apart from these books loaded with religious ideas Jeebon Roy also published three primers to be used as school text-books. His first primer titled *Ka Kitab Khasi Banyngkong* is an orthography but his second and third primers with the titles *Ka Kitab Khasi Kaba Ar* and *Ka Kitab Khasi Kaba Lai* respectively contain folk-tales and moral pleadings which “served as the guidelines for common people to understand his objects and philosophy.”¹⁸⁵ These primers had in them certain dialogues that may be considered as the earliest traces of drama in Khasi language. Jeebon Roy, besides these books, also translated quite a number of Hindu Classical texts or books into Khasi language. Among them mention may be made of the *Hitopadesha* (Part I-IV), *Ka Ramayana*, *Ka Kitab Chaitanya*, *Buddha Deb Charita*. Another important contribution to Khasi literature was his book on Indian history titled *Ka History Jong Ka Ri India*. Babu Jeebon Roy was a pioneer in many fields of knowledge, particularly for the Khasi people. He was at the same time an educationist, an entrepreneur, an administrator, printer, writer and a great humanitarian- one who had immensely inspired the following generation to take up the path that he showed for the followers to tread on.

U Sib Charan Roy was another architect whose literary career extended from 1902 to 1925. He wrote primarily on the culture of Khasi people although he wrote on other subjects also. Like his predecessor Jeebon Roy, Sib Charan Roy also wrote to awaken its own people to the indigenous religious and cultural ideas through his books. With this objective in mind he first wrote *Ka Jingpyani Ka Kmie Bad Ki Khun* in 1911 followed by two other works *Ka Kot Tohkit Tir Tir* and *Ka Niam Ki Khasi* in 1913 and 1919 respectively. The first book contains appeals for the preservation of the old religious concepts through practise so that they can be protected from the assaults from the other religious ideals. The second book as well as the third book also focussed on similar aspects of religion. Third book, in particular, is concerned with Khasi monotheistic beliefs that speak of eternal truth, of god as infinite and omnipotent. Apart from these books he also translated the Bhagavad Gita into Khasi and published in 1903.

¹⁸⁵ Singh, G, P. (2009). “Tribal Socio-Religio-Cultural Renaissance and Reform Movements in North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” *Historical Researches into Some Aspects of the Culture and Civilization of North -East India*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, p. 265.

The poetry of the early twentieth century began with the publication of *Ka Jingsneng Tynmen* which was published by Radhon Singh Berry in two parts from 1902-1903. He is regarded as the first poet in Khasi language. While writing his poems he was able to exploit the traditional *Phawars*, using its metrical and rhythmic patterns. It was basically an extension of the traditional proverbs which were given modern expression while keeping the ethical values of them unchanged. Although small in size it is important for the reason that it had displayed originality of thought as well as treatment.

Rabon Singh, another significant poet, attempted to explain the different aspects of *Phawars* in his book *Kitab Jingphawar*. In the book Singh put in plain words how the *Phawars* are composed by people and also the manners in which they are presented on various occasions. Traditionally, the *Phawars* are sung on certain festivals or rituals such as at time of disposal of bones of the deceased members of the family in a large cromlech or on the occasion of taking of enemy heads.¹⁸⁶

Khasi literature in the first two decades of the twentieth century was concerned with the creation of a consciousness about the traditional culture which had been for a long period left ignored. Empowered by the Western education the learned Khasi persons came to realize how important it was for them to revive the forgotten and also threatened culture of the Khasi people.

Modern Khasi Literature accounts the valuable contributions of figures like Dr. D.I H. Lyngdoh, G. Costa, Soso Tham, P. Gatphoh, and H. Elias. Dr. Lyngdoh was the first Khasi to have qualified for L.M.S in 1903. He served his people in various capacities and during his service period but at the same time he became keenly interested in the traditional ways of Khasi living, in particular, the rituals concerning the cremation of the deceased as well as the traditional festival of sacrifice held at Smit. He later published his most important work on Khasi religion entitled *Ka Niam Khasi*.

G. Costa was interested in the areas of ethnology, anthropology and also the Khasi society. On the basis of his extensive studies he brought out a book in two volumes titled *Ka Riti Jong ka Ri Laiphew Syiem* (Customary Law of the Land of Thirty Syiem).

¹⁸⁶ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 56.

In the genre of poetry after the publications of both Radhon Singh Berry and Rabon Singh who exhibited in their works the potentialities of the form of *Phawars* there was a long silence of more than a decade before another poet of original thinking could emerge on the scenario of Khasi literature. This long quietness was broken by the appearance of U Soso Tham in 1925 with his valuable work *Ki Poetry Khasi*. The appearance of Soso Tham marked the beginning of a new spirit in Khasi poetry. "His profound love of village life, his sympathy with the poor and his romanticism are the key-note: and for the depth of love, the height of nobility, richness of imagination and power of vision that governed his creation, as his naive lyrics and ballads reflect. He used Western prosody, yet was remarkable for expression in the indigenous style and fashion."¹⁸⁷

His next important work of poetry was *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep* (The Light of the Seven Huts) that was published in 1937. It is considered by many as the *Illiad of the Khasi* because of its originality of thought, the splendour of imagination and use of language. The poems in the book reveal the traditional notions of the heaven and the hell as perceived by the Khasi people. The work presents a world never experienced before as it is filled with rich allegories, stories delivered in soothing metre and rhyme. *Ki Sngi* is an honest attempt by the poet to bring out the marked attributes of the earlier culture and civilization to the modern readers who are equipped with a different approach to life. Soso Tham with his gifted abilities to conceive, compose and present the indigenous ideas was able to lay the foundation of modern Khasi poetry for the following generations.

Inspired by the efforts of Soso Tham later writers like P. Gatphoh and H. Elias began to engage themselves with the compilation of traditional Khasi folk-tales as well as writing poetry. Primrose Gatphoh published his collection of folk-tales in the book entitled *Ki Khanatang bad u Sierlapalang*. The manner that is adopted for telling the stories involves a lucid, direct and at the same time forceful. They display the ability of the writer to deal with the historical and ethical concepts associated with the Khasi

¹⁸⁷ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 71.

traditions. He also wrote poetry meant for the children and had brought a book entitled *Ki Nursery rhymes bad ki Poitry rit* in 1941.

Following the same vein in the book *Ki Khanatang U Barim* H. Elias has included about 44 folk-tales most of which were not previously recorded by anyone. Besides this, Elias produced an epical narrative *Ka Saron Ksiar* in 1937. However, later on the title of the book was changed to *Ka Hamsaia Ki Por*. The work is filled with the spirit of patriotism and is reminiscent of the olden days of Syiemships when the Syiem along with other responsible and powerful figures protected the precious laws as laid down for them by the God. Elias wrote poems on the beauty of nature also which demonstrate his competence at the lucid, youthful expressions.

The literature of the Khasis after 1950's witnessed a surge in the production of greater number of creative writings in almost all the genres of literature. The greatest development, however, was noticed in the field of poetry since it is, as claimed by many, a forte of the people of Meghalaya in which the natural beauty of the land also lends a hand. Among the important poets who have notably contributed to this genre are V. G. Bareh, F. M. Pugh, Bajubon R. Kharlukhi, S. Khongsit, B. C. Jyrwa, Jerome Diengdoh, E. W. Dkhar and among the most recent ones K. N. Nongkynrih.

The form of novel, short stories and other forms have also made significant progress in their respective domains. The novelists of the sixties and seventies were uncertain about their work as it was an unfamiliar field to tread on although in later period the writers were able exhibit certain amount of maturity in treating the themes which were still mostly concerned with the traditional issues of Khasi lives. The influence of the news papers, journals and magazines on Khasi literature is greatly felt. The first newspaper *U Nonkit Khubor* was published as early as in 1889 from Calcutta. It was published by Presbyterian missionary with Williams Williams as the editor chiefly to propagate Christian faith in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The next newspaper which was brought out in 1896 was titled *U Khasi Mynta* edited by H. Diengdoh. Unlike the previous one it was secular in approach and as such dealt with contemporary issues of all kinds. There was simultaneous growth of journals which became because of their ability to accommodate diverse topics and offer the writers ample opportunities to express their

point of view. This has resulted into emergence of more than eighty numbers of both newspapers and journals.

Formally born in 1841 along with the appearance of scripts for writing in Khasi language, Khasi literature has made significant progress over the years. But in comparison to other established literatures it is still in a growing stage and for this reason it is sometimes viewed with the sense of admiration as well as with doubt. Nevertheless, Khasi literature has been able create an identity of its own as envisaged by those who laid its foundation in the past.

4.9 Development of the theatre of the Khasis

As far as drama at the early stage of Khasi literature is concerned it was not making any significant development since the notion of drama as understood in the modern sense was not available in traditional culture of the Khasi people. However, the elements of theatre can be traced in the forms of drama that travelled along with the people from the neighbouring regions who had come to various parts of Meghalaya to do jobs under the British government.

The first germ of theatre entered from the erstwhile East Bengal when the educated upper class of people came from there to Shillong. In a similar way there was an inflow of Assamese people to Shillong when it was declared the capital of the whole Province of Assam. It was the Bengali and Assamese people who had by then a much developed theatre tradition in their respective places of origin. When they came they had brought along their theatre to the new place.

However, it is to be mentioned here that much before the arrival of the Bengali people in Shillong the Khasi people living on the border areas closer to Sylhet, Mymensing , etc.had already come into contact with the traditional theatre forms of the then East Bengal. The places mentioned being the centres of trade and commerce had been frequently visited by the Khasi people and there is every probability that they had seen theatrical performances held in those places on certain occasions.

Many of the earlier performances which were made on certain specific days perhaps had been done with the only objective of providing entertainment to the bulk of

the audience. However, with the arrival of the Missionaries in Khasi Hills the practice of holding theatre performances spread from Jaintiapur to Jowai, then moved on to Nongkrem, Mawngap, Mawphlang and at long last it arrived in Shillong. During the early period of its development theatre performances were made mostly on the themes adopted from the myths and legends of the plains, particularly the areas that lie closer to Bengal and Assam of that time. But, gradually themes taken from the Christian scriptures were also taken up and small episodes were presented especially on the Christmas Day or the New Year Day although none of the manuscripts prepared for such performances has survived for the posterity. However, on the basis of what has been available it is found that John Roberts, the missionary who was instrumental in giving Khasi literature a pace, was the first to experiment in this field. He translated an Act from Shakespeare's famous play Julius Caesar into Khasi and included in the Fourth Khasi Reader published in 1895.¹⁸⁸

***Ka Seng Khasi* and Khasi Theatre**

The birth of *Ka Seng Khasi* in Khasi Hills marked a new beginning in the development of culture of the Khasi people by creating a consciousness among the people urging them to give importance to the traditional songs, dance forms and myriad other aspects related to the Khasi culture. The organization facilitated the Khasi people with a platform to practise and profess their own culture including dramatic activities. As a result of such attempts and also due to the necessities felt by the Khasi leaders a permanent auditorium was built in 1899. The objective of the theatre promoted by the organization was not just to provide entertainment to its people but rather to instil and sustain the moral principles in them through the illustration of victory of good over evil forces.

During the same period the community of Assamese people had been searching for a piece of land so that they could practice and preserve their own culture and on their request the Syiem gave a plot of land in the Laban area within Shillong and subsequently the Assam Club of Laban was formed. The formation of the Assam Club in Laban also gave Khasi theatre a push for the exploration of the genre. Although the form

¹⁸⁸ Sten, H. W. (1990). *Khasi Poetry: Its Origin and Development*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, pp. 97-98.

of theatre was not an entirely new one for the people of Khasi Hills yet it took many years to have a completely original play in Khasi language. The first text of play credited as original in Khasi language was *Ka Savitri* written by Sri Haricharan Roy as late as in 1910.

The development of Khasi theatre could not have been possible without the enormous contributions of two eminent theatre personalities- U Hari Charan Roy Dkhar and U Dino Nath Roy Dkhar, both sons of the another great Khasi person, Jeebon Roy. As noted earlier U Hari Charan Roy brought out *Ka Savitri* in 1910, the first play of Khasi origin. On the other hand, U Dino Nath Roy wrote *ka Srommotimai* in 1912. He also wrote two other plays titled *U Arbnai* and *U Tipsngi*. The plays were later included in the *3 Tylli ki Drama*, an anthology published in 1964 and also in *4 Tylli ki Drama* in 1974 respectively. The playwrights, like their father Jeebon Roy, were much influenced by Hindu philosophy and their plays vividly represent that impression in them.

Hari Charan Roy's *Ka Savitri* is based on the Hindu mythological story of Savitri, borrowed from the Mahabharata. As far as the theme of the play is concerned the dramatist did not change it and kept the spirit of the original play intact since it was found to be apt to give advices to the people on following the path of righteousness and truth. The play was written by H. C. Roy with an intention to present it on the stage and therefore scenes that were difficult to present were not included in the play. The chief protagonist is a pious Hindu lady who loves her husband and at the same time obedient to her father's will. Her strength of mind and spirit takes her out of all dangers and helps her to change the course of destiny. *Savitiri* sets an example of devotion, duty and honesty that every human being on earth should crave for. Although basically a Hindu story it resonates the same principles as found in the Bible which once again proves the fact that all religion stand for the same kind of values.

The play that came next to *Ka Savitri* was U Dino Nath Roy's *Ka Srommatimai* in 1912. Likewise the previous play it also deals with the theme of righteousness. The play is divided into scenes wherein D. N. Roy gives expression to his affinity of the Hindu mythologies and literature. In the play the hero, an emperor, performs the role of a man who wishes to prevail over the cruelty of death by regeneration to life forever. The

emperor is driven by his spirit of goodwill and wants to offer services for the betterment of the lives of other people. In this endeavour he, along with his companions, comes across with Srommotimai and ends her peril of curse to be blessed with a happy marriage.

The play *U Arbnaï* is about a prince and deals with the theme of victory of honesty in adversity. The play once again, through the actions of the hero Prince Arbnaï, demonstrates the validity of love and care for others.

The last of the three plays by D. N. Roy- *U Tipsngi* which was written in 1924. In the play *Tipsngi* belongs to a wealthy family but in spite of that he was full of human values such as warmth of love, compassion and spirit of brotherhood. It provides a reflection of the usual life of the contemporary society of those days of the past. The play was divided into two acts with each of them sub-divided in to seven and eight scenes respectively.

Hamlet Bareh in his book *A Short History of Khasi Literature* mentions that the themes the plays of both Hari Charan Roy and Dino Nath Roy involves 'honesty as adversity fixes the righteous persons to the great rigours at the first stage, but honesty as victory crowns them with the untold blessing finally.'¹⁸⁹

The plays produced so far by the two playwrights are representative of the genre of the morality plays that evolved in Europe. The plays had didactic purpose and their plots were designed to put up before the audience the eternal tussle between good versus evil forces.

Mondon Bareh's play titled *Ka Drama U Mihsngi* is yet another very important play that the playwright began to write in between 1928 and 1932 but due to his untimely death could not be completed then. It was, however, completed by his son Hamlet Bareh with an addition of the last Act to the play and subsequently published in 1966. The play is a courageous attempt on the part of the playwright as it tried to expose the hidden corruption and fake lives of certain Church leaders of that time. According to Hamlet Bareh, "it serves as a satire on degrading conditions depicting a

¹⁸⁹ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, pp. 54-55.

characterization of clownish, henpecked and dubious husbands as also domineering and self-centred women, and how both play their part leading to a total collapse of family.”¹⁹⁰

Nevertheless, it was under the aegis of *Seng Khasi* that the tradition of theatre really got a beginning in Meghalaya. It may well be perceived that at the initial stage of its development Khasi dramatists did not have a proper understanding of the rules of writing plays. Their sole concern and focus was to project a certain moral ideals such honesty and trust and also to generate a consciousness among the Khasis towards these ideals.

During the twenties several other dramatists came up with their plays but it is unfortunate that the scripts of many of them have been lost. Among the notable contributors to this field was Rash Mohan Roy Nongrum who had written two plays. The first of them was *Damayanti Bad U Nol* which is once again based on the Hindu mythological story of Nol and Damayanti and was published in 1924. On the other hand the second play that he wrote was titled *U Saimuka Ka Duitara*.

The thirties witnessed the emergence of a theatre hall in Shillong which was built by the Giti Natya Samaj and was named as *Opera Hall*. The hall became a place for staging mainly Bengali plays which were watched by people from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

During this period the contribution of the Catholic Church to the development of Khasi theatre had become more prominent particularly due to the efforts of Fr. A. Correngia. He took up the task of translating quite a few plays to Khasi language with his first play *U Diengduh U Kni* (Uncle's Walking Stick) being completed in 1936. He continued to carry on this job of translating plays into Khasi language till the sixties. Apart from Fr. Correngia there were a number of other fellow Church leaders who were quite engaged with imparting training to the young boys who used to come to receive it usually in the evenings.

¹⁹⁰ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 94.

The Khasi Native Club and Khasi Theatre

The *Khasi Native Club* during the Second World War became very active as they appeared on the various theatre halls of Shillong primarily the Seng Khasi Hall, the Opera Hall , etc. with strong scripts. Among the important presentations made during this phase were *Kathryn Bon Bora*, *Ka Romily* and *Ka Maryngod*. The group presented on the stage plays that are Khasi in content, design and theme. They were commentaries on the prevalent conditions of the society and it is matter of disappointment that none of these plays has survived the test of time.

Shillong Panora Club and Khasi Stage

With the advancement of time into the forties Khasi theatre got a renewed life at the hands of theatre activists like Peace Roy Pariat and his group Shillong Panora Club. From the moment of its inception in 1943 the group tried to bring about plenty of changes to the way theatre before an audience was performed. Prior to such efforts theatre clubs were only presenting plays that were imported from other cultural background with the cosmetic changes limited to the names of the characters, locales and language only. Peace Roy Pariat, unsatisfied with such measures of production, desired to write, produce and direct his plays on his own and formed the new Club leaving his early Khasi Native Club.

The club came up with a completely organized set up where the members had specific tasks to perform. Some of them had to do acting as well as manage a particular aspect concerning actual production of a play on the stage. Pariat himself was an efficient person who knew how to extract the attention of the people and persuade them to watch a play in the hall. With an intention intent to get greater number of audience the Club used to hold their performances on the days when Weiking festival was celebrated. As huge number of people from the surrounding villages gathered there to participate in the festival it was easy for the club to get good number of audience and subsequently earn some money. The Club was well equipped with stage props, dresses and other necessary articles.

The *Shillong Panora Club* made their first appearance on the stage on 3rd June, 1943 with their play titled *Ka Romily*. Inspired by the warm reception by the audience the Club came up in the following year with yet another play *leit, leit, yon, dei Jingieid Shet Khiew Jakai* (Love, Love, It is not a Game) which also turned out to be a huge success. In 1945 the Club produced the *Ka Bor Ksuid Pyrshah Bor Blei* (Diabolical Power versus Divine Power) in the Opera Hall which was once again received wider acclamation. The group was later invited to perform at various other places away from Shillong such as Maswngap, Mawsun, etc. where they presented this play.

The next venture of the group was a play titled *Ka Kyrzan* (Involving Luck), a play based on the simple life of the villages. Just like the other plays of the Club this one was also became an instant hit with the audience as they could view a reflection of the life they lead in reality. In 1946 the group of Pariat was invited to Nongkhleing where they presented *Ka Bor Ksuid Pyrshah Bor Blei*. Soon after the performance of the play was over the group was invited to visit Mawshun where a festival was organised. Overwhelmed by the warm reception and the successful enactment of the same play *Ka Bor Ksuid Pyrshah Bor Blei* and also at the earnest request of the people of Mawshun the group decided to present yet another play. As a result Peace Roy Pariat wrote *Ka Rhah* (Viciousness), an out and out comic play which made the spectators extremely pleased.

In the following year the Club came up with a new production *Na Nongkyndong sha Sor* (From Village to Town). In 1948 Shillong Panora Club presented their most important play *Shangkhawiah Ki Rang* (The Seductress or Snare for Men). Out all the plays that P. R. Pariat had written it is the only play which was published. *Shangkhawiah Ki Rang* deals with the very potent theme of modern society – the issue of prostitution. In the play the playwright has held both the men and women of the society responsible for the unwanted spread of prostitution. The play that followed *Shangkhawiah Ki Rang* was *Ka Maryngod* (A Timbrel).

Both P. R. Pariat along with Mondon Bareh could be considered as the first modern playwrights in Khasi for the reason that they were the ones who had initiated to write about the contemporary social problems which were gradually emerging the affect the Khasi society. P. R. Pariat and his theatre group were very much keen to present

dramatic scenes in the most realistic manner possible. They were so engaged with the notion of bringing realism to the stage that they once put a live horse on the stage during the enactment of the play *leit, ieit, yon, dei Jingieid Shet Khiew Jakai*. The plays of Pariat manifest the direct and strong tone that the playwright used to adopt while writing them. Concerned with the imminent dangers due to the blind pursuit of the Western ideas by the Khasi people these writers desired to make them aware of the necessity to follow the traditional practices.

During the forties certain other groups also contributed towards the development of Khasi theatre. *Ka Synjuk Wahindoh* was one such group which came to limelight for their presentation of plays on stage.

The Catholic Church and Theatre in Khasi

Khasi theatre in the fifties became a more variegated and forceful medium with the participation of greater number of people by either forming newer theatre group or by joining the ones already in place. Such transitions were noticed among the religious circles also and the Catholic Church did not lag behind to respond to the call of the times. Fr. Giulius Costa played a major role in carrying on the initiatives which were taken by Fr. Correngia in the thirties and encourage theatre in the Khasi Hills. Fr. Correngia translated a number of plays from English into Khasi. But except one all the rest were attempted after India attained its Independence. Roland Kharkrang lists a total of nine plays that were translated by Fr. Correngia.¹⁹¹ Most of the plays were either comedies or religious plays.

On the other hand, prior to the Second World War Fr. Costa during his stay in Shillong begun to work in this field by opening a society with the help of some young people. But the momentum was lost due to his transfer to the Garo Hills which resumed after he was brought back to Shillong in 1953. The society which had remained idle for so many years was revived and it was newly formed with the name *The Catholic Dramatic Society* in 1954-55. The first presentation under the new society was *Talisman* which was highly appreciated by the audience. It was soon followed by another operetta *Francis of*

¹⁹¹ Kharkrang, Roland. (1994). *Theatre: Art and Life*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, p. Appendix.

Assisi. Although the Catholic missions took up the task of translating many English plays into Khasi and attempted at occasional enactment of them on the stage yet the part of presenting these plays on the stage was by and large assumed later on by the *Rympei Theatrical Centre* which not only decided to publish the plays translated by the Catholic missionaries but also to present them on stage.

Perhaps, the best moment of the theatre of the Khasis came when the first historical drama *U Tirot Singh* was performed first in 1952 as a radio play broadcast by Shillong station which was written by Bashai Rai Dohling. However, a second version of the same subject was composed by Victor G. Bareh in 1954 and was presented on the stage by *Jaiaw Recreation and Cultural Club* at the Dinam Hall of Shillong. The printed version of the same came out in print later in 1956-57. The play is significant from the plays written before by the Khasi writers for the reason that it was the first time that a completely local theme was chosen which deals with the actual life of the Khasi people. It is concerned with the real life figure of U Tirot Singh's struggle against the British forces which was in reality not an individual fight but one that was waged against the foreign forces to reclaim the freedom, honour and pride of the indigenous people. The struggle between the British and the locals under the able leadership of U Tirot Singh continued from 1829 to 1833. The play brings to light the historical facts about the first struggle of the Khasi people for freedom from the British forces. It demonstrates the skills of U Tirot Singh's capacity in handling war situation and his indestructible spirit of personal freedom and pride in his own culture and heritage. "The loyalties, tenacious adherences and priceless sacrifices of the great masses of people are the other recollections; the mode of guerrilla warfare, an organised one, unfurls itself...The climax is reached at Tirot Singh's agreeing to be deported to Dacca which throws a pathetic scene."¹⁹² Although U Tirot Singh remains the focal point in the play the other characters in the play like Ka Phan Nonglait, Kohlehnoh or Monbhut also bear great significance as they display the same kind of character as is done by the hero. The play was successful in instilling the spirit of patriotism among people of Meghalaya and helped to consider the

¹⁹² Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 93.

struggle against the British not as an isolated event but to connect it with those that took place elsewhere in India of that time.

Khasi Theatre in the 60's

The scenario of Khasi theatre did not see much post the production of U Tirot Singh till the early sixties except a few translations carried out by Fr. Correngia as mentioned earlier. In the beginning of the sixties F. M. Pugh endeavoured to translate few famous English plays of Shakespeare into Khasi language. This group of plays consists of *Ka Drama Katba Phi Mon* (As You Like It), *U Romes bad Ka Juliet* (Romeo and Juliet) and *Ka Temding ia Ka Shla Briew* (The Taming of the Shrew) which were completed in 1961, 1963 and 1964 respectively.

In addition to these translations, Pugh also wrote few other plays of origin in nature. His *Ka Swaangka ia ki saw ngut ba iap mynsaw* is an example of the talent that Mr. Pugh had in him as a dramatist. "This drama is a probe into kinship allegiance and keeping of taboo, how neglect or violation of such sacred laws could lead the family or society to disastrous consequences."¹⁹³ His other play *Ka Sawanka ia ki san ngut ba iap* is a social drama that deals with a range of issues that had immediately affected the society such as drunkenness, broken relationships, etc. Likewise the previous play it also intends to make the point that the laws and values of a society should be maintained and respected by the members of it so to save the society from degradation and peril. Through the events of the play the playwright tries to present his argument even education which is supposed to make people wiser and enlightened does not fulfil the purpose. Instead of it some people having failed to realise the actual value of education begin to neglect the traditional values and rituals and subsequently bring in only devastation both to themselves as well as to the society they live in.

The decade of the sixties also marked with the emergence of various other dramatists who had made significant contributions to the improvement of the status of drama in the Khasi Hills. S. J. Duncan came out with his play *Ka Tiewlarun*. The play is based on an indigenous folk tale but with certain modifications in it. "The play is rich in

¹⁹³ Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers' Allied Society, p. 95.

appropriate metaphors and dictions. Words captivate the sense and imagination with lucidity.”¹⁹⁴ D. S. Khongdup’s play *U Baieit Donshkor* is again based on folk-tale in which the playwrights attempts to show how arrogance and lack of wisdom can cause damage to the state. The play presents two kings of contrasting characters, whereas King Sympa is of thoughtful and kind-hearted nature, King Kharai is brash, talkative and intriguing. The events of the play are made interesting by U Baieit Donshkor, the hero of the play, who later on assumes the control of the two kingdoms into his hands. In his play Khongdup employs metaphorical expressions to laden it with multitude of interpretations and thereby make it even more pleasant.

Khasi theatre in the Seventies

The growth and development of theatre in the Khasi Hills during the seventies was marked with the emergence of several highly competent playwrights and theatre groups which were gradually adopting new theatrical devices to stage their plays.

The *Rympei Theatrical Centre* was the most renowned group which led the new movement in drama in Khasi and has continued to provide entertainment to the public till date. The idea of forming a theatre group was conceived and properly explored by Kenny Shympa. Towards the end of the 1972 Shympa, driven by his desire to inculcate positive attitude and creativity among the youths of the local areas, wished to organise a workshop on drama among the youths of the area. With this aim in mind he invited the youths to participate in this programme which was responded well by all. He was encouraged by his seniors at the Church, particularly by Fr. George Vanni who gave the permission to use the infrastructure of the Cathedral Parish of Laitumkhrach. At the end of the workshop that lasted for about five months the group of participants came out with a production entitled *Ka Ngiew*, a translation of the English play *The Terror*.

The successful completion of the project inspired Kenny Shympa to form a theatre group and in June 1972, it was formally formed by keeping its name after the non-operational theatre *Rympei Catholic Club* founded in the early fifties by Fr. Vanni.

¹⁹⁴Bareh, Hamlet, N. (2004). *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Khasi Publishers’ Allied Society, p.96.

The first production put up on the stage under the new identity was *Ka Ngiew* which was well appreciated by the entire gathering of audience. The play was an adaptation of the original English play *The Terror* but Kenny Shympa, in order to give it a local flavour, had changed the names of the characters as well as places. Shympa wrote several other plays that are of both original and translated versions from English plays. Among them *Kaei Ka Daw*, *To la Map* and *Ka Lak Ka Putit* are most important.

In addition to these the theatre group presented a number of plays during the period of the seventies such as *Ka Pla I Nah*, *Namar Ka Ri*, *Steshon Shongtyrut*, *Arngut Ki Hippies*, *Laingui Shipara*, etc. The group still has been presenting plays though in a much lesser frequency. The main reason behind the shrinking of activities has been the gradual loss of the elder actors and the lack of interest among the new generation to join the genre.

Some of the theatre groups other than the Rympei Theatre Centre that have contributed are *Hynniew Trep Cultural and Welfare Organisation*, *longpiah Club*, *Don Bosco Technical School*, *Caroline Club*, *Synjuk Samla Riatsamthiah*, *Mawpat Catholic Theatrical Club*, etc.

Formed in 1978, the *Hynniew Trep Cultural and Welfare Organisation*, with the objectives of the upliftment and preservation of Khasi tradition and culture, begun to hold competitions in Khasi Folk songs separately for the general public and the students. However, the organisation simultaneously used to put up plays from its beginning to instil the spirit of cooperation among all to ensure development of all concerned. The first presentation of a play that the group made was the highly political drama titled *Ka Ri Umsnam* in 1979. It was written by John Syntar Shangpliang, a much renowned Khasi playwright.

The other groups also provided great impetus towards the development of theatre in the Khasi Hills. The *longpiah Club* formed with a similar ideology to that of its predecessor *Seng Khasi* presented its own play *U Kiang Nagbah* written by Lakhon Shullai. Another important play that was staged by them was titled *Daiophi*.

Besides these theatre groups there were many playwrights who had significantly contributed to the growth and development of Khasi theatre through their individual efforts. Playwrights like O. Lamare, H. Myllemngap and W. D. Jyrwa were the notable one among them. In 1974 O. Lamare brought out his play titled *Ka Kut lapngar* which is based on a folk-tale. The play exemplifies how sense of greed, deceitfulness brings only disaster and sufferings but can be overcome by the superior feelings of love and sacrifice. Lamare also sought to reflect upon the participation of women in the political activities in a Khasi society. In a Khasi society of the past women were never allowed either to ascend the throne or assume any other political role such as a myntri as these positions were filled up by people from the selected clans of the community. But Lamare in this play has exhibited his dissent over the matter. He has presented not one but two female characters – law Sharing and Luh Shadap, occupy the throne.

H. Myllemngap's play *Ka Synjat ba la shem pat* that appeared in 1979 is also founded on a traditional story. The story of the play surrounds a king and his inability to maintain a proper balance between his domestic affairs and those of the State. The newly crowned King Kyrup, inexperienced both in married life as well as in administration, is misled by a maid servant which ruins his family life causing years of separation between his wife and the children. In the play the dramatist is able to focus on a host of areas that are related to the life and culture of the Khasi people including politics, economic activities, crime and retributions, recreation, cultural activities, etc. The most significant aspect of the play is that it retains the indigenous features of the Khasi tradition and history.

The next playwright of great importance was Webster Davies Jyrwa who made his greatest contributions to Khasi Theatre through his publication of the book of translated plays. In 1979 he published an anthology of four plays titled *Ki Drama Lyngkot*. It included translations of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Haman*, *A Spark Neglected Burns the House*, *Sakuntala* and *The Diamond Necklace*. It is, however, to be noted here that the plays were presented in compact forms and only those portions from them were translated which contained some instructive or moral values. The playwright had been very careful in selecting the plays as it seems that apart from the literary taste the idea behind these translations was to inculcate in the readers a moral sense. The triumph of

ideals of rationality and wisdom over the mindless acts done out of over-excitement, the good over evil, etc. are portrayed in the translated play of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. On the other hand, *Sakuntala* and *The Diamond Necklace* are representatives of the values of truth and substance. They validate the point that the truth of a matter cannot be kept in veils of illusions and falsehoods for long however hard one tries to manipulate with it.

Khasi Theatre in the Eighties

In the eighties also the *Rympei Theatrical Centre* continued to stage a good number of plays on various themes. In 1980 it produced *Ka Saia Nongum* followed by few short plays *Ka Elekson*, *Ka Kti Ka Jingim*, *Sngi Khatduh U Tirot Sing* and *Ka Tung Rymbai*. It was further followed by *Ka Nga* and *Ka Kynhum Kheinduh*.

In the next year the group came up with another few plays viz. *Ka Ruh Nar*, *Ka Kput Kylliang* and *Last day of Tirot Sing*. In 1982 the *Rympei Theatrical Centre* presented again five new productions namely *Ka Bniat Namar Ka Bniat*, *O Jerusalem*, *Ka Tyrut Kyunsha*, *U Kiang Nangbah* and *Tip ia la ka Kam*.

In 1982 D. S. Khangdup brought out a book containing two plays titled *Ar Tylli Ki Play*. The two plays found place in the book were *Ai PatKa Spah Jong Nga* and *Ka Nabon*. The first of the two was a one-act comedy while the second play was a tragic-comedy.

In the next year the play *Ka Mahadevi* written by Prof. H. W. Sten was published which was highly appreciated by all. The year 1983 was marked with a great loss for the Khasi theatre. Towards the end of the year the father of *Rympei Theatrical Centre* passed away creating a void in the domain of Khasi theatre at large. He was instrumental not only in giving the *Rympei Theatrical Centre* its life and soul but also an identity to the Khasi theatre.

Even after his departure the group continued to bring honours to the State of Meghalaya by winning several prizes at National level. It won its first President's Award in the 17th National Short Play Competition held at Allahabad in 1984 for the play *The Inspection Bunglow*. The group won another award in the next year as well in the same competition. The group won the best play in the category of one-act historical play

where they had gone with *U Kiang Nagbah*. After a gap of few years the group took part in the National Short Play Competition and won the best play award for two consecutive years i.e. 1988 and 1989 for the plays entitled *Laingut Shipara* and *Kaei Ka Daw* respectively.

Among the new generation of theatre artists from Meghalaya Nicholas Kharkongor is the most prominent one. He is a young playwright and director who is based in New Delhi has been actively engaged in writing and directing them. He has several plays to his credit such as- *To Each His Own*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *Come As You Were* and *Salaam India*.

To Each His Own, a comedy, touches upon the views modern Indian youngsters who are open in their outlook, comfortable with the use of distasteful language. It is the story of a crazy model who falls in love with a mama's boy from the neighbourhood. In *The Heart of the Matter* the playwright deals with the sensitive issue of cancer and the fears associated with it. The play moves around the leading character *Geetan* who suddenly finds out that she has cancer and is gripped with terror thinking about the consequences. But, as soon as she meets Dinesh, a cancer patient like her, all her worries disappear and her perspective of the world also changes. The play which initially begins on a bleak note gradually transforms into an optimistic one. Through the love story of the two characters the play wants to celebrate life with all the shades – bright as well as dark.

His *Come As You Were* is about five young best friends- Samar, Ashish, Nidhi, Venky and Imti who meet once ten years after leaving school. Set at a isolated resort outside Delhi, it deals with how they rediscover their relationship using the technique of flashback on the stage. But, this play in the course of its movements also touches upon a lot murky and serious issues that affect the contemporary Indian society.

Nicholas Kharkongor's *Salaam India* is based on the book titled *Being Indian* by Pavan K Varma. The play presents a critique of India that is conveyed through a tinge of humour. The play, likewise the original book does, attempts to unearth layer-by layer the

truth of Indian psyche through four actors performing the roles of sixteen characters. It brings up the issues arising out of the conflicts between traditional notions and the modern counterparts. It shows through the intertwined stories as presented by the characters what exactly characterises Indian people. There are a number of stories that work within the play- an elderly maid worker living a *basti* but strongly believes in worthiness of education set against her grandson who is absorbed in pornography, drugs and unfocused, a constant idle; a CEO of an exclusive ladies' escort service company; an MP who wants to make Idly as the national dish; a sister who wants to complain to the police about the demand for dowry by her would-be- husband against the wishes of her brother who rather wants his sister to follow the 'traditional values', etc. Thus, the first of the four stories deals with the closeness and cooperation that is enjoyed by the lower section of the society while the following story revolves around a Gujarati businessman and his Belarusian wife who is crazy for exercise. The third story is about a thirty four year middle class girl whose marriage is still in doubt as the family is affected by the 'requests' for 'gifts' from the groom's family. The final story of the play deals with a political debate by MPs on a silly topic of whether Tandoori chicken or Idly should be declared the National dish. But, towards the later part of the play all the diverse stories move towards one direction and create a mosaic of Indianness. The play does not explicitly expound the traits of *being* Indian but rather focuses on the processes as befitting *Indianness*.

What strikes most about the plays of Kharkongor is the fact that his productions are not limited one particular state or region. Like most other major playwrights from the North-Eastern region whose plays deal with the core issues of their respective regions, Kharkongor does not bear the constrained perspective. On the contrary, his plays talk about the issues that are more general in nature and therefore, can be adjudged as pan Indian.

The development of Khasi theatre during the later decades has been very tardy, a concern which has been expressed by Bevan L. Swer in an essay titled *A Glimse of Khasi Literature Today*. Swer finds that "The nineties do not see much publications either in

the novel or drama although the former takes the front seat by way of published form. Khasi creative writers are rather slow to react to drama writing.”¹⁹⁵ It is indeed a matter of little disappointment that in spite of the strong development throughout the seventies and the eighties, the Khasi Theatre has not made the kind of progress that is expected from it.

4.10 Mizoram

The name *Mizoram* refers to the *Land of the Mizos*. Etymologically, the word *Mizo* denotes people and *Ram* a land or nation. The state of Mizoram was earlier known as Lushai Hills which is bounded by Manipur and Assam on the north while Burma and Bangladesh fall on the east and west respectively. The state of Tripura covers the north-west side of its boundary. It is a rugged hilly area having narrow and deep gorges. . The life of the Mizo people life is closely linked with nature, the birds and animals of the region. The history of the Mizo people is difficult to be found in written form as there was no tradition of keeping matters in black and white. There is common belief that the Mizos have originated from a big cave known as *Chhinlung* which has mentioned in many traditional folk tales and verses. But, various findings have suggested that they once inhabited the Central Asian region and belong to the Mongoloid stock. The Burma Census Report of 1932 clearly mentions that the Kukis of Manipur and the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in Tibet and are of the same racial stock.¹⁹⁶

The drama of Mizoram cannot be discussed without the reference to its religious background. Like every other cultures of the world the birth of Mizo drama lies also in the womb of religion. But prior to the arrival of the British, the Mizos followed the animistic form of religion though like many other such groups did, they did not worship the Sun or the Moon. Instead of they had belief in the powers of some evil spirits known as *Ramhuai* and *Tuihuai* who lived the midst of the hills, trees, caves or rivulets , etc. Along with that the Mizos also had a belief on the existence of some good spirits such as *Lasi*, *Khuvang*, etc. The Mizos used to offer more sacrifices to the evil spirits than to the

¹⁹⁵ Swer, Bevan L.(2008). “A Glimse of Khasi Literature Today.” *Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages*, (eds.) C. R. Marak and J. S. Shangpliang. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 17.

¹⁹⁶ Carey, Betram, S. and H.N. Tuck. (1976). *Chin Hills* Vol. I. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, p.1.

good to appease them as the former spirits were thought of bringers of diseases, deaths and other such things. The Mizo people, in addition to this, also believed in the presence of a family of Gods and the Supreme of all is known as *Pathian*. But the arrival of the British in the late nineteenth century brought in revolutionary changes to the life, religion and culture of the Mizo people.

4.11 Arrival of the British and Christianity:

The state of Mizoram was not occupied by the British rulers until 1890. The people of the land were living in complete isolation. But the killing of an administrator Mr. Winchester and taking his daughter away by the attackers prompted the British to act against the Mizo people in 1871.

“It was to rescue the captive girl and to enter into permanent relationship with the savages (Mizos) that the first major military expedition was launched in 1871 by the order of Lord Mayo, the then Governor General of India. The result was that twenty villages were routed out for offering resistance, sixty villages tendered their submission, fifteen important Chiefs promised lasting friendship and Mary Winchester restored in good health in January, 1872.”¹⁹⁷

This expedition opened up the doors of the land the Mizo people for the British and there was a second larger expedition in 1889-90 by the British which finally brought the entire land under their control as there was very little resistance from the local people. It marked the beginning of new era under the rule of the British. The entry of the British simultaneously paved the way for the Christian Missionaries into the erstwhile Lushai Hills, presently known as Mizoram.

The first Missionary to arrive Mizoram was Rev. William Williams who started his journey from Shella of Khasi Hills on 15th February 1891 and after more than a month on 20th March reached Aizwal. But he did not stay there for long. During the short stay for nearly a month he tried to observe the ways of living of the Mizo people. Since his

¹⁹⁷ Hminga, C. L. (1987). *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*. Lunglei: The Literature Committee, Baptist Church in Mizoram, p .43.

objective was to spread the message of Jesus, he distributed pictures from the Bible. He even tried to learn the local language and within his capacity Rev. Williams tried to preach to the Mizos about God.

In the mean time, the news of the gruesome murder of Mr. Winchester and the abduction of his daughter Mary, reached London and it created sensation and curiosity among the people of a limited circle, more so because of the detailed description of the whole incident in a magazine. It so much influenced a rich person named Robert Arthington that he formed a Missionary organization and decided to send two envoys to the Lushai Hills to subdue the coarse people through religion.

As part of the scheme two missionaries belonging to the Arthington Aborigines Mission, the organization that Mr. Arthington established were sent to Mizoram. In 1894 Rev. J.H.Lorrain and Rev. F.W.Savidge reached Aizawl and with their arrival on the soil of Mizoram the Gospel is believed to have started. When they arrived Mizoram they were initially not offered any warm welcome. Finding no one to help them to carry their luggage they had to do it on their own and this surprised the Mizos since till then they had never seen a white man carrying his own luggage. These two Missionaries were not even helped by the local British administrator but allowed to put up their tent on the parade ground of Aizawl.

However, they developed a cordial relationship with the local people by dint of their honesty and dedication. Their acts of self-less kindness and medical services helped them to win over the confidence of the people. The local people were so much impressed by them that they awarded with respectable titles 'Zosap' meaning 'Sahibs for Mizos' while the other British people were referred to simply as 'Sahibs.' Later on this much honoured title was conferred on any Christian Missionary who came to Mizoram.

Meanwhile, the British administration felt that these two missionaries should not be left to live in an unsafe place and therefore, asked to set up their dwelling in *Bawlhmun*. After they got this permission they began to build their home with the help of very few local people. Both the missionaries began to learn the Mizo language and communicate with the local people. Observing that these missionaries had gained over

the faith and control over the local people to some extent, the Superintendent of Lushai Hills decided to entrust them with the responsibility of distributing salt which was a very valuable commodity at that point of time. They gave the permission to take salt from the designated shop against their written note which was issued to those who would help the missionaries in their work. It created an impression among the local people that the Sahibs they had been seeing were not ordinary or mad sahibs as they believed. On the contrary, they started to consider them as powerful as a Chief could be and consequently, obeyed and assisted them in their work.

What marked their stay in Mizoram was the attempt of the missionaries to give the Mizo language that was till then in oral form, a written character. By using the Roman script both Lorrain and Savidge wrote small booklets and also translated portions from the bible into Mizo language. It was a revolutionary development on the part of the Mizo people at large since this ensured the beginning of education and literature in their own language. In addition to this the introduction of the written form gradually strengthened the footprints of Christianity in Mizoram.

While these two missionaries were trying to bring various important changes to the people and life style through their dedication, care and most importantly by introducing them to religious texts in their language, Mr. Arthington felt that it was time for the evangelists to take on the responsibility of preaching the Gospel of Christianity in the land.¹⁹⁸ With this thought in mind he desired that the Welsh Presbyterian Mission be handed over the charge of spreading the religion into length and breadth of Mizoram.

As a result the first missionary of the Welsh Mission Rev. D.E. Jones arrived in Aizawl in August, 1897 and he was followed by another, Edwin Rowlands in December, 1898. Both these missionaries took up the task by first learning the local language and then enriching the minds of the people with their preaching through hymns and other welfare activities. The Mizo people for their simplicity and dedication called Rev. D.E. Jones lovingly as *Zosaphluia* meaning 'the old Mizo Sahib' and Rev. Edwin Rowlands as *Zosapthara* meaning 'the new Sahib.' For several years these two missionaries had look after the missionary works of the whole of Mizoram of that time. But the arrival of

¹⁹⁸ Chirgwin, A.M.(1935). *Arthington's Million*. London: The Livingstone Press, pp. 30-31.

another missionary group from the Baptist Missionary Society in 1903 reduced their work load as the new missionary was assigned to work in the South Mizo Hills while they had the North Mizo Hills to their share. In order to carry on the missionary services properly the two pioneer missionaries, Rev. Lorrain and Rev. Savidge were invited which they gladly obliged. They were entrusted with the missionary works in the North Lushai Hills.

Among all the missionaries who had arrived Mizoram during the nascent stage of Christianity in Mizoram, Rowlands also called, *Zosaphara* could best understand the temperament of the Mizo people. He composed a number of hymns which display an excellent command over the use of language. Moreover, he translated more than one hundred hymns from English to Mizo language that are still used most frequently. He devoted his entire life for the welfare of the Mizo people and had always kept Mizo people as companions to wherever he went and whatever he did.

Christianity and its impact on Mizo people

Within a very short period of time after Christianity was introduced to the people of Mizoram it was greatly accepted as a religion though it was initially difficult to find the first one to embrace it wholly. With the first converts of two Mizo men Khuma and Khara on 25th, 1899 the journey of Christianity began and soon it was embraced by the majority of the people. The people, excited over the newly found belief, took active part in spreading the religion further. They even went door to door to spread the message of god and within their limited knowledge about the religion, they talked to people about it in simple terms. The active participation of the early Christians was one of the reasons for the rapid growth of the Church in Mizoram.¹⁹⁹

As a result of the gradual process and effect of the conversion of the majority of the people into Christianity, a lot of changes had come to the socio-cultural and religious spheres. It also subsequently brought in administrative changes. Earlier the British Government was not in favour of spending a lot of money on the administration of this particular region. The main objective was to somehow keep the borders quiet and it was

¹⁹⁹ Zaithanga, Rev. V.L. (1981). *From Head-hunting to Soul-hunting*. Aizawl: The Synod Publication Board, p. 14.

being done by the missionaries and Churches. In other words rather than the administrators it was the Churches who played the role of “a more active instrument of change than the Government is the Christian Mission.”²⁰⁰

The impact of Christianity on the people of Mizoram may have both the good and bad results. While on the one hand, the Mizo people got both culturally and spiritually displaced from their traditional system of practices, but on the other hand what they received in return seems more valuable. The acceptance of Christianity gave the Mizo people freedom ignorance and opened up their eyes to new spheres of knowledge. With the gradual expansion of education the Mizo people have learnt see the world in new perspectives. It has made them discard the unwanted practices of the older tradition and at the same time identify a new set of belief to replace with.

Against the contention that the “spiritual break-down of the man whose native values are suddenly assaulted and intellectually undetermined”²⁰¹ due to the introduction of new religion, it may asserted that Christianity empowered the so long ignored people a sense liberty, a new hope for a better life and a new sense of spiritual freedom.

4.12 Literature of the Mizos

As has been noted earlier Mizoram did not have a written language until the British came to this land as part of its scheme for the expansion of the empire. With the introduction of the written language the system of education also inevitable came along.

However, it was not the missionaries who first published a book on the Mizo language but by Capt. Thomas Herbert Lewin, Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, titled *Progressive Colloquial Exercises in the Lushai Dialect* in 1874, much ahead the arrival of the British on the land. This upholds the fact the land and the people of Mizoram was not entirely cut off from the rest of the world. It was followed another publication of *Grammar of the Lushai Language*, a pioneering work attempted give the language a proper structure. It was written by Assistant Surgeon Brojo Nath Shaha, Civil

²⁰⁰ Parry, N.E. (1932). *The Lakhers*. London: Macmillan, p. 19.

²⁰¹ Wilson, Dick. (1970). *Asia Awakes: A Continent in Transition*. England: Penguin, p.41.

Medical Officer in Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1884, again ten years before the British set its foot.

When the first missionaries, Lorrain and Savidge, came to Mizoram they had learn the local language without the knowledge of which their purpose would not have been served. So when they attempted to learn the language they took these books as a starting point. In the introduction to the Dictionary of the Lushai Language which Lorrain wrote, he acknowledges his gratefulness indebt to both these books. These books had helped them in such a way that it only because of that they were able to reduce the language to writing in a system which would be easy enough for the people themselves. For this purpose they chose the simple Roman script based on the Hunterian system.²⁰²

Both Lorrain and Savidge, apart from the dictionary and the development of the written form of the Mizo language also produced several other books during their first four years of stay in the land. As per the reports of D.E. Jones both the missionaries produced book that were first of its type in Mizo. There was a Primer titled *Zirtanbu* and a Question and Answers Book, titled *Zawhna leh Chhanna* in 1896.²⁰³ The missionaries were also responsible for bringing out parts of the Bible such as the Gospel of St. Luke and St. John in Mizo language at different phases of their stay. After the demise of his dearest colleague Rev. Savidge, Rev. Lorrain returned to England due to his ill-health and there he finalized the publication of yet another significant work on the language titled *Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai Language* in 1898.

In the same year the first Mizo newspaper, The Highlanders' News (Mizo Chanchin Laisuith) in the handwritten form was published. The newspaper provided news on the local news on the events that took place in various villages, folk tales also notifications from the Government. However, since it was brought out in written format, due to the hardships involved in the process it could not be published for long and its circulation stopped in the year 1899. Although hymns were written sporadically yet the first compilation of hymns in book form was published in 1899. It was a small book containing 18 numbers of Christian hymns.

²⁰² Lorrain, J.H. (1940). "Introduction." *Dictionary of the Lushai Language*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, p.V

²⁰³ Jones, D.E. *Reports of 1899*.

With the establishment of the first school, the Church by 1896 in Mizoram the foundation of the Christianity was further strengthened. Such development is simultaneously accompanied by the growth of literature. After the departure of the two pioneer missionaries the task was carried on by the able members of the Welsh Missionaries- D.E Jones also known as *Zosaphluia* and Edwin Rowlands alias *Zosapthara*. They produced, with the assistance of some Khasi Christians and a few literate Mizos, a number of books on different subjects. These books were primarily meant for teaching at the schools. As a result of this endeavour books on religious and moral lessons, history, arithmetic, geography, general knowledge and English were published. Except only few the majority of them were written in Mizo language. These books laid the foundation of education in Mizoram which has resulted in turning it into one of the top states having the highest number of literate people in the country.

At a time when the textbooks were being published the first magazine in Mizo language also saw the light of the day in November, 1902. The title of the magazine was *Mizo Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu* and it contained around eight articles on diverse topics. During the period from 1905-1916 the missionaries took the task of translating books from the Bible such as St. Mathew (*Matthaia*), St. Mark (*Marka*), Revelation(*Thupuan*) , the whole of the New Testament (*Thuthlung Thar*), etc.

These activities of translation by the missionaries inspired many other educated Mizo people to take the exercise. As a result of such attempts stories from the Bible and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* were translated from English in to Mizo language.

With the ever increasing number of educated people among the Mizos the demand for literature also witnessed an unprecedented surge. But without the availability of a printing machine it was extremely difficult to fulfil the growing demand for reading materials. But in 1909 a printing machine was received as donation from an unknown gentleman to the Mission at Lunglei and it marked the beginning of a new era in Mizoram. Another similar printing machine was installed in 1911 by Dr. P. Fraser at Aizawl. However, in spite of the installation of these two printing machines in Mizoram the growing demand remained unfulfilled as these machines were manually operated and hence, could not produce as many number of books as required. In 1915 impressed

by the work of the missionaries and realizing the need for printing machines the Commandant of the Lushai Hills Military Police provided the Welsh Mission with another printing machine.

In the meantime Mizoram had become a land where majority of the population had embraced Christianity yet the zeal of the missionaries to work for its growth never ceased. As part of this programme a monthly church magazine titled the *Krista Tlangau* (Herald of Christ) was brought out for the first time in 1911. The Mizo word *Tlangau* means a person who announces loudly to the villagers on behalf of the village Chief. It was very small magazine that contained articles on religious sphere only but it was soon enlarged with a little change to its title- it was now named *Kristian Tlangau* (Christian Herald). The significant aspect about the magazine is that since its first publication in 1911, it has been continuously published without a break.

The development of written literature in Mizo language was possible only for the sincerity and devotion of the missionaries who arrived in Mizoram at different points in time. Their contribution towards the improvement of the life of the people who had so long been living in ignorance was immense. It is indeed remarkable the way they were able to bring in a complete change in the outlook of the people concerned. The missionaries took all the pains to achieve this feat of success. It may be true to some extent that the Mizo people had lost some parts of their old culture, but if weighed against what they have got back in return it might seem meagre. The development of the Mizo people may be assessed at various levels. Religiously, Mizo people had turned very sincere, compassionate and full of enthusiasm. This had huge impact on other aspects of life also. On the social and cultural spheres they had become sober, active and creative also. The significant aspect of the whole journey of progress is that all of the developments were taking place simultaneously. One could see religious, social and cultural progress going on at the same moment. These developments were also accompanied by the growth of language and literature of the Mizo people.

4.13 Theatre of Mizoram

The foundation:

It is always very difficult to ascertain from when the art of theatre entered into human civilization. However, the basic human tendencies to imitate life as it comes to him is believed to have inspired him to give birth to germ of theatre just the same way as any other art form might have come into existence. But, when such possibilities of genesis are withheld and a more reasonable explanation of the origin of drama is aimed at the onus lies on religion. This accounts for greater validity if looked into the aspect on a general term. Wherever drama has come up, the force that gives birth to it has invariably been religion.

In every civilization men have always tried to express their gratitude to the unknown forces that believed to have controlled their lives. Apart from the invisible gods and goddess people also worshipped their heroes usually in the festivals held annually. In a similar manner the Mizos, too, had great reverence for their deities and observed festivities in their honour. They “really enjoyed their yearly festivals with dance and rice-beer, and a kind of religious sacrifices were given to their gods and solemn functions. It was the customs of the Mizos of the past to organise *Ral-lu-lam* (Head-dance) to hold a dance in celebration of a head taken in raid and *Sa-lu-lam* (Animal dance), to hold a dance and a feast to celebrate success in the chase and to perform *ai* ceremony. *Ai* ceremony looks forward to the blessing for another kill and to control the soul (of the killed/slain) in after life.”²⁰⁴ As per the Mizo tradition of the past it was very essential to perform the *ai* ceremony. It was believed that through the ritual of *ai* the power of the souls of the dead come under the sway of the slayer after his death and it also demonstrates before the others in society the strength that he holds in him. There is another traditional faith associated with the performance of rituals of this sort. As a result of the performance of the ritual the souls of the dead men and animals would accompany the possessor after his death on his way to the Paradise (*Pialral*) and having seen the strong march the Lord of the Paradise (*Pawla*) would come up to the gateway to welcome him into the Paradise.

²⁰⁴ Kiangte, L. (1993). *Mizo Drama*. Cosmo Publications. New Delhi, p. 32.

These traditions, however, have now been replaced by the newer traditions that have evolved out of the new religion, i.e. Christianity. The tradition of Mizo theatre can now be traced from the inception of the Christian faith in Mizoram as there is no written evidence of its presence in the early periods. Though the history of theatre in Mizoram is comparatively new yet it has made notable progress in this field.

Drama from beginning to 1924:

It has already been mentioned that the emergence of drama in any culture or civilization occurs in the religious rituals. In the context of the birth of drama in Mizoram also similar phenomenon could be seen as dramatic performances were presented for the first time during the celebrations of Christmas.

The first ever Christmas that was celebrated by both the missionaries and the local Mizo people in a fine way where particularly children were entertained and a feast was given was in the year 1903. It was found to be so absorbing that the celebration became a yearly festival. In the following year the Baptist missionaries of the South, Lorrain and Savidge, also joined the celebration held in Aizawl by the other two missionaries of the North, Jones and Rowlands. It was consistently becoming a very popular event and each year it continued to grow into a bigger and better event. In the year 1912 the Christmas was celebrated in most of the villages of Mizoram with a feast. The day would forever remain one of the most important days for the Mizo people since on that day the first ever dramatic performance was presented in Thakting Veng of Aizwal.

The function, *The Christmas Variety Entertainment*, celebrated with the active support and participation of the missionary had around twenty six items on the list of programmes. Among them majority were songs and especially Christian songs that were carefully arranged to be sung by the entire congregation. The items of the list were sorted by the Missionary in order to give it a neat look. With this purpose in view separate songs were arranged for boys, girls, young women, mothers and so on. In addition to these programmes there were presentations of seven humorous dialogues which amused the gathering a lot.

The first of these dialogues was *English Stranger and the Interpreter (Sap mi khual leh ling tu)*. It refers to the arrival of a white foreigner in the land and his encounter with the native people. The dialogue mentions of a foreigner who had come to Mizoram for the first time with no knowledge either of the people or the culture and language. Since the Mizo people had never seen a white man with brown hair who uttered something that was not understandable to them at all they were quite surprised. The foreigner was looked at as a strange object by the native people and they gathered around him to have a closer look at him by touching his hands and feet. Among the group of people who were trying to examine the white man, one person finally came forward to interpret the uttering of the white man although it was not making any sense to him. But as it would naturally happen in such a context the interpretation was just a fantasized one and when it was properly understood later on it created a lot of fun.

Few of the other interesting and entertaining items of dialogue were *Krismas hria leh hre lo* (One who knows the meaning of Christmas explained to is friend its significance), *Kristian leh Kristian lo in biak na* (a dialogue between Christian and Non-Christian), *Sap Putar leh Mosolamn putar lem in biak na* (A dialogue between an English old man and a Mosolman old man), etc.

But the most important of them all was *Borsap lem, leh thu chhia nei tu 2 leh rasi lem chang be* (Superintendent's Court Scene). It is regarded as the first real dramatic work in Mizo which is significant not because of the presence of acting and dialogue only but also for the reason that it had a plot of its own, the primary requirement for a play. The story of the play revolves around a greedy man who has stolen the goat of his neighbour. The owner of the goat lodges a complaint against the stealer with the Borsap (Magistrate). Acting upon the complaint the court summons both of them to be present before the District Magistrate. It produced a lot fear in the accused and he calls upon the *Rasi* (The Circle Interpreter) to defend his case and he even pays him a good amount of money for it. But, it does not remain a secret and the Magistrate comes to know about the bribery. When the court meets on the case with the incident of the bribery revealed the court pronounces a favourable judgement in favour of the complainant and holds the thief a convict. Upon receiving the verdict against him, the accused asked the *Rasi* to

return the money that he gave as bribe. But the cunning *Rasi* pretended not to have heard him but moved out of the place making the bleating sound of goat.

This being the first dramatic performance of its kind it became an instant hit with the people. In the following year also the same drama was presented as the practice of organizing a variety show by that time to mark the celebration of Christmas had become a norm. It did not remain restricted to its celebration of Christmas within the city of Aizwal alone rather it was celebrated in the villages celebrated not only in the town of Aizwal alone rather it was celebrated in the villages celebrated as well. After few years the dramatic performance was presented in the Church intermittently. The success of the dramatic performance and its popularity among the common people led the missionaries also adopt the method of reciting and acting out some incidents in order to teach certain moral and religious lessons to the people.

Under the perspective of this it may be asserted that the origin of drama in Mizoram has intricate relationship with the function of the Church. It was the result of the combined efforts of both the missionaries and the people that brought about tremendous changes to the cultural scenario of Mizoram as they took active role in the presentation of dramatic acts.

However, the drama of Mizoram could not maintain its shiny growth for long as there emerged a new wave of Christianity with greater emphasis put on the Cross and suffering of Christ. It also lays importance on the revelation of the love of God for man prompting at the same time the sentiment of brotherly love and affection. It was the moment when the singing of hymns in conjunction with the beating of drum began to grow more and more. Soon, this movement picked up its energy and became very popular among the people. But, it had adverse impact on the growth of drama in Mizoram as this discouraged the staging of drama and such other performances even during the celebration of Christmas. Instead of presenting such dramatic performances people became more drawn to the singing of hymns accompanied by dance. The most significant aspect of the development of drama at this stage is that the new mode of spirituality had pushed drama to back foot resulted its removal from the activities of the Church even for a short time.

Drama from 1925 to 1958

The dramas of the preceding period were mostly concerned with religious and didactic matters. The drama of this particular time grew in tandem with religious progress. It not only echoed the joy of the people over the newly found faith of Christianity but it also represented their aspirations though of a limited kind. However, the same religious zeal of the people was responsible for the gradual oust of drama from the rituals of the Church.

Given up by the Church the Mizo drama of this time also renounced the tendency to pick up religious themes for them. It had brought about a great transformation in the manner of choosing subject matters for the plays. As a consequence of the exclusion from the Church Mizo drama became secular to accommodate various social issues but at the same time they focussed on teaching moral lessons also.

It was during this phase of the development of Mizo drama when a great personality Pasena appeared to renew the genre of Mizo drama. Pasena had by that time returned from London after obtaining his Diploma in Education who was looking forward to do something for his land and the people. In the absence of dramatic performances in Mizo people showed great interest in *Variety Shows* organized by the Bengali Officers during the celebrations of Puja and also the live shows (*Nataak*) which used be organized by the 1st Assam Rifle Regiment.

Having witnessed this trend Pasena strongly felt the need to revive the flagging Mizo drama of that time. Out of his desire to breathe new life into the failing Mizo drama he wrote and directed six dramatic performances between 1925 and 1933. These plays were staged in the hall of Boys' Middle School otherwise known as *Sikulpui Hall* situated at Mission Veng, Aizawl. The first of these plays was *Heroda Chawimawina* (King Herod's Glory, 1925), a tragic story taken from the Bible. He composed another two plays again from the Bible- *Fapa Tlanbo* (The Prodigal Son, 1927) and *Khualbuka mi a* (A Fool at the Inn, 1933). These three plays as they are adopted from the Bible concentrate on moral lessons. In addition to them he also wrote three other plays which speak of his dramatic creativity- *Tinreng daih Khawl* (Robot or A Machine with a Brain, 1927), *Ransa Khawmpui*

(Animals' Conference, 1929) and *Rorelna* (Court, 1933). Like the other plays of Pasena these plays too attempts to talk about moral principles through the stories.

This stage of the budding period is so influenced by the works of Pasena that it is aptly called the age of Pasena. Through his endeavour to produce plays of Mizo origin he had immensely influenced his contemporary writes and the successors also. Although he could not produce entirely diverse kind of plays yet considering the context in which he wrote it was indeed a great achievement on his part to have been able to pave the way for other Mizo writers to pay attention to this strained genre. Besides this he helped other writers such as Chuauthuama to produce Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in Mizo known as *Sailoka*. According to L. Khiangte this was the first Shakespearean play that was presented in Mizoram in 1929 at *Sikulpui Hall*.²⁰⁵

The next notable dramatist who also contributed enormously to the growth of Mizo drama was *Lalkailuia*. Whereas the themes of the plays of Pasena were based primarily on the Bible, the themes of Lalkailuia were taken from the folk tales of Mizoram. It signifies how for subject matters the dramatist, instead of looking into the beliefs and myths of others, searched for them in his own culture indicating a change in the attitude of the writers. In his play *Tualvungi and Zawpala* (1935) Lalkailuia adopts the most popular love story of the Mizo people which had come down orally from the earliest of times. He is credited with the staging the love story for the first time in the history of Mizoram. Encouraged over the acceptance and popularity of his first play Lalkailuia presents his second play based on yet another popular folk story known as *Liandova te unau*. This play was also staged in same year as the first one.

Both Pasena and Lalkailuia were trying to give the Mizo drama a new identity by introducing into it new themes and most importantly a new way of looking at their own resources for stories to enact. The history of Mizo drama between the periods from 1934 to 1950 may be remembered as *Chawngzike Age*. The age is so defined after *Chawngzika* for the amount of influence that his works had not only on the people but on the other writers of Mizoram also.

²⁰⁵ Khiangte, L. *Origin and Development of Mizo Drama*. (Unpublished manuscript), p. 3

The dramatic career of *Chawngzika* began in 1934 with the first production of the play *Krista Palai* (Ambassador for Christ). The play was translated into Mizo by Challiana. It is considered to be the first play to have a written format and typed in Mizo language. The play, directed by the playwright himself, was staged in 1934 at the *Sikulpui* by a group called *Aijal Theatre Performers*. The play is associated with another very significant development in Mizo drama that is, for the first time in Mizo theatre tickets were issued for the entry into the show. The purpose, however, was not a commercial one but philanthropic. It was done to raise a fund in the loving memory of *Pawngi*, the person who was behind the formation of *Aijal Theatre Performers*.

The play that followed it was a dramatized version of a novel titled *Kristiana Vanram Kawng Zawh* (1938) which was translated into Mizo with the help of Rev. Samuel Davies. Rev. Davies himself was a holder of a Diploma Certificate in drama from the prestigious London School of Drama. The play was presented under the direction of Rev. Davies in 1938 at *Sikulpui* and later on *Dawrpui Sikul* and is claimed to be the first true drama in Mizoram.

Rev. Davies came to Mizoram in 1938 and stayed there till 1951, a period of time that co-inside with the Age of Chawngzika. During his stay he engaged himself with plenty of works related to theatre. He was instrumental in introducing Mizo theatre to several modern methods such as lighting, make-up, background music, settings, etc. which gave it a new dimension. Further, with a vision to raise the level of drama in Mizoram he began a drama competition in 1940 with a running cup called *Zosiame Cup*. The first version of the competition was participated by three teams- *Mission Veng Y.L.A.*, *Kulikawn Y.L.A.* and *Wolf Club*. The competition was won by *Mission Veng Y.L.A.* and their play *Princess Pocahontas* was adjudged as the best play. An entry was collected to see the plays during the competition. It was done to contribute to the *War Fund of British Empire* and the amount that was collected from this competition was Rs 70/-.²⁰⁶

The play *Princess Pocahontas*, written by Chawngzika was based on a story centring around the Red Indians of America and a white man. The story was told to him by a missionary which deals with the personal life of a Princess. In the play the Princess

²⁰⁶ *Zosiame Cup Drama Competition Report, Kristian Tlangau Thubeth.* (October, 1940), pp. 81-82.

rescues the white man called *Sap tlangval* from being sacrificed by her own people. It has a happy ending as both the Princess and white man, *Sap tlangval*, get married after they fall in love at the first sight. This casts ample light on the ability of the dramatist who had been successful in adopting a foreign story to his purpose, to give it a character of Mizo taste.

In addition to these plays he also wrote several other plays on stories drawn from the Bible. Among them *The Royal Robes*, *Rabboni* (both in 1948), *Christmas Spirit* (1949), *The Star of Christmas* (1950) and *Naamana* (1950) are most important. The noteworthy matter in this context is the fact that he was not only a playwright but an able director also and he directed a number of plays including those that are mentioned here. He had even published few articles on drama in local monthly journals. The duo of Chawngzika and Samuel Davies had produced several plays on the Christian principles in order to provide moral lessons to the audience in addition to its primary objective of providing entertainment. As a true Christian Chawngzika was driven by the Christian values of brotherhood, love which he tried to uphold through several of his plays like *Siamtu* (1938), *Travelling Companion* (1950) and *Martina* (1951).

Drama from 1959- 2011

The plays of this period betray a vastly changed attitude towards play righting. While in the previous stages of development of drama the tendency was to focus on the religious and moral concepts as themes, in the new and changed situation it was to give greater thrust to the representation of life in its true colours. Nevertheless, the new outlook on drama did not altogether discard the religio-moralistic ideas of the earlier times but rather it attempted to drive home the point in a new fashion. With the expansion of education there was also a greater desire to look at life from new perspectives.

Drama in Mizoram had changed from the time when it started in 1912 and over the next period of five decades in every village there was at least a group which acquired drama and practised the form in their own capacity. With the appearance of the first published play in Mizo language *Sangi Inleng* by Lalthangfala Sailo in 1963 it marked a

new beginning in the history of Mizo drama. The focus had shifted from the performing aspect of drama alone to include in its purview the textual facet of drama also.

During this period of development of drama in Mizoram a host of writers began to write and stage them. Among the prominent playwrights are Lalthangfala Sailo, Lalhmuaka, P.K. Dingliana, Lalzamlia, H. Lalsiama, James Dokhuma, Khawlkungi, Laizawna, L. Khiangte, R. Lalhmingmawia, Liansailova who have contributed greatly towards the growth of Mizo drama.

Eminent Mizo playwright Lalthangfala Sailo is accredited with bringing out the first printed Mizo drama- *Sangi Inleng* (Sangi's Suitor). The play was first staged in 1959 at MZI Hla Kutpui held at Mizo High School, Aizawl. A tragic-comedy by type the story revolves around the heroine Sangi (Rosangi) and her two suitors Hrang and Muana. The parents of Sangi, Ngura and Thangi, receive an offer through a mediator for their daughter's hand in marriage to Hrang, the son of a well-to-do family of the village. They accept the proposal and convey it to Sangi. But, Sangi objects to this proposal on the ground that Hrang is 'old by birth, funny smile, one who plays clumsy whistling with mouth.' Apart from her dislike for Hrang she had another reason for the refusal of the proposal- she had a lover, Muana. She waits for Muana and asks him to do something for their union but unfortunately things were not happening in their favour. In the mean time Sangi's mother was preparing for the marriage of Sangi with Hrang against her wishes. Finding no other solution, just before the proposed date for marriage Sangi writes the last letter to Muana declaring her everlasting love and sends it through her friend Mawii. Upon receiving the letter and Mawii's call to act immediately to save Sangi who was at that point of time attacked by a wounded tiger, Muana arrives on the spot and rescues her. Finally, Ngura gives away his daughter's hand to Muana to live happily thereafter.

His other important work was a comedy in five acts titled *Liandova Te Unau*. The play is about a young man Liandova who, along with his brother Tuaisiala, becomes fatherless while their mother marries another person soon after the death of her husband. Helpless, the brothers had to endure the difficulties of life but in spite of that Liandova did not lose his good spirit. Later on, incidentally he is able to win the favour of

the King and both the brothers were gradually becoming very prosperous. This story of the rise in fortune of Liandova falls in the ear of the Princess Tuaichawngi through Pi Fangi, the next-door neighbour of Liandova. Eventually, she marries Liandova in a selection ceremony and lives happily forever.

The playwright who followed Sailo was M.Lalhmuaka. His first book on the collection of plays titled *Lemchan Bu* was published in October, 1965 containing in it six short plays though only four of them were written by him with the other two were composed by R.K. Dingliana and Lalzamlia, two neighbours of Lalhmuaka. His plays *Lo Kir Leh Mai Rawh*, *Ranthleng Mak*, *A ni mai thei*, *Mautam tam*, *Ramthanga te chhung* are some of the works by him. Several of his plays are adopted from stories from the Bible although he draws his themes from contemporary events and history also.

H. Lalsiama, the next in prominence, wrote only two plays primarily meant for children of class VII and VIII in 1970. Both the plays titled *Pa Awk Hrawl* and *Ukil Hlawhtling* were comedies dealing with some moral lessons as well. They deal with greed and dishonesty and how they bring in loss of life and property.

James Dokhuma, the first Mizo recipient of Padma Shri Award for Literature in 1985, wrote few plays although he is best known for novels only. His plays *Tumma chu a hlawhtling thin*, *Hmasawmna*, *Hausak aiin a hlu zawk* and *Finna Hmahruai* may be considered as plays for propaganda. All of the plays of Dokhuma reflect upon certain issues pertaining to the welfare of the society like the need of education, nutrition, religion, etc.

Khawlkungi, the first woman playwright of Mizoram, wrote a few plays although only one of her plays was published in 1981. In this play, *Zawlpala Thalan Tlangah*, a fictitious Christian story of love is presented. It is based on the traditional Mizo folk-tale *Tualvungi leh Zawlpala*. The story revolves around Vanlalremi or Remi in short, Lalmuana and Malsawma. The play deals with the difficulties in love, deception and final meeting of the two lovers Remi and Malsawma.

C. Laizawna wrote only one play called *Kan tiam tawh si* though he had written a good number of short stories and novels. In the play he presents two pairs of lovers

motivated by two different philosophies of love- one driven by passion while the other by reason. Divided into two plots the stories move on but towards the later part the two plots meet to mingle with each other. The complicated relationships finally find solution in compatible partners.

Another very important playwright of the recent times is Laltluangliana Khiangte who has penned more than ten plays. His first play *Thupha ka rawn chawi e* was staged in 1982 at Shillong. The other important plays of him are *Nu leh pa bum-mahni inbum*, *Faki te chhung*, *Thawmmawia*, *Thawmvunga*, *Zorama*, *Duhawma leh lalfaki* etc.

In *Nu leh pa bum-mahni inbum* Khiangte depicts the story of the contemporary society messed up by the so-called modernity that has misguided the young generation of people. His *Faki te chhung* points out to the importance of Christian values against the lifestyle propelled by worldly pleasures. *Thawmvunga* is representative of a historical warrior who fought valiantly with the King against the attack of enemy of the King. The play ends with the return of the hero and his subsequent marriage with the Princess.

During eighties Lalsiama brought out a number of short plays. His first play *Nu Mawl*, however, was staged in 1961 but unfortunately the text of the play has been lost. He came up with his next play *Zoluti an man* and in 1988 a book comprising four plays written at different point of time was published. The plays that found their place in the book were- *Kaha jaiga* (1962), *Pastor leh Zurui* (1986), *Mene, Mene Tekel Upharsin* (1970) and *A Setana a zam ta* (1970).

Another important playwright is Liansailova who has published a collection of four plays under the title of *Lawn a Kim* in 1989. It contains a play by the same name as the title of the book followed by *Duaia a duai bik lo*, *Krismas Drama*, *Tlai ngalio Pathian*. Among these four plays the first and the last are comedies while the other two deal with social and religious topics such as importance of literacy and the birth of Christ. In addition to these he has written *Zovi te chhung* which depicts the tragic death of a father being unable to bear the pressure of the arrangement for the dowry of his daughter.

During the same period R. Lalhmingmawia appeared with just one play titled *Buannel Farm* (1987). It revolves around the hero of the play *Hminga*. The play tells how

Hminga rises to height of success by dint of his sincerity and dedication. The play, primarily a propaganda one, shows Hminga initially as an ordinary but an industrious boy who does not possess any special quality in him. But, he is always in search for some opportunity to earn something and make an independent living on his own.

Eventually, he is able to get his Master's Degree and avail a loan to set up an industry named Buannel Farm which gradually becomes quite famous and brings him awards. The play culminates with the thanksgiving celebration. The play was written to spread certain messages concerning the dignity of labour and the importance of sincerity and perseverance in life.

Some other important playwrights that composed few plays this period were Lalengmawia Ralte, B. Thanhranga, R. F. Irish. Lalengmawia, primarily a novelist, wrote plays also. In his play titled *Nausen Vang* (1988) he presents some events from the night when Jesus was born. It deals with the story about the visit of the three wise men to the palace of King Herod in order to greet the new born king thinking that there had been a birth in the palace. But, since there was none they returned leaving King Herod suspicious of the secret birth as it seemed to him the premonition of his fall. To prevent this to happen King Herod orders to murder all the male child under two years.

In another play *Khawiah nge* (1988) also the playwright mentions about the life and struggle of the fourth wise man and his subsequent failure to greet the newly born Jesus along with the other three fellows. Both the plays were published together in a book under the title *Christmas Drama* which points out the themes and purpose of the plays.

B. Thanhranga wrote only one play titled *Harh Rawh* (1989). The play describes how two men *Hera* and *Hmuhfiaha* are able to usher in a new energy among the Mizo people and help them produce goods for their own needs. It presents the situation where the native people are being pushed back by others and therefore appeals them to wake up before everything is captured by them. The play, through the events of it, sends the messages of self-dependence and patriotism to the people of Mizoram.

R. F. Irish composed *Romeo and Juliet Part-II* in 1989. The play narrates the story of the life of Romeo's former girlfriend and also look into the connection between Montague and Capulet following the death of Romeo and Juliet.

During the nineties there were several other playwrights who published few plays. Few of these playwrights may be named here- Vanneihluanga (*Zothansangi*, 1990), Lalchungnunga (*Salam*, 1992 and *Dalalpu*, 1994), B. Lalhriattira (*Beiseina Eng*, 1993 and *Chantual Mawitu*, 1996), and K. Malsawma (*Pathian Thilthlawnepek*, 1994).

The tradition of writing play have continued in the twenty first century also as more and more books of plays are found in print than before. Considering the large output during this period only a few of the playwrights along with their plays have been mentioned here. P. C. Lalrinpuia, a teacher by profession, has published few collections of plays. The first of these titled *Suangtuah Ram Hlimthla* was brought out in 2002. In 2005 he published another anthology of dramas *Chantual Thuruk*. In the same way Lalhmachhuana Zofa published his *Chhurbura* (a collection of 12 plays) and Lalzuia Colney brought out his collection of ten plays titled *Lemchan thawnthu* in 2004 and 2005 respectively. In the following years till 2011 several collections of plays or individual plays have been published on various issues mostly socio-economic issues. In the year 2006 Lalsangzuala came out with two plays *Duhmanga leh Dardini* and *Thangzawra*. In the same year Laldanglova also published *Ka hmangaih a ni*. Rozama Chawngthu put out *Ennawn Mak thar* (a collection of eight plays) while C. Lalrochhara published two short plays under the title *Thiangzau*. Lalfakzuala's *Fanu hmangaihna*, R. L. Thanmawia's *Lalngaihawmi* were published in 2009. The following year witnessed the coming of R. C. Lalruatchhunga's *I thu ni se*, Lalnunthara Sailo's collection of eight plays *Zonun* and F. Lianchhinga's *Inhlanna Nung*.

In recent times another young theatre group named *Mizo Drama Organisation* (MIDO) has been trying to inculcate the taste for theatre among Mizo people. The group, formed in 2002, has been actively taking part in various activities related to drama. It has won several prizes in competitions held at various places. It took part in India Theatre Olympiad held in Cuttack in 2010 and also in first International Indigenous Theatre

Festival which was held in Dhaka in 2015. The group has participated for few times in the International Children's Theatre Festival as well.

It is evident that the history of theatre in Mizoram begins mainly with the arrival of the British ruler on the land. The traditions that perhaps were prevalent had been replaced by Christian values which entered simultaneously with the British. As such theatre in Mizoram is modelled on the principles of the West with proscenium stage arts and other associated things. As a result of the deep-rooted influence of the Western world the majority of the playwrights deal with Christian ideals of religion, love, family, brotherhood , etc. At the same time the plays also reflect upon the ideas of wealth, power of various kinds as conceived by the Mizo people. In recent times there have been some efforts to fuse Mizo folk elements with the modern stage art. But the response to it has been low although there is plenty of scope for its development. The theatre in Mizoram, too, has been facing similar challenges as is experienced in other parts of the North-East region. However, situation would improve to the betterment of the Mizo theatre if all the stakeholders including the government and the public would join hands with the theatre activists and turn it into a reality.

Chapter-V

Dance of the Dragons: Theatre in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim

5. Nagaland

Known very little about the state of Nagaland till recent times, it has always been perceived with an aura of mystery. The perception commonly held was that it was a land that was inhabited by savages who practised the forbidden head-hunting. But in spite of the prevalence of such grim tradition it has made great transformation in terms of alteration of such an image and has been able to register a new identity of its own. On the contrary to such views of Nagaland as a closed, savage society, within a comparatively short span of roughly one hundred and fifty years of its entry into modern age it has made tremendous progress in transforming the state to a very modern and liberal place.

Geo-politically at international level Nagaland enjoys a very important place with China in the North, Burma in the East and Bangladesh in the West surrounding the state. It is the sixteenth State of the Indian Union which was created on 1st December, 1963 and remains one of the smallest states of the nation. Prior to this the state had been drawn to a volatile condition due to the “administrative and political seclusion of the Naga Hills (*which*) naturally resulted in a feeling of separatism, and ... the form of a rebellion by a section of the Nagas in the mid-fifties.”²⁰⁷ The North-East region which is both culturally and linguistically enormously diverse than the rest of the country required a sort of re-organisation of them in order to accommodate the aspirations and demands of all the stakeholders of it. As a measure to fulfil the need the process of granting statehood begun and Nagaland, after it was given its share of rights, begun to march ahead though amidst challenges on the paths of progress for a peaceful and progressive state.

²⁰⁷ Singh, Prakash. (2014). “Preface.” *Nagaland*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p.- VIII.

On the home front it shares its border with Assam on the North and West while Arunachal Pradesh is found on the North and East. The East is bounded by Myanmar and the south by Manipur.

The state is comprised of seven districts, viz. Kohima, Phek, Mokokchung, Wokha, Zunheboto, Tuensang and Mon. The land is inhabited by fourteen major tribe groups namely- Angami, Ao, Chakechang, Chang, Khemungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Santam, Sema, Yimchunger and Zeliang. "The population of the Naga tribes and sub-tribes with their distinctive languages and cultural features are concentrated in the seven districts of Nagaland. The district of Kohima is the home of the Angami, the Zeliang, the Rengma and a small group of Kuki and a few other minor tribes. The district of Phek is inhabited by the Chakachang an Pocharis and a group of Sangtams....Wokha district is the land of the Lothas and Zunheboto is the home of the Sema, while Mokokchung district is inhabited by the Ao. Of the other two districts Tuensang is the home of the Changs and the Sangtams, some Semas and a few other minor tribes and the Mon districts is inhabited by the konyaks."²⁰⁸

There are various theories concerning the origin of the Naga people. According to the noted linguist and litterateur Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee the Nagas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family who are frequently mentioned in the antique Classical literatures as the Kiratas. In texts like the *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda* and also in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* references have made about people like the Nagas who "lived mostly on fruits and tubers, dressed themselves in skins, wore their hair in a top-knot, and were a pleasant-looking people, but terrible with their weapons, and cruel in war.... They were rich with all the natural wealth of minerals and forest produce with which the mountains and hills and jungles where they lived abounded, but they were adepts in the art of weaving cloth."²⁰⁹

Apart from this the Naga people have different stories relating to their origin. One of such stories explains that the Angamis, Lothas and Semas were the children of the

²⁰⁸ Vidyarthi, L. p. (1993). *Art and Culture of the North-East India*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Govt. of India, p. 57.

²⁰⁹ Chatterjee, S. K. (1950). "Kirata-Jana-Kriti, The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol XVI, No. 2, Calcutta. pp 21-22.

same family who owned a miraculous stone that doubled the amount of the paddy kept over it within a day. The stone was being used by each of the sons on a rotation basis. But, things became unpleasant when one day there was a quarrel over the ownership of it and the stone was set to fire by the parents in apprehension of a bloody feud between the brothers. As a result, the spirit of the stone went to heaven and it lost its magical properties. Eventually, the three brothers decided to part ways and left each-other to different directions and became the forefathers of the Angamis, Lothas and Semas. In addition to this there are few other views uphold by the Western Angamis, the Rengmas and also by the Lothas and the Phoms.

There are also diverse interpretations as to how the term *Naga* came up to refer to a wide group of people living in a particular hilly area. Prakash Singh in his book *Nagaland* has recorded a number of such interpretations by various scholars on the subject. "According to S. E. Peal, the word is probably derived from *Noga* by which these hills tribes were known to the Assamese for centuries, while *Noga* itself is derived from the word *Nok* which means 'folk' in some of the hill dialects. L. W. Shakespeare and Robert Reid think that Naga is only a corruption of the word *Nanga* meaning 'naked.' Another theory is that the word Naga is derived from the Sanskrit *Nag*, a mountain, thus Naga meaning a 'Hillman'."²¹⁰ It is to be marked here that the people living in the areas now known as Nagaland were called themselves as Nagas as there was hardly any generic term for referring to these people. Instead, they identified them in terms their own tribe group or the villages they lived in. However, the umbrella term used to designate the diverse group of tribes as one has been very worthwhile considering the fact that in spite of the differences that exist among the tribes they are united as single community.

The people of Nagaland do not have a written history. They are rich with the reservoir of oral history. There is a legend explaining the unavailability of a written history which depicts that at the time of the creation people from both the plains and hills were given the knowledge of reading and writing. But while the people from the plains were given paper to write on, the Nagas were handed down with skin which

²¹⁰ Singh, Prakash. (2014). *Nagaland*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p.7.

having found edible was consumed by the latter leaving him without anything to be used for writing in future.

Prior to the contacts with the British authority the Nagas had maintained a close relationship with the Ahom people of Assam. Although there were frequent conflicts between the Ahoms and the different tribes of Nagaland yet by and large the relationship between the parties involved was a peaceful one. It became more distasteful only when the Ahom Kingdom started to become weak due to the home-grown rebellion and the subsequent attack by the Burmese army in the eighteenth century.

The relationship with the British began in the year 1832 when an attempt was made to establish a road communication between Assam and Manipur that required the British troops to move through the Naga Hills. Such an exercise did not go well with the Nagas and they started retaliate against it. The relation between the Nagas and the British may be viewed on three parameters. The first of the three periods began from 1832 to 1850 during which the British used its military power to dominate the resilient Nagas. The next period from 1851 to 1865 is marked by the unusual method of non-intervention by the British into the affairs of the people of Nagaland. However, in the third and final period this system was abandoned and a full control of the administration was taken over by the British government from 1866 onwards.

In the first period the British wanted to bring the Nagas under their control by using force but it was not an easy task for them as they hoped for it. They had lost several of their officers in their attempts to subdue the born fighters. In the early stages of its contacts with the Nagas the British authority entrusted both the King of Manipur as well as Cachar assuming that they would easily control the Naga tribes. However, by 1838 the British realized that such an arrangement was not working in favour of them and they subsequently appointed an officer to deal with the Naga people. Several Officers holding the post took up expeditions to the Naga Hills to subjugate the people resulting in loss on both the sides. A salt depot was opened in Dimapur in 1842 which was a very important commodity that the Naga people wanted. While the British officers were trying hard to pacify the tribes, they in turn carried out frequent raids on the plain

areas, many a times killing people and looting. The intermittent conflicts between the British force on the one hand and the Naga tribes on the other continued for many years later which saw further deterioration of the relationship that resulted in the murder of officers who went to mediate a dispute between two opposing groups. Finally, exasperated at the insistent attacks by the Nagas, the British in 1851 decided to withdraw from any kind of intervention into the affairs of the Naga people. The British had left Dimapur and withdrew till North Cachar Hills. But contrary to what the British had expected and emboldened at the desertion of the land by the British force, some of the Naga tribes launched fresh attacks on the people in plains. It is estimated that in 1851 alone the Naga made around twenty two raids in Assam in which about fifty five persons were killed and several hundreds were taken as captives. Under such worsening situations the British government had to review their role in the land and finally decided to take the region directly under their complete control.

But, it was never an easy task for the British forces to subdue the Nagas as they retaliated violently whenever such an attempt was made. Nonetheless, there were huge casualties on both the sides. While the Nagas attacked with their traditional weapons and killed a number of British soldiers as well as officers, the British on the other hand, equipped with guns and mortars, impounded the Naga people and either killed people or burnt down entire villages. After several bloody encounters over the period from 1865 to 1880, there was some improvement to the situation with the last of the resolute villagers of Khonoma surrendered before the British which “marked the end of the serious trouble and hostility in the Naga Hills.”²¹¹

Soon after this the Naga Hills District was formed in 1881 which was attached as a part of Assam but with scheduled status thus keeping it out of the range of general operation of laws put in force for other parts of the country. The Simon Commission of 1935 also made similar provisions under the concept of exclusive state. In 1950 the Constitution of India made special provisions under the Sixth Schedule that awarded autonomy to the Naga Hills District. Later on in 1957 the Naga Hills- Tuensang Area (NHTA) was formed by joining two separate divisions and in 1961 the name was changed

²¹¹ Shakespear, L. W. (2004). *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North Eastern Frontier*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, p. 225.

to 'Nagaland' and a demand for a new state was placed before the Government of India. The demand was finally accepted and the new state of Nagaland was created on 1st December, 1963.

5.1 Development of Literature in Nagaland

The Nagas, as has already been mentioned earlier, did not have any written literature until the arrival of the British on the land. The literature of Nagaland is intricately associated with the growth of Christianity in the region. When the British came, they did not come alone but were accompanied by the American Missionaries. These Missionaries had entered from different parts of Assam. The first of these was Rev. Miles Bronson who worked among the Nagas for about ten years from 1842 to 1852. During this period of his stay he opened a school at Namsang located in the Konyak area bordering Assam. But due to his ill-health Bronson could not stay there for long and had to give up his future course of action and return to Assam.

He was followed by another missionary named Rev. E. W. Clark who had initially stationed himself at Amguri. He was able to influence to convert the first Ao Naga as early as 1851. However, the real beginning in this regard was made by Gadhula Brown, an Assamese Christian, who had come from Sibsagar (now Sivasagar) and settled for a while at Dekhahaimung, an Ao village. Due to his persistent efforts in 1876 around nine villagers came forward to accept the Christian faith and be baptised. Rev. E. W. Clark went down to Dekhahaimung to perform the ritual. But, he was not easily accepted since his teachings were against those that they had been practising for ages. It made him and his followers to move to another place and set up a new village at Molung. The new place gave these people an opportunity to stay away from past habits and rebuild their lives based on the new found faith of Christianity. Gradually the number of converts increased and soon a school was established to provide education to the people. It became essential for both the new converts and students at the school for books to read and particularly religious texts. In order to fulfil the needs Clark set up the first printing press of Nagaland at Molung in 1874 and immediately after that brought out The Gospels of Mathew and John in the form of translation into Ao language. In 1875 Capt. J. Butler published an article in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal entitled *Rough notes*

on the *Angami Naga and Language*. It was followed by another book on the same language with the title *Outline Grammar of the Angami Naga Language* by R. B. McCabe in 1887. Again, in 1888 W. E. Witter brought out the *Grammar and Vocabulary* in Lotha language in 1888. In 1889 the translated version of the book *St. Mathew* into Angami language was published and in 1905 Rev. Rivenburg came out with a book yet again on the *Phrases in English and Angami Naga* in the year 1905. The *Sema Primer* by Rev. H. B. Dickson was published in the year 1908. Later in 1911 E. W. Clark published a dictionary on Ao Language.

During the World War I for the first time several thousand of Naga people got the opportunity to explore the world outside when they were taken to France as part of the Labour Corps. Such an exposure, in spite of the difficulties and the risks of death in the war field, gave the Nagas a sense of awareness about their own culture and identity. Ironically, it was only when they were thousands miles away from their homeland and engaged in the battlefield that these Naga soldiers were ready to forget the internal feuds between them on the home front and realized for the first time that in spite of certain differences they belong to a single community. This feeling of awareness remained in them which later inspired to form the Naga Club after they returned from their mission was over. The Club soon became the place of assemblage particularly for the educated Nagas across the tribes and later on served as a platform to voice out the political aspirations of the Naga people.

During this phase there was not any form of literature except certain routine government reports and few travelogues though much of it was published later only. However, this period of hard times witnessed the publication of few books on language, more specifically on Angami language. As example of the greater interest taken by the scholars in this field, mention may be made of the *Angami-English Dictionary Vol 1* by Haralu which was published in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1933. Prior to that J. H. Hutton published his much appreciated books *The Angami Nagas* and *The Sema Nagas*, both in 1921. Likewise Hutton, another administrator J. P. Mills also wrote books on *The Lhota Nagas*, *The Ao Nagas* and *The Rengma Nagas* respectively in 1922, 1926 and 1937. By 1920 the consciousness among the Nagas for their rights over their own land grew much stronger and under the banner of the Naga Club a petition was

submitted to the Simon Commission that came to India to implement revolutionary alterations to the administration of India. The petition demanded to keep the Nagas out of the Reformed Scheme of India which was duly heard and accepted. But under the shadow of the World War II these provisions could not be implemented further.

In the post-war situation also literature from the soil of Nagaland could not take birth due to the political instability that was still looming large over it. For greater part of the times the people of Nagaland got entangled between the revolutionary guerrillas on the one hand and the Indian security forces on the other over the issue of political independence. Under the circumstances the writings from Nagaland rarely appeared and whenever it did they were concerned with the prevalent social and political situation only. Among the earliest writers of Naga origin Ao Tajenyuba was prominent who brought out two books entitled *Nagas' Customary Laws* and *History of Anglo-Naga affair*, published in 1957 and 1958 respectively. These books showed a glimpse of the ability of Naga writers to introspect into one's own tradition and make a sensible assertion of the same. During this time few travelogues written by British administrators or scholar like Elwin were also published. Verrier Elwin's *Naga's in the Nineteenth Century* may be cited as an example of this. Although it was written long back it saw the light of day only in 1969. By and large, literature in Nagaland was not still developing and whatever had been written were mostly of descriptive nature only.

However, the scenario began to show gradual improvement in this field and from the late seventies onwards writings from the Naga writers began to appear. It perhaps would be apt to mention here that although Nagaland was given its statehood yet a large section of the people were still not satisfied with this arrangement as they had claimed for complete cessation from the rest of the country. This political conflict persisted to influence the mindset of many people leaving unable them to focus in a greater manner on the creative aspect of literature. Needless to say that such a disturbing situation has affected the growth of the literature in Nagaland significantly. More importantly, the rich and varied indigenous literature that is found in oral form has faced a serious threat of extinction since people who have the knowledge of them have been dying along with their literature left out unrecorded. However, even in the midst of uncertainties and

anxieties, writers began to appear, particular from those who had jobs and financial security out of having government jobs or such other engagements.

It was in the eighties that two of the most prominent Naga writers emerged into the scene – Easterine (Iralu) Kire and Temsula Ao. Although both of them started to write quite early in their lives yet they were able to publish their works for the first time in this decade. For Easterine Kire the first work that she came up with was *Kelhoukevira* (1982), a volume of poetry while Temsula Ao, too, brought out a book of poems entitled *Songs that Tell* (1988). With the beginnings of their literary career made with these works on poetry, both of them have since gone on to publish books till date on various forms of literature.

Literature in Nagaland was gradually growing as a powerful medium of expression much to the credit of these noted writers who have kept on publishing more works through the 90's till date. Prof. Temsula Ao continuously published books of collected poems with titles *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs From Here and There* (2003) and *Songs From the Other Life* (2007). The other notable works that she has written over the years are- *Henry James and the Quest for an Ideal Heroine* (1998), *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* (2000) and two anthologies of her own short stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009). On the other hand, her fellow writer Easterine (Iralu) Kire after a gap of few years from her first publication has been continuously bringing out books on various topics. Some of the important works that the writer has published are *Folk Elements in Achebe* (2000), *The Windhover Collection* (2001), *a Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *Ah, People of Tromso* (2006), *Three Nagas in Norway* (2007), *The Battle of Kohima* (2007), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Naga Folktales Retold* (2009), *Mari* (2010), *Forest Song* (2011) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). In addition to these she has written several books specially for the children, the latest being *The Dancing Village* (2015).

The other two writers of prominence are Nini Vingurian Lungalang and Monalisa Changkija. Although these writers have produced less in terms of quantity and diversity, in comparison to Ms. Kire and Prof. Ao, yet their writings are equally important for the

people and literature of Nagaland. Nini Lungalang is best known for her poems on the contemporary issues concerning the society and people of Nagaland. In 1994 she published her first and the only book of her poems titled *The Morning Years*. The writer does not consider her poems as expression of the Naga consciousness alone but rather of universal feeling. However, this does not at all imply that her poems are isolated manifestations. Apart from the book mentioned she has also written *Child of Fortune*, a story which once again questions the validity of violence and emphasises the importance of protest against such unjustness in violence. She has her poems published in recent anthologies such as *The Sun Rises When the Shadow Falls: The North East* and *The Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry* compiled and edited by Geeti Sen and by Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih respectively.

The other notable person who has also greatly contributed to the growth of literature in Nagaland is Tiameraenla Monalisa Changkija. She has to her credit the honour of being the only women editor from the North East and proprietor of an English daily news paper *The Nagaland Page*. But apart from it Changkija has also earned a lot names for herself both as a creative writer and a social activist. She has written about the issues concerning lives of women and the society. The first volume of her poetry was brought out in 1993 with the title *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* while the second was published in 2007 entitled *Monsoon Mourning*. Although her poems are drawn on the backdrop of the state of affairs of Nagaland yet they express her genuine concern for the people all over the world.

The literature of Nagaland is still in a very young stage but has already shown signs of greatness within its short period since beginning. What these writers display in unison is the vision of the world that is not circumscribed either by geographical boundary or by circumstantial conditions rather by the universal sense of belonging.

5.2 Development of theatre in Nagaland

As far as drama as a form of literature is concerned there is hardly any trace of it found in the writings of these writers. However, in Tenydie, a form of dialect which is commonly used by the different linguistic communities within the Angamis, a number of

plays have been written particularly by Dr. Shiirhozellie Leizietsu. Dr. Leizietsu, a highly educated person, has been elected Member of the State Assembly for several terms and has also acted as Minister for various departments on most of the occasions. But, in spite of his busy political activities, he has been to engage himself in literary works bring out a number of books on different forms of literature in Tenydie language. He has published four novels, three anthologies of poetry, dictionaries, and most importantly twelve plays on various themes. In addition to these, he has publications on essays, history and even on jokes. He has also translated around five books into Tenydie language.

Out of the twelve plays that Dr. Leizietsu has composed, several of them are based on themes borrowed from the Bible. His first play was *Mehouvi-Moriisa*, a traditional play. The other traditional play that he wrote was *Peli*. He has written two comical plays titled *Riisie Kedojii Kepetha* and *Kkepulie Do*. The major share of his plays is Biblical plays. These include *Ruokuothopfu*, *Jfiketa Nuo-u*, *Jacob mu Puo Nuonuoko*, *Daniel Mhie Thepfulie*, *Jisu Kepenuo* and *Nehemiah*. Apart from them he has written *Ketho mu Keyu* which is literary play and *Teikado Kedukhri*, an adapted play.

Among the other writers of Nagaland in this field stands out Easterine Kire. She has written many plays both for the All India Radio and TV. Among the notable ones reference may be made to some of them. The list includes *Instant Coffee*, *King Lear for our Times*, *The Man Who Went to Heaven*, *The Story of Solomon* which were written for the radio. The plays that were written for TV are- *David and Jonathan*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Story of a Stone*. She wrote another play *Babe of Christmas* which was written for both radio and television. However, none of the plays has been published yet.

Traditionally perceived, the Naga people perhaps had some rituals that were close to drama that were practiced in the *morungs*. The *morungs* are the institutions where young people received training of the things that they would require in their later life after marriage. There must have been some kind of activities among the borders in the *morungs* wherein they would re-enact their adventures of the world outside. However, with the coming of the Christianity the significance of the *morungs* decreased a lot since it barred the Christian Nagas to stay in the *morungs* and with the passing of time the *morungs* have fallen into disuse as the traditional way of living has also become

extinct. The access to western education has been both illuminating as well as devastating for the Nagas. On the one hand, it has made their lives a lot more peaceful as it has given them knowledge of the truths of things and avoid being prey to superstitions and the unwanted practices. On the other hand, it has made the young educated people to undermine and detest their own traditional cultures and look for the greener pastures of life while leaving behind their own. It is beyond denial that such changes were inevitable and are for the betterment of the Nagas. But, at the same time is to be taken care of that a balance between the old and new is maintained since not everything of the old is corrupt or bad and the vice-versa.

The other language that has made much development among the Naga people is the Nagamese. "It is hybrid mixture of Assamese and Naga languages but serve as the *lingua franca* of the Naga people. It does not follow any strict rules of grammar and is easy to pick-up."²¹² In more recent times efforts have been made by different persons and organizations to bring about changes to the way theatre activities are taken up in Nagaland and lot of plays have been produced in Nagamese. The Government of India under the Department of Culture has also set up a separate department in Dimapur under the name North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) comprising the states of the North East.

The centre organizes cultural activities in the member state on different occasions and at various points of time in a year. In 1999, the organization for the first time organized a month long production oriented workshop on theatre in collaboration with the National School of Drama, New Delhi. The workshop was conducted by Ms. Robijita Gogoi, an NSD alumnus and as a result of the efforts a Nagamese play was produced. The play titled *Nisheli* was included in the list of plays meant for the performance at the first ever theatre festival organized by the NSD under the name *Bhart Rang Mahotsav* which has now become a regular event of the organization.

The play was based on a Naga folk story of the Sema Nagas which gives an idea of the simple, peace loving, patriotic people of Nagaland. The story of the play is built around Nisheli, a vivacious young and beautiful Sema girl. She is the daughter of a rich

²¹² Singh, Prakash. (2014). *Nagaland*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 56.

gaonburha (village headman) and lives happily among the beauties of the nature, unmindful of the cruelties outside it. Her pleasant personality is appreciated by the people of the village. But, things do not remain same forever and she begins to face difficulties of the real life as she is denied the permission from her parents to marry her beloved Pheo who belongs to a very poor family. At this moment another young man Kutpa appears on the scene and offers to marry Nisheli. Kutpa is from an equally rich family like that of Nisheli and therefore, the proposal is accepted by the parents of Nisheli. But, Nisheli never liked Kutpa and did not want to marry him. Such an intricate situation compels Nisheli and Pheo to take the decision to elope and live happily somewhere away from the village. As such a plan was prepared in which Pheo was supposed to take Nisheli from the traditional girls' dormitory called Eliki at night. But, their plans become known to Kutpa and taking advantage of darkness around the Eliki he takes Nisheli away. When Nisheli comes to know about it she protests against such a despicable act of Kutpa and the confrontation claims the life of Nisheli at last.

Times pass on but her beloved Pheo never marries and keeps remembering her all the time. Once, while going into the forests with few of his friends on a hunting mission a strong storm suddenly sweeps in forcing them to take shelter under a big tree with plenty of orchids on it. Soon it was noticed that a branch of orchids was following Pheo as he moved in order to protect him from the rain water. Pheo, out of his curiosity and fancy, plucks out a full bloomed stick of orchid and takes it home. At night Pheo had a dream wherein he meets Nisheli and talks with her. In the dream Nisheli reveals the truths behind her mysterious disappearance and lets him know that the branch of orchid was nothing but one of her arms. The revelations immediately spread in the village and the villagers come out to catch the real culprit and accordingly punish him. On the other hand, the grief and remorse takes a toll on Pheo and he leaves this world to meet his beloved Nisheli in another world beyond this. The play was an example of how elements of Naga culture and traditions can be blended with the modern elements and build up a new and attractive form of theatre.

Following the footprints of this pioneering work a number of theatre groups began to emerge on the theatre scene of Nagaland. Among them the *Nagaland Theatre Fraternity* and *Dreamz Unlimited* are notable ones. The Nagaland Theatre Fraternity was

established in 2002 and since then it has staged several plays such as *Ahom Naga*, *Nisapa Nisala*, *Inakha Ghonili* and *Nisheli*. It has produced plays on behalf of other organizations which are employed to create awareness for the conservation of environment and wildlife as well as RTI.

The Dreamz Unlimited, established in 2008, is another group which has been relentlessly trying to put the theatre of Nagaland in the global map. Its first presentation was *Lichaba's Daughter*, a play based on a traditional Ao story. It has been staged at different parts of the country including Delhi, Gangtok, Imphal and Guwahati and appreciated a lot by the audience as well as the critics. The story of the play revolves around the daughter of *Lichaba*, the Creator of the world, whose name is *Tshungrola*. She during one of her visits to this earth is captured by some men and eventually becomes the wife of the eldest among them. But after some time she expresses her desire to go back to her celestial home along with her husband. They accordingly visit the original home her and after spending some time there returns to the earth with a lot of food items from there. But soon a strange development is noticed in *Tshungrola* as she turns into an enchanting lady and whoever looks at her becomes a victim of her beauty and grows jealous. The husband later investigates to find out the reason behind it and discovers that it happened due to the food stuffs taken by his wife which were nothing but human flesh. The husband after his realization that the union of the earthly and heavenly life can never be materialized urges his wife to go back to her original home. *Tshungrola*, after some persuasion decides to leave the earthly life. She turns into a bird and flies up to her original abode.

The group even has the credit of taking its play *Technicolor Dreams* to the stage of the prestigious 12th *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* held in New Delhi in 2010. The play was jointly produced in collaboration with *Jirsong theatre*, a theatre group from Assam and in four languages viz. English, Nagamese, Ao and Sema. It deals with the various aspects of the contemporary situations or issues in Nagaland including the issue of corruption. Apart from these plays the group is actively engaged in imparting the much needed knowledge about the art form to the talented youngsters of the state by organizing a number of workshops either in collaboration with various organizations or independently. Dreamz Unlimited has also produced several plays as part of its mission

to send messages to the society. Plays such as *Strength of a Woman, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* have been produced to mark certain important celebrations like International Women's day, World Water Day , etc. It has further organized many awareness camps in sanitation, old age and so on.

Bendang Walling, an alumnus of the National School of Drama, has been actively engaged in the field of theatre, particularly of Nagaland. After the completion of his course at NSD he returned to his hometown and founded his theatre group with the name *Hill Theatre* in 2012 and with the motto of 'Love through creativity.' The group has, since its inception, produced and staged a number of street plays, skits, dance ballets, mime plays and above all full-length plays. The group has presented plays such as *The Third Eye, N.H. 36, Chimti: The Ant, The Wedding, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Don't Women, No Cry*. The last of the plays was presented in the 6th North East Theatre Festival held in Dibrugarh, Assam in 2014. It is about the conditions of women in Indian societies. It reflects the pain and struggle endured by the women in the present time. The play addresses the issue of gender equality in Indian context and appeals to treat women as equals. In the year 2015 the group came up with the street play entitle *The Scavengers* in celebration of the World Theatre Day at Mayagnokcha Higher Secondary School, Cannan Higher Secondary School and also at Govt. Higher Secondary School- all at Mokokchung. In the same year it once again went to Imphal to take part in the 7th North-East Theatre Festival with its play titled *Morusa*. The Hill Theatre is also engaged deeply with the training of young artists through workshops in various parts of Nagaland and even outside of it.

There are several organizations in Nagaland that have been formed to generate interest in theatre among its people. The *Kohima Sahitya Sabha* was one such organization which was established long back in 1895 with a vision to serve socio-literary aspirations of the people. During its course of existence it has staged plays, music and dance programmes in addition to the chief aim of it to produce works to cater to the literary taste of the people of Nagaland.

Another organization emerged in 1982 with the name *Longmisa Cultural Club* having its branches in places like Dimapur and Kohima. Its objectives are to promote

activities related to the field of music, dance and drama. The Associates of Performing Arts and Theatricals was also established with similar aims and objectives. The group is closely involved with the District administration in various projects related to the creation of awareness for different issues.

The situation of theatre in Nagaland has been gradually developing in to a powerful medium of expression. The entry of many talented Naga young people who have received formal training from institutes like the N. S. D. into the domain of theatre has provided further assurance that the state of theatre in Nagaland is indeed very bright. However, there are a lot of things that are needed to be done to create niche for itself to sustain. With multitudes of tribes and each of them donned with language and culture, there is huge quantity of unexplored materials yet to be tapped. Nagaland has immense potentiality to stand out as a unique destination of theatre amidst crowd if the folk material present mostly in oral form is exploited to be transformed into theatre materials.

5.3 Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh, the land of the dawn or the land of sunrise, came to existence as a full-fledged state in 1987 'after a long period of probation under the Nehru model of tribal development, enshrined in the Panchsheel of tribal policy.'²¹³ Politically, the state of Arunachal Pradesh was once a part of Assam and designated as North Eastern Frontier Agency. Till 1965 it was administered by the Ministry of External Affairs and later on the administration was looked after by the Governor of Assam with the status of a Union Territory being given to it. The land was also given its new name Arunachal Pradesh on in 1972. It is the twenty fourth state of India and is located at the most north-eastern position of the nation and bears great strategic importance. The state has been subjected to controversy due to the intermittent claims by the Republic of China that the state falls within their territory although such claims have so far been out rightly rejected the Government of India.

²¹³ Singh, K. S. (1995). "Foreword." *People of India: Arunachal Pradesh*. Vol. XIV. Calcutta: Seagull Books, p. xii.

Likewise many other present states of the north east, Arunachal Pradesh was also regarded till the beginning of the twentieth century as a 'terra incognita' due to its isolated position both geographically as well as culturally. However, it must be noted that there have references to this part of the world in various texts of the ancient times although they do not provide any clear picture of the people and the land. Texts such as the *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Kalika Purana*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have mentioned about the people as the *Nisadas*, *Kiratas* and *Asuras*. As per the Hindu mythological beliefs it was the land where the great Sage Parashurama had washed away his sins after he killed his own mother. It is believed to be the same land where sage Vyasa meditated and King Bhismaka established his rule. In the ancient past it was treated once as a part of *Pragjyotisa* or *Kamrupa* that included the entire region of the present day Assam.

Geographically, the state shares its south with Assam and Nagaland while Bhutan borders it on the west. The north and the north-east is contoured by China and Burma in the east and south-east. The state is distinguished by its linguistic heterogeneity. This characteristic may be perceived truly only when considering the fact that in spite of being small in size, the state has as many as forty two spoken languages. Except only Assamese and Nepali which fall in the category of Aryan language, all other languages belong to the Tibeto-Chinese language family. According to the census report of 2011 the population of the state amounts to 1,38,2611 which spread over about twenty five scheduled tribes recognized by the Govt. Arunachal Pradesh.

"Arunachal Pradesh is divided into two cultural zones constituted by the hills and plains, inhabited by the major and minor tribal groups... The first, covering the districts of Tawang and West Kameng, is dominated by the Buddhist Monpas; the other groups being the Sherdukpens, Akas, Mijis and Khowas. The Second Zone, lying to the east of the first, is dominated by the Nishis/Bangnis. It covers the the districts of East Kameng and Lower and Upper Subansiri. The other tribes in the zone are the Sulungs, Apatanis, Nas, Tagins, Mikirs and the Hill Miris."²¹⁴ The other prominent tribes that are found in the

²¹⁴ Singh, K. S. (1995). "Foreword." *People of India: Arunachal Pradesh*. Vol. XIV. Calcutta: Seagull Books, p. xiii-xiv.

region are the Khambas, Membas, Mishmis, Khamptis, Khamiyangs, Deoris, Noctes, Wanchos Tangsas and smaller groups like the Singphos, Lisus , etc. On the front of religion the people of Arunachal profess diverse religious beliefs. A majority of the communities follow the traditional cult of *Donyi-Polo* (The Sun and Moon God) which is believed to be bearer of supreme power and governs the universe. However, Buddhism is another religion which is practised by some communities, particularly by who live in the district of Tawang. Hinduism and Christianity also hold quite a good number of followers.

5.4 Literature of Arunachal Pradesh

The literature of Arunachal Pradesh is found, as is usually obtained in many tribal societies, in the form of oral literature. Due to the non-availability of the scriptures the majority of tribes did not have a written literature of its own. However, the Buddhist monasteries which are located in various parts of the state have a tradition of imparting formal education to its followers and it has its distinctive written scriptures. It may be, however, mentioned that the texts are primarily to deal with different aspects of the religion. Written literature began to appear only after India got its freedom and initiatives were taken to provide formal education to the people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Among the important writers from the land of Arunachal Pradesh mention may be made of Lummer Dai, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Mamang Dai, Tagang Taki, N. N. Osik, and Yumlam Tana. It is crucial to observe that several of the key Arunachali writers have chosen to write in Assamese language. There could be several reasons for it, the foremost being that these writers had received their education in Assamese medium schools, particularly during their formative period. Another reason could be the prevalence of Assamese language as the *lingua-franca* among the diverse tribal communities who otherwise did not have any common language to establish communication among them. However, later on Hindi was introduced as a subject in schools and subsequently replaced Assamese as the *lingua-franca*. But, this move has not brought any positive outcome for the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Because, the writers, specially the younger generation, have not received any patronage from the Hindi writers or bodies promoting Hindi literature elsewhere, in spite of the fact that

they have studied it as a subject. On the contrary, such patronage has been always offered by the Assamese writers or the prominent literary body of Assamese literature- the *Asom Sahitya Sabha*.

Nevertheless, the writers from Arunachal Pradesh, irrespective of their language of expression, have been sincerely trying to portray the indigenous tradition and culture of their own. Lummer Dai was not only a litterateur, he was at the same time, an administrator and an editor of the first English newspaper from Arunachal Pradesh, *Echo of Arunachal*. Lummer Dai represents the first generation of writers who primarily wrote novels and he wrote his first novel *Paharor Shile Shile* when he was still a student in 1961. Prior to that, he wrote *Udayachalar Sadhu* in 1959 which was published by Asom Sahitya Sabha. It was followed by four more novels. In 1963, he wrote another much acclaimed novel of him *Prithibir Hanhi*. In this novel the writer has cast his views on the variety of social and human problems of the Adi society. "Family life, social life controlled by the communal Kebang, the forest and field background against which youths discover themselves and seek life partners, and human values- all these are linked up in a story of love and hate, fellow-feeling and individual scheming."²¹⁵ The other novels by him were *Mon aru Mon* (1968), *Kainar Mulya* (1982) and *Upor Mahal* (2003). In addition to these he also brought out a collection of short stories titled *Eti Tapat Smriti*. Lummer Dai's works presented a realistic world of the Adi tribe to which he belonged. Most of his works reflected the rituals, culture, beliefs and practices of the Adi people.

The next stalwart of the world of literature of Arunachal Pradesh is Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi who belongs to the small Sherdukpen tribe. He has written novels and short stories mostly in Assamese language. His first novel was *Sonam* (1981) which followed by other novels *Lingjhik* (1983), *Mouno Ounth Mukhar Hriday* (2001) and *Sava Kota Manuh* (2004). As in Lummer Dai's works, the novels of Thongchi also concentrate on the traditional culture and social life of the Monpa and Sherdukpen tribes. However, these novels have presented views not limited to a certain society but deal with universal themes and thereby appeal to a greater readership. The third of his novels *Mouno Ounth Mukhar Hriday* (2001) was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2005. The

²¹⁵ Barua, B. K. and P. D. Goswami. (1988). 'Assamese' *Indian Literature*, ed. Dr. Nagendra. New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, p. 434.

story of the novel is “in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of the 1950s. During the construction of a new road in one of the hilly areas of NEFA, two young people – a boy and a girl- belonging to two different tribes fall for each other. The novel deals with the human feelings of love, hope, aspirations and dreams which transcend the limit of society and even that of language between the two lovers.”²¹⁶ All of his novels have been highly appreciated by readers and critics alike for the genuineness of expression and human emotions. Thongchi has been awarded also with the Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha Award and Basudev Jalan Award by the Asom Sahitya Sabha for his enormous contributions to not only to the literature of Arunachal Pradesh but also to Assamese literature.

Following the footsteps of Thongchi appears on the literary scene of Arunachal Pradesh is Mamang Dai, a distant relative of Lummer Dai. Mamang Dai, being an IAS officer, also held high administrative jobs but later quit it to devote her time and spirit to journalism and literature. She has to credit two books of poetry. The first of the collections of her poems is titled *River Poems* (2004) while the second one is *The Balm of Time*. Her poetry reveals her love for the nature and also the deep concerns for the carelessness of mankind towards it. She inherits the general attitude of the people of Arunachal Pradesh while dealing with the culture and heritage of the land which is characterised by the sensibilities for the protection of the delicate and the beautiful. She describes the nature as mysterious, laden with memories and magical with rivers, mountains and forests but only on an apparent plane. On the flipside of it lies the guile and a sense of deep disquiet. Dai has also written three novels that have been highly praised- *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2015). Other than these works she has tried her hand with writing books for the children as well. *Once Upon a Moon-Time* (2005) and *The Sky Queen* (2005) are the two books that she has penned for children. *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2002) is about the land and its people for which she has been awarded the State’s first Annual Verrier Elwin Prize in 2003.

²¹⁶ Dutta, Juri. (2014). *Ethnic Worlds in Select Indian Fiction*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, p.55.

Among the other writers who have contributed in their own ways towards the development of literature in Arunachal Pradesh Tagang Taki is one. He has written both in English and Assamese language. In his early years as a writer he brought out *Adi-Assamese Word Book* (1959). Much later in 1998 he published another such book on *Adi-English Word Book*. Among the literary works he has written two story books in Assamese- *Adi Sadhu* (1964) and *Nibo Aru Robor Sadhu* (1998). He wrote a bi-lingual piece of drama titled *Border Eme* (1965).

N. N. Osik is again another writer who has extensively written of the history of Arunachal Pradesh along with other books on literature and culture. The publications on the history of the land are- *British Relations with Adis* (1991), *A Brief History of Arunachal Pradesh* (1993) and *Modern History of Arunachal Pradesh*. (2000). But his more important books deal with the legends and culture of the state. He published *Myths, Legends and Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh* in the year 2002 followed by *Songs and Dances of Arunachal Pradesh* published in the same year.

Among the newer generation of writers in Arunachal Pradesh Yumlam Tana shows a lot promise. By profession he is a teacher at a Secondary School at Karsingsa in Papumpare district. He has already published two books of his poems. The first of the two titled *The Man and the Tiger* was published in 2000. In these poems 'Mr. Tana constantly clings to the mores of quest for identity and the poems allude to the Nyishi tribe's myths of brotherhood between the man and the tiger, the Nyishi legends, superstitions, rites, rituals, customs, costumes, mysteries and the ecology of the land of his birth.'²¹⁷ His second and the latest book is *The Wind Also Sings: Poetry of Protest and Anger from India's Northeast* (2015). This collection of his poetry also betrays the same temperament which he represented in his previous anthology of poems.

5.5 Theatre in Arunachal Pradesh

Theatre activities in Arunachal Pradesh are gradually accelerating ever since it obtained its statehood in the late eighties. However, due to the centuries old close relationship between the people and cultures of both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh the

²¹⁷ Das, Nigamananda and N. D. R. Chandra. (2007). "Introduction." *Ecology, Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, p.4.

theatre activities of both the states are mutually influenced. The theatre of Assam being more rich and old has a definite advantage over that of Arunachal Pradesh.

There is an opinion among some practitioners of the theatre form Sri Sankardeva that the semi-dramatic folk forms of Arunachal Pradesh have influenced the former to a certain extent. In this connection references may be made to the semi-dramatic forms as practised by tribes such as the Monpas, the Gallongs, the Membas or the Khampas and the Sherdukpens. These tribes have very rich semi-dramatic theatre traditions in the form of dances that are performed during certain festivals with a religious or ritualistic background. In the theatre forms that were prevalent prior to the introduction of the *Ankiyā Nāt* or *Bhaona* by Sri Sankardeva in Assam, there was no use of masks in use. But, the uses of various kinds of masks are always used by some of the tribe communities of Arunachal Pradesh during the performances of certain dance forms. For this reason, it may be argued that due to the ever present close contacts with the people of Arunachal Pradesh there is every possibility that the technique of preparation and use of masks by in Shankarian theatre was adopted from these tribes.

Among the Khamptis who practise Buddhism there are several dance forms but only couple of them bear the traits of drama in them. Among such varieties there is one form which is called *Kapung* (ka-dance; pung- story). The form barring the dramatic aspect of the same form is known as *Ka*. *Kapung* usually deals with some mythical stories bearing an ethical message and are always performed during the religious festivals of Potwah or Sankian. In *Kapung* the story taken up is narrated to the spectators with the help dance movements. Since it is related to religious festivals rehearsals, if arranged, are done most preferably in a monastery. However, they can be arranged in someone's house also. Like *Shumang Lila* of Manipur it is sometimes performed in the front courtyard of some wealthy person's dwelling if the group is invited to present a performance.

The roles of female characters are performed by male dancers by wearing the costume of a woman. It is very interesting to know that the group is paid some amount which can always be divisible by seven.

Another important semi-dramatic dance form is *Ka Fifai Dance-Drama*. Unlike the other one this is designed around a specific traditional theme. According to this traditional belief there are ghosts who appear before human beings and kidnap either girls or men, thus cause trouble to them. The participants in the drama comprises of a man, his daughter who gets kidnapped, a ghost who is responsible for the kidnap, the Ministers of the Kingdom who undertake the task of waging war against the ghosts, the King of the state in which the girl's father is a subject, and the king's men who go out to capture the ghost.

As the performance begins a man with his daughter is seen taking a walk by the garden when the ghost that was hiding in the garden appears and captures the girl. The man, terrified and shocked, hurries to the King to let him know about the incident and pleads his to take action in order to rescue the kidnapped girl. With this news of kidnapping the King becomes very angry and calls for the Ministers and orders them to prepare for a war against the ghost. The King's men immediately go out to catch the culprit and having caught the ghost they present it before the King. The King orders the ghost not to engage in such crimes and warns it of severe punishment in future if it repeats such a crime. The drama comes to the end with the ghost bows before the King and leaves.

Apart from these dance-drama forms there are few other forms that are performed during annual festivals in Tawang. During the Torgya festival celebrated in and around the monasteries of Tawang several monastic dances are presented. But there are few more interesting ones which are performed during various other festivals. Among the prominent dance forms the *Aji Lhamu Dance* is one which is also known as *Lhambro*. This dance form is performed during the Losar festival which presents the Tibetan version of the Ramayana. The *Aji Lhamu Dance* has comprises of five characters each having a mythological origin. The names of the characters are Gyeli, Nyapa, Nyaro- all male characters and Lhamu Abu and Lhamu Zomu, the two female characters. Lhamu was the fairy who came down from the heaven and later became the queen of Gyeli.

The next important dance form is the *Yak Dance* which is the most attractive dance forms of the Monpas. In this dance form the dancers represent a family who had

discovered the yak with the help of a magical bird many centuries ago. The discovery of the yak had resolved the family's internal conflicts over property and brought in peace and happiness to the family as well as to the community forever.

The last of these dance forms is called the *Lion and Peacock Dance*. Just like the other two this dance form is also beautiful and very popular among the spectators. As the name suggests in this dance form there appears two dancers wearing the costumes of a lion and a peacock. The story of the dance revolves around a saint named Tenteling who performed extremely hard meditation and remained in fast at the mysterious mountain of Gangri-Karpo for three consecutive years. The snow lions who watch observed the sacred and pious life of the saint gave him their milk and their company also. Such a lovely and happy relationship between man and animals made other people highly delighted and inspired them to dance out their joy. The dance form sends a precious message to the world of how important it is live to lead a happy life in co-existence with other species of life.

Arunachal Pradesh has strong tradition of dance-drama prevalent among various tribes of the state. However, it has not made enough progress in the area of theatre in the modern sense. But, of late a lot young people are taking keen interest in theatre activities. NSD alumnus Suk Bahadur is one such theatre personality who has been making relentless efforts at bringing in change in the scenario. After he completed his Post-Graduate degree from NSD he came back to his own place and engaged himself in promoting the indigenous culture and tradition of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. He has so far directed several plays. The list includes plays such as *Money, Money Shehar*, *The Legend of Choryal Norzand*, *Choti Si Daniyam*, *Drowa Jhangmo*, *Ek Devi ki Kahani*, *Doniyai Chumji* an *Hamro Samay*. Suk Bahadur, at present, is associated with two groups- *Bashel Brothers Creation* and *Bugun Welfare society*. The Bugun Welfare Society was formed to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Suk Bahadur has represented the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the prestigious *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* organized by NSD with his play *Ajilamu* which is experimentation with the traditional dance form of *Ajilhamu*. The group focuses on the training of the The Bugun Welfare Society was formed to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The group focuses on the training of the youth of Arunachal

Pradesh in various performing art forms such as dance, pantomime, theatre production , etc.

The people who have come forward to join the stream of theatre must own the responsibility of recording the stories or legends that are still in motion in oral format down to written format. They may provide the theatre artists the much needed ideas for genuine work of art. The most obvious and unique feature of the dance-drama forms of Arunachal Pradesh is the extensive use of masks by the performers. If Arunachal Pradesh is to make real progress in the field of theatre then it must ensure that a careful balance is maintained while blending the traditional forms with those of the moderns.

5.6 Sikkim

The state of Sikkim is located in the eastern part of India. The state is bounded on the north and on the east by Tibet and Bhutan while on the south it is bounded by Darjeeling of West Bengal and the west by Nepal. The early inhabitants of Sikkim are the Lepchas who believe that they had come from the east along the foot-hills from the direction of upper Burma and Assam. According to the Lepcha legend the ancient Sikkimese were the Kiratas who also lived in the neighbouring Kingdom of Nepal.

For quite a long time the land occupied by the present-day Sikkim has been the area of contest for people inhabiting the adjacent regions of the Himalaya. The records which are available do not divulge a lot about the ancient history about the origin and the way of life of the people who had lived in Sikkim in the olden times. Scholars from the both the Western world and Indian counterpart hold the view that Sikkim was not politically secured as one till 1642 when Phuntsho Namgyal was chosen as the Chogyal or Dharmaraj of Sikkim by the three Lamas at Yoksom Norbugang. These Lamas had come down from Tibet to convert the Sikkimese people into Buddhism. In their search for the descendent of their Guru Tashe these Lamas came across with Phuntsho who turned out to the great-grandson of the Guru and accordingly made him the Chogyal. During that time there were a number of independent Chieftains belonging to the Lepcha, Tsongs or the Limboos and Mangar community and they were ruling the Greater Sikkim

autonomously. But, soon after Namgyal was chosen as the Chogyal many of the Lepchas and Tsongs had expressed their willingness to accept the supremacy of the Namgyal dynasty and accordingly in 1642 an agreement was made by which all the three parties involved integrate their resources taking in the migrant Bhutias along and a new region was created. This new country was called by different names by the different communities. The Lepchas called it Renjong, the Limboos called it Yioksom and the Bhutias termed it as Deyjong. It was later on “named *Song khim* (New House or Palace) by the Limbooni Queen Thungwamukma of Tensung Namgyal, second Maharaja of nagyal Dynasty and then corrupted to *Sukhim* and again to *Sikkim*.”²¹⁸

The Sikkimese people in spite of the repeated invasions by people belonging to two other cultures – the Bhutias from the North bringing with them the Tibetan culture, the Tibetan language, the Lamaistic Buddhism along with a tradition of settled agricultural life on the one hand, and the Nepalese, coming from the west brought with them indo-Aryan languages, Hinduism and also just like the Bhutias, a system of doing agriculture, were able to retain their own culture. By the middle of the eighteenth century the invasions particularly from the Nepalese side began to increase. The Gurkhas who had gradually become a powerful community in Nepal emerged as a threat to the Sikkimese as well. They had entered the land and settled down by encroaching upon the forests of Sikkim without much of a resistance. Although a section of the Sikkimese people was unhappy with such encroachment there were a greater number of people who welcomed the Nepalese for they provided easy help in developing the resources and the various construction works that had been taken up.

In the early nineteenth century the British had entered into relationship with Sikkim through a treaty (Treaty of Titalia) signed between both the parties by which the East India Company agreed to hand over the territory captured by Nepal to Sikkim and also to make arrangement for a definite political boundary between Nepal and Sikkim. But unfortunately, due to such a treaty Sikkim had lost its freedom to the British since the treaty contained a clause that Sikkim would not have the right to take any independent decision in any of its disputes with other parties. Gradually, the differences

²¹⁸ Subba, J. R. (2011). *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, p. 1.

between the British and the Chogyal increased as the British authority wanted to have greater control over the region. After several conflicts between the forces of the two, the British finally sent a strong contingent of army in 1860 and defeated the Sikkimese counterpart. In the following year another treaty was signed which put the Sikkim under the complete control of the British.

However, peace did not come to Sikkim immediately. With the British coming to hold sway over the land the migration of the Nepalese, being able to win the favour of the British, began to increase. But, it led to a tense relationship between the Nepalese on the one hand and the original population of Sikkim on the other as the immigration of the former had threatened to jeopardise the interests of the latter. This disquiet among them increased even more gradually when political authority and other higher governmental appointments were still retained by the Bhutias and Lepchas. The Nepalese felt that in spite of the presence of the largest number of population they were not given the due recognition. The growing discontent found the occasion of India attaining its independence in August 1947 as an opportunity to replace the monarchy with an elected government in order to promote the interest of the majority. As a move towards this end a political party was formed- the Sikkim State Congress which prompted the King to form another party –Sikkim National Party. For the next several years both the parties failed to win an absolute majority until 1974 when the State Congress won a thumping victory. It paved the way for the complete dissolution of the monarchy and its merge with India. Finally, on April 26, 1975 Sikkim became a part of India having declared as the twenty second state of India. It has four districts – East District, West District, North District and South District with its capital at Gangtok.

5.7 Literature in Sikkim

Although the Lepchas, the Limboos and the Bhutias have their own script prior to the formation of the Greater Sikkim the languages were not so much popular during that time. It seems that the groups of people had oral literatures and were more popular among their respective communities. After the formation of the Greater Sikkim the Bhutia language of the Tibetan origin became the official language which was used for both administrative and monastery affairs. However, later on the Lepchas began to learn

another script of Sirijunga origin. During the initial period of the reign of Phuntsho Namgyal a number of monasteries were established and through the Buddhist texts written in Tibetan script was pushed in and subsequently it was declared the official language of the country.

The language and literature of the Nepali community began to emerge as a strong force in Sikkim from the later period of the eighteenth century. Due to the process of Nepal Unification there was an attempt to make Nepali language as the *lingua-franca* of the region. Until the thirties of the twentieth century the Nepal Unification did not give others enough scope to follow their respective language and literature. During the period Hinduism in religion, Nepali which is called otherwise *Khas Kura* in language and literature was allowed to prevail in the Gorkha occupied areas of Sikkim. However, not much of development in Khas language and literature was made.

During the period from 1817 and 1975 there was a movement away from the Tibetan language to Hindi, to Nepali and English language and literature. In schools the medium of instruction was changed from Hindi to Nepali and English. By 1920 the Nepali language had consolidated its presence in Sikkim. The first grammar of titled *Grammar of the Nepalese Language* was published long back in 1820 by J. A. Ayton, an assistant professor in Fort William College in Kolkata. The Nepali language and literature found a boost with the establishment of the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924 followed by the publication of many newspapers such as *Kanchanjungha* (1957), *Tintara* (1958), *Sikkim Herald* (1959) and *Sikkim* (1966). Later on the formation of the literary body- *Apatan Sahitya Parisad* in 1947 brought in a renewed movement in Nepali literature. A large number of poets started to write and in 1950 an anthology of them was brought out by Padam Singh Subba, the erstwhile secretary of *Apatan Sahitya Parisad*. It included poets like Agam Singh Tamang, Tulsi Bahadur Chettri, Padam Singh Subba, Nima Tshering Lepcha, Chandra Das Rai and many others. By 1975, the literature of Nepali language had greatly developed and the language became the *lingua-franca* of the state.

After the merger of the state with India the government of Sikkim recognized the Nepali, Bhutia and the Lepach as official language in 1977 while steps were ensured to

promote eleven other languages. Later in 1997 seven more languages were included in the list of state languages.

Such measures inspired writers of different linguistic background to write and thereby enrich their respective literature. In Bhutia language Bhaichung Bhutia has produced a novel titled *Richi* and a lot of poems. The prominent writers of this language are Prema Rinzing Bhutia, Palden Tshering Gyamtso, Norden Tshering , etc. Similarly in Lepcha language also there have a lot of new writers who have come up with various kinds of literature. It is to be noted that the first grammar of the language was published in 1876 by General G. B. Mainwaring and a dictionary of Lepcha-English language was also brought out by him in 1898. The first primer in the language titled *Rong Arok Chhukalbo* appeared in 1961. In 1978 the first literary magazine *Mayel Lyang* in the language came out. Among the writers who have published books in Lepcha language are Norgain Sangdyang, Ugen Lepcha, Sonam Tshering, hildamit Lepcha. They have written on the traditional myths and legends, poetry, etc.

In the same manner writers belonging to Limboo language, Tamang language have also vastly contributed to the development of the literature of Sikkim. The literature of the Limboo language is very rich with many of the writers have published on folktales, novels, poetry and essays. The prominent writers of this language are B. B. Subba, Padam Singh Subba, J. R. Subba, R. B. Limboo , etc. Some of the important writers of Tamang literature are K. M. Tamang, Kumar Yonzon, Pempa Tamang , etc.

Among the recent writers of the state Gadul Singh Lama who is popularly known as Sanu Lama is one of the most prominent writers in Sikkimese literature. He is a poet, a translator and a fiction writer. For his enormous contributions to Nepali literature he has been awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 and Padma Shree Award in 2005. In 1971, he brought out his first anthology of short story titled *Katha Sampad*. This was followed by another in 1981 titled *Gojika* and *Mrigatrishna* in 1993. Apart from these he has written a novel- *Himalchuli Manitira*, *Angan Pabitra* and a book of poetry *Jahan Bagchha Tista Rangit*. Sanu Lama was interested in exploring the world of religion too which gets reflected in the two works by him titled *Bhagawan Bhiddah Jeewan ra Darshan* and *Guru Padmasambhava*.

Among the poets of the new generation Dr. Rajendra Bhandari holds a very prominent position. He has so far published three collections of poems and has also won several awards for them. The titles of these collections are – *Huide Yee Chisa Raatka Pardaharuma* (1979), *Yee Shabdaharu: Yee Harafharu* (1986) and *Kshar/Akshar* (1998). His poetry shows a preoccupation with the passage of time, silence reminiscent of the Buddhist world view and its thrust on impermanence. The poems of the third anthology present deteriorating socio-cultural values, political aspirations of the Gorkhas, widening human relationships, etc.

Among the very young generation of writers Chetan Raj Shrestha has stood out with two of his novels have been published within a short span of time which has also received high appreciation from all quarters. His first novel was titled *The King's Harvest* (2013). The book is comprised of two novellas – *Open and Shut Case* which revolves around a murder and *The King's Harvest* that deals with a man who after thirty two years of isolation goes to meet the King. His second novel *The Light of His Clan* (2015) again is built on six short stories.

In the present times literature of Sikkim has been making very significant development as it has a very high literacy rate and as such a huge number readership. The state of Sikkim, unlike all other states of the North-East India, has not faced any violent movement. As such, it has the privilege of focussing on its own literature undisturbed by the unwanted disturbing factors. Under such circumstances literature in Sikkim has by and large thrived and many writers have appeared with new forms of literature.

5.8 Theatre in Sikkim

Although Sikkim has a very strong literary tradition that began in the earliest times of its emergence, yet it has not, as has been observed, made significant progress in the field of theatre. Nevertheless, Sikkim is culturally extremely rich and with the dance forms that are there in Buddhist culture the scope of theatre to flourish is very high.

Traditionally considered, Sikkim has a number of festivals in addition to the common festivals such as Dussera (Dasain), Diwali (Tihar), Saraswati Puja, Janmastami

,etc. Being influenced more by the Buddhism there are several festivals such as *Lhababa Dhuechen Festival*, *Losoong Festival*, *Saga Dawa festival*, *Losar Festival*, *Phang Lhabsol Festival*, *Kagyed Dance Festival*, etc. In some the dance forms performed during the celebrations of the festivals traces of dramatic elements become evident through the movements and the overall themes.

In one of the dance festivals mentioned- the *Kagyed Dance Festival*, some element of theatre are found in it. The festival is celebrated on the 28th and 29th day of the 10th month of the Tibetan calendar, which falls around the December. The dance form portrays the destruction of evil forces and hoping for peace and prosperity in Sikkim. The performances are presented by monks who provide comic relief to the audience with faces of jokers amidst the sombre mood that the dance performance creates as a result of the myths dealt with.

Among the different communities inhabiting the land of Sikkim, there several ritualistic dance forms which are conceived around certain myths that are believed by the respective community. One such ritual dance is *Sakyo Rum Faat* which is based on a legend and is practised by the Lepcha community. The dance is performed during the month of November as a food offering worship of the seven immortal couples of *Mayel Kyong*. According to the legend it is believed that seeds of all kinds of agricultural and horticultural crops were brought from the seven immortal couples. The Lepchas also believe that birds were sent to them by the seven immortal couples to guide the people for sowing the seed in proper places. This ritualistic dance is performed to express their gratitude to them and as a mark of this they offer various kinds of food items to *Mayel Kyong*. This dance is participated by both men and women and is performed in rows to the accompaniment of music that is provided by flutes and drums of different kinds.

There is another very important festival prevalent among the Lepchas , i.e. the *Pang-Lhab-Sol* or *Pang Lhabsol* (in Bhutia *Pang* menas - witness, Iha- God and Sol-worship). This annual festival is celebrated every year in Sikkim on the 15th day of the 7th Lunar Calendar. It is celebrated in commemoration of the historic swearing in of blood brotherhood at Kabi between Lepcha Chief Thekong Tek and Khye-Bumsa, the Prince from Minyak Kham in Eastern Tibet in the fourteenth century. Pang Lhabsol is

worshipped in the honour of Khancgchen-Nzodgna or Kanchenjunga, the Guardian Deity of Sikkim who is believed to have witnessed the momentous treaty. The festival is also known as *Chyu* (mountain) *Rum* (Deity) *Faat* (propitiation) which symbolizes unity and prosperity of the people of Sikkim through the atonement of the gods or deities. The festival involves the practice of offering *Neysol puja* by the monks at Gangtok Tsuklakhang monastery. It is followed by the ritualistic dance where the monks put on colourful masks and put on equally colourful attire to represent the mountain gods. The dance performance describes a story in which the *Mahakala*, the lord protector of faith, appears and asks both Kanchenjunga and Yabdu, its supreme commander to defend the faith and bring in peace and prosperity to the land. The mask of *Mahakala* is of black colour while Kanchenjunga's mask is adorned with five skulls and flags on top of it. All the accompanying dancers wear traditional sikkimese attire including swords, shields and helmets to perform a masked warrior dance.

But, it is the monastic dance or mask dance of various types which is most famous among the devotees as well as other persons. In Tibetan language such performances are called *Chaams* which refers to some religious form of dance. Though there are different versions of the mask dance which are celebrated on various occasions and seasons, they still deal with the same theme of triumph of good over evil. The origin of the mask dance lies in the cult of exorcising malignant demons. The performances of the *Chaams* have different purposes. The *Chaams* performed during the New Year ceremony force out evil from the land and ushering in benevolence and good luck for the new. The dancers wear fearful dragon, animal and bird masks, richly designed costumes and move to the tune of the musical notes.

The *Chaam* begins with the sound of *Kangling*, an instrument like a trumpet. It is accompanied by other traditional musical instruments such as *radong*, a long copper horn, cymbals and ceremonial drums and gongs. As the dancers gather in the space provided to them for the performance dressed in majestic design and colour, some incense bearers would move around the spectators purifying the environment. This initiates the chief figure of *Mahakala*, whose presence invokes other protective deities. It is at this moment that the masquerades i.e. *Sha Yak* and *Nam-Ding* appear wearing

masks of animals. The dancers act out the destruction of apostasy represented by an effigy which is cut into pieces.

This monastic dance also is based on a legend which goes back to the 9th century. There was a devout king in Tibet whose name was Ral-Pa-Che. As a devout follower he was involved in translating the Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan and granting of land to the monasteries. But his brother, Lang Darma, was equally evil and plotted the murder of his elder brother. As soon as Lang Darma ascends the throne after the death of Ral-Pa-Che, he begins to destroy whatever his brother tried to build. There was anger among the people against the King but could not do anything about it.

At last one Lama Pal Dorjee decided to bring an end to the devil in guise. He disguised himself as a dancer of a group which to perform before the king and hid within his dress a bow and arrow. When the king, being attracted by the dance that he performed, called him near, the Lama took out his bow and arrow and shot at the king which eventually killed him. In the subsequent chaos the Lama jumped on to a black pony and tried to escape the chasing king's men. The lama in order to avoid the capture plunged into the Kyi-chu river. When he later emerged from it he was surprised to see that the black pony had become white and as result of the strange event he could deceive the guards and escape without any harm. The entire legend implies the central theme of the monastic dance which is – the defeat of the evil at the hands of the good.

In this dance form the costumes are prepared in a very magnificent way with rich brocade and satin gold embroidery being used to do the same. The dress is designed in such a way so as to resemble that worn by Lama Pal Dorje when he killed the king. Taking the legend into account it becomes convincing that the monastic dance is not a mere dance form but rather a mixture of dance and drama.

In Sikkim there is a strong theatre tradition among the Nepalese which is, as many believe, nearly a century old. It is assumed that the tradition began with a play titled *Atal Bahadoor* (1924?) composed by Rashmi Prasad Ale, a teacher from Assam who

initiated use of Nepali as medium of learning.²¹⁹ But there was no such activity for more than two decades until in 1946 another organisation *Gorkha Dukh Niwarak Samity* staged *Harischandra* at the White Hall of Gangtok. In the same year another organisation named *Apatan Sahitya Parishad* was formed and they, too, presented a play *Mukunda Indira*. Few years later the organisation presented their plays *Kamal* (1946) and *Sadhe* (1958).

At around the same period the love for theatre was felt in the South Sikkim and East Sikkim as well where plays like *Harischandra* and *Thuli Dharki Chori* were presented. During the period from 1955-60 in the East Sikkim a number of plays were being presented by some theatre lovers who eventually formed the *Mutual Dramatic Club* and stage several plays such as *Raja Harischandra*, *Dhruva*, *Bhakta Prahlad*, *Atal Bahadur*, etc. In this early phase of the contribution of the *Apatan Sahitya Parishad* and *Gorkha Dukh Niwarak Samity* towards the development of Nepali theatre was praiseworthy.

From the early sixties Nepali theatre began to witness a tremendous growth in terms of the numbers of plays as well as the extension of the genres. Between 1966-69 B. S. Subba wrote three comedies titled *Honorary Magistrate*, *Zandu and Gandu* and *Pashupatiko Darshan*. At the same time attempts were made to write plays that were based on true stories. For example, *Sayo Rupiako Note*, a play based on the feudalism prevalent in the south Sikkim was written with a purpose to raise voice against such practice. Along with that a good number of plays were still composed on the stories related to religion and also on themes that had contemporary relevance.

The period from 1960 to 1975 marks a significant stage as Nepali theatre was introduced to new and modern ideas of theatre through *Ani Devrali Runcha*, a play composed by Man Bahadur Mukhiya from Darjeeling. It set a new standard for Nepali theatre and strengthened the foundation of it which was laid in the previous decade and inspired the Nepali playwrights to write more in this direction. In 1975 an organisation named *Himali Sangeet Sangh* was formed and a string of plays were staged for several following years. The organisation began their journey with the famous *Ani Devrali*

²¹⁹ Ghimire, C. L. (2016). 'Sikkimeli Nepali Natya Parampara: Hijdekhi Ajasamma' in *Bindu*, vol. 124-125. Lumding: Bindu Press, p. 133.

Runcha which was followed by *Ritto Mandir* (1976), *Peccho Mageko Vishwas* (1977), *Ratko Pratham Prahar* (1978), and *Ab Kahile Bihani Nahosh* (1979). In 1981 another such organisation- *Kyados*, was formed under the initiatives of Mandip Lama and few other theatre enthusiasts. It staged *Raktim Raat* written and directed by Mandip Lama himself which was warmly received by the audience.

After the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975 there was a further assurance that the steady pace of theatre would remain unaffected as various government department were established to look after the art and culture of the newly included region were.

The eighties remained a decade which brought in a lot of activities on to the stage of Nepali theatre. With the emergence of a young theatre activists and playwrights Nepali theatre was filled with energy. The new band of theatre workers like Chunnial Ghimire, Dhruva Lohagan, Dhama Nowag , etc. produced a number of plays such as *Ritto Kshitij*, *Rangeli*, *Upalabdhihar*, *Bolaha*, *Jhankri Ayepachi*, *Pathe Basepachi*, *Badhusiksha*, etc.

In the nineties also these playwrights continued on to produce more plays. Dhurva Lohagan's *Bihani Hoon Adhi*, *Aandhi Ayapachi*, *Khichdi Sanmilan* and Chunnial Ghimire's *Kalank* were some of the important plays of this period.

In the following decade also these playwrights have produced a good many plays on the stage. Lohagan's *Mrigatrishna* (2001), *Prasavkaal* (2004), *Garibko Ashish* (2006) and Ghimire's *Purano Manche* (2005), *Hamro Natak* (2006) were presented on different stages in Gangtok. Another notable dramatist who has greatly contributed to the development of Nepali theatre in Sikkim is Thaman Nauvag. He, too, has written several plays such as *Kalank*, *Iman*, *Kafan*, *Vikrant*, etc. between 1992 and 2003. In addition to this he has composed a number of one act plays like *Himali Sanjivani*, *Vasana*, *Kastu Dastoor*, etc.

The establishment of the All India Radio station in Gangtok on 1st October, 1982 added another dimension to the development of theatre in Sikkim. The station provided a suitable platform for the emerging and the talented playwrights of Sikkim to reach a larger audience base and cultivate an interest among people for theatre in general.

Among the important plays that have been presented on the radio are- *Yamrajko Nyaya*, *Ramlako Ghar*, *Bharimathi Supari* by Ganga Captan; *Puktako Mah*, *Gangi*, *Nainhara Kata Gayi*, *Aandhi*, *Maun Dharti*, etc. by C. Ghimire; and Dhruva Lohagan's *Siddhartha*, *Katusatya*, *Mamata*, *His-Aaj-Bholi*, etc. Moreover, playwrights like Thaman Nauvag, Vijay Subba, Bhakti Basnet also contributed to the development of theatre through the Radio plays.

The development of theatre in Sikkim on the principles of proscenium theatre has not been very satisfactory so far. But there are few persons who are silently working in this direction. In *Poorvottar Natya Samaroh* organised by the NSD in 2008 that was held in Gangtok two plays from Sikkim participated. The state for the first time had the opportunity to experience such a grand festival of performing art. The first play was *Siddhartha Gautama Dekhi Buddha Samma...Ek Yatra*. It was directed by Bipin Kumar, the co-ordinator of the festival. It was presented in Nepali language by the Jeewan Deep Theatre Group from the South Sikkim district which explored the dimensions of truth through an incident set in Gautama Buddha's time. The second play that took part in the festival was *Jharlangi*. The play was directed by R. D. Lepcha with the help of the group Zulkirahakogham from Gangtok. In this play the playwright Lepcha has stroked a parallel between the Zamindari system of the past with that of the bureaucracy of the present day. R. D. Lepcha, an alumna of NSD, started to take serious interest in teaching and performing theatre in Sikkim from 2005 onwards only although he had passed out from NSD way back in 1987.

In the year 2011, two plays from Sikkim represented the state in the Indigenous Theatre Festival held in Delhi. One of the plays was *Balan* which was directed by T. R. Khonal while the other was titled *Angulima* of R. D. Lepcha. It proves the fact that the activities of theatre have been going on although rather silently but surely.

The Sikkimese theatre has received a further boost with the setting up of a theatre training centre of the prestigious National School of Drama in Gangtok. A number of workshops under the aegis of the centre have been conducted for different groups including children since its beginning. The centre participated in the Octave Festival organized by WZCC, Jodhpur and held on 10th March, 2013. The titles of the

plays were *Kalo Sunakhari*, an adaptation of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's novel *Sonam* and *Hum Hi Apna Aap*. The same plays were taken to Agartala also for performance in the same year. The centre participated in the 6th Poorvottar Natya Samaroh in 2014 in Dibrugarh once again with *Kalo Sunakhari*. It has been regularly conducting workshops and drama festivals at points of time.

Recently, a five day long studio theatre festival in the later part of August, 2016 was organized by the centre where three Nepali plays were staged. The plays performed during the festival were *Chatushkon* (Dir. Prof. S. Bhardwaj), *Promotion* (Dir. Prof. A. K. Malkani) and *Macha Macha Bhaguta* (Dir. C.L. Ghirmire). Again, the NSD, Sikkim Centre also took active participation in the Poorvottar Rashtriya Rang Utsav held in Amritsar in August, 2016. The centre went there with a Nepali play titled *Hami Nai, Afai Aaf* which was directed by Bipin Kumar. The play is an adaptation of Padma Sachdev's Hindi novel *Ab Na Banegi Dehari*. The play tells the story of a widow who comes into contact with Giri Baba, the priest of a temple that she takes shelter in. Gradually, both of them develop feelings for each other and mutually decide to get married. However, the other religious leaders urge Giri Baba to abstain from such a step and persuaded him to accept *Samadhi* instead. The experimental method of theatre involving the concept of both imagery and physical theatre was employed in the enactment of the play.

The setting up of the Theatre Training Centre of the NSD in Sikkim has surely produced a creative atmosphere in the state which will go a long way in giving the theatre of the state a new identity and a respectable place in the map of world theatre.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

“I am anxious that they should advance, but I have been more anxious that they should not lose their artistry and joy in life and the culture that distinguishes them in many ways” - V. Elwin

For long the North-East of India had remained beyond the pale of civilization and except the plains which the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries had left flooded, the other parts of the region were virtually unknown to the world outside. The image of the North-East which the people from other regions had was of mountains and lofty peaks, forests, wandering rivers, rivulets and streams; of wild animals, birds; of ferocious people wearing masks and uttering cries waiting to kill somebody and take his head as prize; of naked people beating drums around fire and so on. But, things today have drastically changed over the years. Today, one would obviously find its beautiful natural treasures, but at the same time concrete houses, roads, railways, expensive motor cars, movie halls, schools, colleges, hospitals, industries, guitars, colourful dresses and most importantly ever smiling warm hospitable people.

During the period of the British and immediately after the independence of India, the situation in the region began to witness changes more particularly for political and administrative reasons. As a result of such changes, the North-East was divided into seven separate units which were later joined by another in recent times. What is more noticeable is the fact that despite these divisions done to fulfil the aspirations of the people of the region there remains more or less similarities between them in terms of ecology, economy, social systems, religion, value systems, etc.

Nevertheless, the North-East region has within its ambit diverse cultures, traditions, rituals, customs, world views, languages, food habits, dress codes and so on.

Each of the communities of this region exercises or practises its own distinctive tradition and culture and this adds to the overall beauty and attraction of the region.

Under such perspectives the study was carried out to find out in general terms the existence of theatre in the North-East region. The discussion on the subject has been divided into six chapters including the one on the conclusion.

In the first chapter an effort has been made to define the term of theatre in general and also explain the concept of tradition and north-east. The chapter further discusses broadly the presence of theatre in India. India has a very rich tradition of theatre. there are a variety of theatre forms available in most parts of it. it has been observed that most of the traditional theatre forms related to religious rituals. In this connection the chapter tries give an idea of the principle theatre forms that are practised not only in the respective states to which they belong but also followed by people from other parts of the country. Beginning with Sanskrit drama the chapter takes up other traditional theatre forms such as *Yaksagāna*, *Bhāgavata Mela Natakam*, *Kuchipudi*, *Kathākali*, *Ramalila*, *Bhavai*, *Yātrā*, *Tamasa*, *Chhau* and *Nautanki*.

In the second chapter a discussion on the traditional theatre forms of Assam has been attempted. The tradition of Assamese theatre is found to be palpable only from the late 15th century with the introduction of the same by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great Vaishnavite of Assam. But there are several other forms of dances with semi-dramatic elements which have been existent since times even before the *Ankiyā Nāt* s were introduced to Assam. These forms represent the richness of the people in terms of culture. Among the most prominent traditional art forms prevalent in Assam mention has made of Putala Nac, *Ojā-Pāli*, *Dhulia Bhaona*, *Kushan Gan*, and *Bhari Gan*.

Following the discussion on these traditional theatre forms, some of which have been done in detail, the chapter focuses on *Ankiyā Nāt* , the important of them all. The form of *Ankiyā Nāt* or Bhaona has been discussed in details taking note of the different aspects of the form – theme, language, music, light and even make-up of the actors.

The chapter then moves on to discuss the kinds of theatre that developed post the coming of the British till recent times. The modern drama in Assam began as early as

1857 when Gunabhiram Baruah wrote *Ramnavami* for the proscenium stage. Since then Assamese drama has been making steady progress and during the course of its development a number of experimentations with the form on the stage have also been attempted. The Chapter further tries to look into the function of another very unique theatre form of Assam, i.e. the Mobile theatre. It is unique in the sense that nowhere else in India is found such form wherein the troupe not only takes its plays but they take along with them all the necessary tools including the stage, chairs, generator, lights and so on to places wherever they go.

In the third chapter the theatre tradition of Manipur has been picked up for discussion. The state of Manipur also has a very rich tradition of art and culture particularly in the field of music, dance and theatre.

In the first place the form of *Lai Haraoba*, one of the oldest forms found in Manipur has been considered. It is followed by the Rasa Lila, another very important tradition related to worship of Lord Krishna. In the discussion the different varieties of the form such as *Maha Rasa*, *Vasanta Rasa*, *Kunja Rasa*, *Nitya Rasa*, *Gopa Rasa* or *Gostha Rasa* and *Ulukhala Rasa* have also been briefly dealt with.

Shumang Lila which has long history in Manipuri theatre is yet another traditional theatre form that has been examined in the chapter. It refers to a performance or play that takes place in the courtyard. *Shumang Lila* is a highly evolved form of theatre, which is structured under the format of total theatre.

The last part of the chapter takes into consideration the Manipuri theatre of modern times. Attempt has been made to see how modern theatre gradually evolved in the State over the years. This part of modern theatre in Manipur has been discussed by dividing it in four different phases – from the beginning of 20th century up to the 60s, then from 60s to 70s and so on till recent times. During the course of discussion the contributions of the various theatre groups have also been highlighted with all the key theatre personalities embraced within it.

In the fourth chapter three states namely Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram have been taken together for the discussion. It is carried out state wise and as such in the first place the theatre of Tripura is taken up. Here also the portion on the theatre of Tripura has been divided into several sections such as from the beginning till the 60s which is followed by the middle that takes up theatre till the 70s and the last section deals with theatre after 70s. In addition to this the chapter also studies two more traditional forms that are prevalent in Tripura. The first among them is Yatra while the other one is Kokborok theatre. The form of Yatra is brought in from the neighbouring West Bengal while the latter is a recent development that has emerged out of their own soil.

In the following part of the chapter the theatre tradition of Meghalaya has been discussed. This part is sub-divided into two parts each devoting to two of the most important communities of the state- the Garos and the Khasis. It begins with the discussion on the theatre of the Garos. But prior to that, an assessment of the literature of Meghalaya has been carried out focussing on all the major literary forms. Meghalaya also has a couple traditional theatre forms which are known as *Wangala* and *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka*. It deals with different facets is representative of life and possesses several elements of drama. The rituals of Wangala dance starts as a thanksgiving festival but concludes in celebration through dances. In *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka* traditional stories are narrated to the people by persons designated for that purpose. It subsequently proceeds to look at the theatre of the Gaors in the modern times which has of late gained momentum for further development.

In the second part of the portion on Meghalaya the theatre of Khasi people is taken up for study. Likewise the previous one here also an assessment is made on the literature of the Khasi people followed by the theatre forms that they have in their culture. Unlike the Garos the Khasis do not any prominent art form which contains traces of theatre in them. However, theatre among Khasis began to emerge from the mid 19th century. In the beginning it was mostly presented in Bengali language but from the start of the 20th century and with the initiatives taken by many it gradually began more

centred around Khasi language and tradition. The contributions of the various clubs and decade wise assessment of theatre among the Khasis have been made till the present.

In the last segment of the chapter the theatre tradition of Mizoram is looked into which begins with an evaluation of the arrival of the missionaries followed by their impact on the life and literature of the Mizo people. The theatre tradition of the Mizos actually started after the missionaries had arrived in the land. The discussion is made in three divisions- from beginning to 1924, from 1925 to 1958 and from 1959- till present. Mizo theatre shows a smooth transition from religious to a more secular kind.

In the fifth chapter, once again, the remaining three states namely Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are taken up. The chapter begins with the state of Nagaland. But, before embarking upon the theatre of Nagaland as estimation of the state, its people and culture is undertaken followed by an assessment of the literature that one comes across in Nagaland. The section on the theatre of Nagaland commences with the plays written by Dr. Shiirhozelie Leizietsu in Tenydie language followed by the initiatives taken by North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) to promote theatre in the state.

The discussion also brings up the contributions of few theatre groups of Nagaland like *Dreamz Unlimited* and *Hill Theatre* led by the young activists like Tiakumzuk Aier and Bendang Walling respectively. These theatre groups have been trying to usher in a creative movement through drama. However, the role of various other organizations towards the development of theatre in the land has also been observed.

In the next part an attempt has been made to consider the theatre in Arunachal Pradesh. After the initial introduction about the state in general is made, the literature of Arunachal Pradesh is also looked into. The chapter further deals with the theatre in the state. In this context the available traditional dance-drama forms prevalent among various tribes of the state have been explored. On the other hand how the appearances of few young people on the scenario with new ideas have brought in changes to the domain of theatre in Arunachal Pradesh has also been discussed.

In the final section of the chapter the theatre in Sikkim is dealt with. As has been done in the previous sections here also an introductory review of the state and its literature is made followed by the discussion on the theatre traditions of it. It has been found that in Sikkim also there are several traditional dance forms which contain within them elements of drama. Such forms have been duly explored in this section. It further takes note of the efforts that individuals like R. D. Lepcha and T. R. Khonal towards the development of theatre in the state. The chapter also takes note of the contributions of Nepali drama in the growth of theatre in Sikkim. The role of the centre of the prestigious National School of Drama which has been established in Gangtok is also studied in the chapter.

From the discussions made in the chapters it becomes evident that the North-East India, 'in spite of its geographically handicap situations, the non-availability of materials, the poor and primitive technology, the absence of market and patronage, and above all certain taboos and traditions hindering free use of artistic skills the brave men and women of the North-East India continue to maintain the perennial flow of artistic current in the remotest corners of the hills and forests.'²²⁰

With most of the people from the North-East India music and dance form a very crucial part of their culture. This is perhaps due to their existence in close proximity with the beauties of the nature and also their capacity to live harmoniously with it. It has been observed that, unlike people from other parts of the country, the North-Eastern people by and large consider them not as separate entities from the nature but rather as a part of it. It is assumed that the peace and delight of being in the company of nature inspire them to express their feelings through songs and dances. It has to be acknowledged, at the same time, that the dances and songs are not without a story to tell.

It is evident from the study that in many of the states there is very little presence of theatre of the standard that is formed on the principles of proscenium or western ideas. But it does not suggest that they do not have any experience of theatre in the first

²²⁰ Vidyarthi, L.P. (1993). *Art and Culture of North-East*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Govt. of India, p. 87.

person. Every cultural tradition has some form of rituals which is followed by the people of that culture. Very often such rituals that are usually performed in the honour of some supernatural force contain within them the traces of drama or theatre. Most of the people follow such practices without being aware that while performing them they also become a part of the theatre.

Another very interesting fact that has surfaced out of the discussion is that theatre traditions in every state began to emerge only when there was a contact with the other parts of the world. The sooner such a communication with others was established the stronger the tradition has become. In the context of most of the hilly states it has been observed that theatre or literature began to take shape in the real sense only when the missionaries or the British administrators were able to establish lasting relationship with the communities of these lands. In all the states of the North-East the arrival of the British and the Bengali people marked the beginning of a new phase of development in downside every field. However, there were some drawbacks also in the sense that the missionaries or the British administrators in their attempts alter the lives of the people under their jurisdiction sometimes harmed them by not allowing them to practice some of their traditional ways. For example, they did not allow any converted Christian to stay in the traditional dormitories which hold very high importance in a tribal culture. As a result over the years native people began to greater importance to the new system of values undermining their own.

The development of theatre or any other art form depends upon certain foundation. It has risen wherever there is some amount of defined form of theatre. But in places where there is lack of such foundation, it would take some more time to build a strong tradition.

It has been seen that theatre activities in many of the states have faced decadence due to the threats from various corners. One of the important factors that have affected the growth of theatre is the lack of patronisation or total absence of it. During the times when Kings or Royal families ruled, the practitioners of the performing arts- whether a singer, painter, musician, poet or actor used to get the financial support from the masters. As a result such art forms thrived to new heights. But after the British

took over the administration from the previous rulers of these regions such patronisations were stopped completely. The consequences were far-reaching. The people who were engaged in various such areas had suddenly become out of profession and the situation turned worst since the new generation of people failed to appreciate their own art forms. They would rather venture out in search of other works to earn and to survive.

Another reason for the slowdown of theatre is the development in the science and technology along with the influence of globalisation. These two factors have drastically changed the way we look at the world around us. There is no denying the fact that technology has made our lives far more comfortable and the world more 'liveable' and 'safe' than before. It has made many unthinkable things a reality and accessible also. But, this has reverse effect on us as well. Leaving aside the issues related to environmental degradation concentration may be focussed on the influence of on theatre and other allied art forms. Technology has gifted us with various means of communication; the appearance of television has been the most extensive. The television coupled with satellite channels have provided us with all the means of entertainment. There seems to be no necessity at all to go out and take all the troubles to enjoy. But the same technology has played a major role in making theatre an obsolete or forgotten space. The television brought the stage of a theatre to one's home or in other words it may be said that the home has become a theatre hall. In the last four decades theatre has come to a halt. In many places theatre halls which once were centres of art and culture and full of people from all walks of life now wear a deserted look; a number of them have shut down forever.

On the other hand, the grip of globalization has caught each and sphere of life. It has turned the whole world into a village. But, what makes it dangerous for the world is that it fuels the interest of a handful of people in the world. It prospers by creating an illusionary world around us thereby persuading us not to see what we need to see, not do the things that we need to do. Under such circumstances it seems that theatre is no longer important for mankind.

But, very lately there has been an increasing sense of awareness among people all over the world about the need for preservation and perseverance of one's own tradition and culture. Efforts have been made to revive what has been either lost or neglected so far. This is evident from the works of the very new generation of creative workers. Theatre in the North-East, barring few, was by and large dependent on the models borrowed from outside resources. It cannot be denied that they did help in the formation and the subsequent development of theatre in the region. But with the passage of time as the theatre traditions matured these models were found to be insufficient to give expression to the new and more complicated situations. Instead, there has been introspection and a simultaneous effort to get back to the indigenous traditions and forms and find out means to bring them to play with theatre. Such attempts have served not one but multiple benefits. The obvious benefit has been that theatre today has come out of the monotonous way of presentation and turn out to be much more attractive due to the fusion of the traditional and the modern aspects. On the other hand, the success of the new kind of theatre has brought back the ancient, long ignored forms and traditions to limelight. Due to the efforts of the numerous theatre groups people have begun to show greater interest in the traditional art and culture as they have realized the need to promote and preserve them for the future.

The present study had to face a lot of difficulties mainly due to the lack of information. But, at the same time this presents a scope to make further exploration in the field.

Taking into consideration the challenges and the prospects a few suggestions in this regard may be proposed.

As has been observed that a large number of people are unaware of the fact that they live amidst theatre and even sometimes become part of it, it appears necessary that they are made sensitive and love their own tradition and culture. In order to achieve such ends it is necessary that awareness drives are taken from time to time.

Again, to secure the future of human civilization the children must be taught to value that what is precious. With the aim in sight theatre as a subject should be introduced in the curriculum and involve the young people into practical aspect of it. It

would not only protect the future of theatre but also build up a sense of camaraderie since it is matter of team work.

The government should take concrete steps to arrange for public grant to the practitioners of theatre form so as to a sense of security among them. Wherever possible, organizations promoting theatre should be given increased financial aids.

The government should establish more institutes to impart formal training in the concerned field.

As for the practitioners are concerned they should take adequate steps to present a blend of the traditional and modern ideas in their works as this would help their works to reach a greater number of audience.

The study carried out here is not intended to make the final say on the subject; it is rather a humble beginning on it. It is hoped that the interested scholars would give this field a thought and take up one state and through some more light on the subject.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Assam

a) Putala Nac



Performance of string puppet dance



Performance of rod puppet dance



Performance of string puppet dance



Performance of string puppet dance

b) Oja Pali



Troup ready for Biyahar Ojā-Pāli



Troup ready for Biyahar Ojā-Pāli



A group of Sukanani Ojā-Pāli



Kaliya associated with Sukanani Ojā-Pāli



Dhulia or drummers associated with Sukanani Ojā-Pāli

c) Ankiya Nat



Ankiyā Nāt performance in a makeshift anena



Different headgears used in Ankiyā Nāt



The make-up taking place prior to performance



The entry of the main character with the Aarkapoor



The dance of Sutradhara along with the gayanas and bayanas



Bhaona on stage with effigy of a hog

d) Mobile Theatre:



The inside of mobile theatre that with the twin stages behind the screen



The wooden rear gallery for seating with plastic chairs in front



A scene from a play



a scene from a musical play



A scene staged on the left stage



A scene staged on the right stage

Manipur

a) Lai Haraoba



A Lai Haraoba Procession



A dance on the occasion of Lai Haraoba



A procession with the deity



A gathering of people on the celebration of Lai Haraoba

b) Rasa Lila



A moment of Rasa Lila dance



A moment of Rasa Lila dance

c) Shumang Lila



A Shumang Lila performance with audience around



A permanent hall meant for performance of Shumang Lila

d) Theatre Halls



A scene from Kanhailal's Pebet



A scene from Ratan Thiyam's Hamlet



Aryan Theatre at present



Govindaji Temple where performances were held



Front of Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory



Inside Chorus Repertory



Inside Aryan Theatre



Inside Chorus Repertory



Inside Kalakhsetra Manipur



Inside Manipur Dramatic Union



Manipur Dramatic Union



Manipur Ensemble



Rupmahal Theatre

Tripura

a) Theatre Halls



Nazrul Kalakshetra



NSD Centre, Agartala



Palace where theatre began



Rabindra Sadan, Agartala



Sukanta Academy

b) Kokbork



Kokbork Theatre



Kokbork Theatre

c) Puppet



Puppet Theatre



Puppet Theatre

Meghalaya



Ritual of incense burning in Wangala Festival



Ladies dancing in celebration of Wangala



People taking part in Wangala dance



Dancers attending a house to bless



A demonstration of Wangala festival

Mizoram



A scene from a play



A scene from a play



A scene from a play



Children taking part in a theatre festival

Nagaland



A scene from Morusa



A scene from No Woman No Cry



Inside a Morung



Inside a Morung



Morung

Arunachal Pradesh



Aji-Lhamu-Dance



Bomdila Monastery



Courtyard of the Monastery



Lion Dance

Sikkim



Courtyard of monastery



Monastic dance



Monastic dance



Pang Lhab Sol



Rehearsal of Pang Lhab sol



Some masks used in dance forms

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