

Performative Traditions and Folk Theatre of the Bodo People

Pranab Jyoti Narzary

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the performative traditions and folk theatre of the Bodo people of Assam, an indigenous community with a vibrant oral culture. In the absence of an early written tradition, Bodo theatrical forms evolved from ritual, mythological, and community-based performances. Central to this evolution are genres such as *Jatra Gaan*, *Ek Thengiya Gan*, *Kherai Mwsanai*, *Musukha Bhaothina*, *Solo Bungnai*, and *Subung Mwsanai*. These forms range from purely dramatic enactments to ritual and narrative performances, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Bodos. The study examines the typology, narrative structure, performance styles, characters, costumes, musical instruments, and community participation in these forms. Despite facing decline due to the rise of modern entertainment, Bodo folk theatre continues to play a critical role in preserving cultural identity, transmitting values, and fostering community cohesion.

Keywords: Bodo folk theatre, *Jatra Gaan*, *Ek Thengiya Gan*, *Kherai Mwsanai*, ritual performance, oral tradition, Bodo culture.

INTRODUCTION

The Bodos of Assam constitute one of the major indigenous ethnic communities of the region. Racially, they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock, while their language is part of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Although the Bodo language has ancient roots, it historically lacked a written tradition. The first book in Bodo, *Boroni Phisa O'Aiyen* (a compilation of customary laws), was published in 1915. Before this, Christian missionaries and colonial administrators had initiated

efforts to produce books on grammar, dictionaries, folktales, rhymes, and biblical translations. For example, *Mech Grammar* was published earlier, and *A Collection of Kachari Tales and Rhymes* appeared in 1895. Sidney Endle's monograph *The Kacharis* (1911) also included numerous folktales and songs.

In the absence of written literature, the Bodo people cultivated a vibrant tradition of oral and folk performances, including storytelling, ritual singing, dance, and theatrical enactments. These traditions continued to thrive even after the introduction of written literature, as newly educated youth popularized *Jatra Gaan* (folk drama) as a tool for entertainment and social reform. Up until the 1970s, *Jatra Gaan* remained a key medium of mass entertainment and informal education in Bodo-inhabited districts of Assam. However, *Jatra Gaan* was not the sole form of folk performance. Other notable theatrical expressions include:

- i. ***Ek Thengiya Gan***: A unique one-man theatre where a single performer enacts all roles, from hero to villain.
- ii. ***Kherai Mwsanai***: A ritual dance-drama associated with the traditional Bathou religion.
- iii. ***Solo Bungnai***: A storytelling tradition performed by an elder (*Serja Burai*) accompanied by a string instrument akin to the sarinda.
- iv. ***Musukha Bhaothina***: A form of puppet theatre.
- v. ***Subung Mwsanai***: A category of folk dances, many with dramatic elements (e.g., *Na Gurnai Mwsanai*, *Swdumsri Mwsanai*, *Zarphagla Mwsanai*).

Before the rise of *Jatra Gaan*, earlier forms like *Thakri Pala* and *Khemta Gan* were popular and are considered early expressions of Bodo drama.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to:

- i. Study the folk theatrical forms of the Bodos of Assam.
- ii. Provide a concise account of the origin, growth, and evolution of Bodo folk theatre.
- iii. Explore the socio-cultural context in which these performance forms have developed and endured.
- iv. Highlight the diverse performance genres and their typological distinctions.

v. Analyze the narrative structure, performance style, characters, costumes, musical instruments, and performance spaces of Bodo folk theatre.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THEATRE IN ASSAM

Assam boasts a rich legacy of folk theatre that predates the development of *Ankia Bhaona* by saint-poets Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Forms such as *Putala Nach* (puppet dance), *Dhulia Bhaoriya*, *Ojapali*, *Bharigan*, *Kushangan*, *Marai Gan*, and *Jatra Pala* were prevalent, especially in Lower Assam (Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang).

While *Bhaona* became widespread through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, other forms like *Marai Gan* and *Kushan Gan* remained localized to communities like the Bodos, Rabhas, and Koch-Rajbongshis. The regional character of these theatrical forms is noteworthy, as many of them are confined to specific districts or communities.

In the case of the Bodos, folk theatre developed along a distinct trajectory. Many scholars believe that Bodo drama has its roots in the ritualistic *Kherai* worship, where the female shaman (*Doudini*) performs symbolic dances to communicate with deities. These dances incorporate dramatic, spiritual, and martial elements and are seen as the foundation of Bodo theatrical expression.

Thakri Pala and *Khemta Gan* are also considered early forms of Bodo folk drama. The former involves storytelling and spinning movements akin to a wheel (*Thakri*), while the latter is named after the *Khemta* rhythmic cycle. These performances emphasized mythological and moral narratives, and during the pre-independence era, *Khemta Gan* was a medium for promoting patriotism and social awareness.

Jatra Gaan, the most prominent form of Bodo folk theatre, likely entered Bodo regions of Goalpara via Bengal due to cultural affinity. Bodo dramatists such as Dwarendra Basumatary, Satish Chandra Basumatary, and Modaram Brahma played key roles in translating and adapting Bengali *Jatra* plays into Bodo and staging them in open-air venues known as *Saina Sali*.

PERFORMANCE GENRES: TYPOLOGY

Bodo folk theatre includes diverse performance genres that can be classified as:

1. Pure Dramatic Performances:

Jatra Gaan and *Ek Thengiya gaan* belong to the type of pure dramatic performance where the stress is more on dialogue and action. These two genres of folk theatre have the immense power of entertainment. The dramatic dialogue and action are very often enriched by occasional breaks for song and dances. The actors are folk artists without any formal training of stage acting. They are good folk entertainers without any remuneration. However, they can win cash prizes from the audience if the performance becomes exceptionally good. The audience generally encourage the actors with their clap and shouting's. Sometimes they reward them with cash prize also. In this type folk theatre, there is no *sutradhara* of the Indian traditional or classical theatre. The role of the *sutradhara* is played by the bidusaka, who appears on the stage and make occasional comments on the characters and the course of events. Any *Jatra Gaan* or *Ek Thengiya gaan* performance begins with the musical performance by the choral group who sit in one corner of the open stage. The director or ustad of the *Jatra Gaan* and *Ek Thengiya gaan* may choose drama of his liking. He may select a mythological play, or a historical or legendary play. In those plays the preference is always for a mythological or historical plays than a social play. The audience prefer to watch the dramatic characters appear in royal attire and engage in heavy fighting. In most cases the directors follow a written script but the actors have great liberty in the use of extempore dialogue. The tradition was that a *Jatra Gaan* would start early in the evening and continue till sun rise. Now the time length has been cut down to two to three hours. (Boro: 2011). It can be distributed in the following given points-

- i.** *Jatra Gaan* and *Ek Thengiya Gan* fall into this category. These are dialogue-driven dramas performed for entertainment, often incorporating songs and dances.
- ii.** Performers are typically untrained folk artists. While there's no *Sutradhara* (narrator), a *Bidushak* (comic figure) often guides the narrative through commentary.
- iii.** These performances are typically based on mythological or historical themes. They used to last all night but are now shortened due to modern entertainment influences.

2. Ritual Theatre:

Kherai performance belong to the type of ritual theatre. In *kherai*, the Bodo deities are propitiated with the ritual dance and drama. The *doudini* the female shaman, is the key dancer in *kherai* performance. She becomes

possessed when the *oja* or the priest rhythmic dances. The *doudini* moves in a chant the mantra and she start dancing circular way round the *Bathou* altar where the deities are positioned. The *oja* and the *deuri* and the elderly members of the village follow her dancing and making hand gestures. The *doudini* performs at least eighteen varieties of dances which are replete with deep philosophical meaning. (Boro: 2011)

The *Kherai Mwsanai* is a ritualistic performance involving elaborate dances by the *Doudini*, accompanied by the *Oja* (priest) and villagers. The performance includes 18 types of dances, such as *Gorai Dabrainai* (horse galloping), *Muphur Gelenai* (bear play), and *Khujuwma Fonai* (symbolically driving away evil). Instruments include *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute), and *Zotha* (cymbal).

3. Puppet Theatre

Puppet Theatre or *Musukha Bhaothina* in Bodo uses string puppets to enact mythological and local tales. Though not very prominent today, it reflects a long-standing folk art tradition. The Bodos has a tradition of puppet theatre which is still surviving. As already mentioned, *musukha bhaothina* of the Bodos is an ancient art in Assam. Like the other communities, the Bodos have kept this tradition alive. However, *musukha bhaothina* cannot be considered a major folk theatrical form among them. Like the other groups of Assam, the Bodo folk artists use the string puppet to narrate some mythological, epic tales and local legends. (Boro: 2021)

4. Storytelling and Dance-Based Performances

- i. *Solo bungnai*: It involves narrative storytelling by an elder accompanied by music.
- ii. *Subung mwsanai*: It is a collective term for dance performances often included in Bodo community festivals.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Narrative and Performance Modes:

Jatra Gaan and *Ek Thengiya Gan* rely heavily on dialogue and theatrical interaction. While earlier performances did not permit co-acting, women now participate in these dramas. Costumes include traditional Bodo attire like *Dokhona*, *Phali*, and *Aronai*, especially in *Kherai*. Performances are held

in open-air spaces with minimal stage decoration or lighting, using banana trunks and leaves to construct makeshift stages.

Performance Space and Audience

Performed on *Saina Sali*, an open-air bamboo stage, with audiences seated on the ground. In the past, people brought jute mats or sat on paddy stacks. Audience participation is vital; they often cheer, clap, and offer cash to exceptional performers. Normally the performance lasts for whole night.

Costumes and Instruments

Costumes reflect mythological or royal themes. Musical instruments include harmonium, tabla, dholki, clarinet, and traditional flutes. *Ek Thengiya Gaan* requires the lone performer to switch quickly between costumes and roles. The women characters wear traditional dress along with other functional dresses.

Modern Influence

With the advent of cinema, television, and mobile theatre, these folk forms face a decline. Nonetheless, they remain significant during festivals like Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Durga Puja, and social occasions like weddings.

SUMMARY:

The Bodos of Assam have preserved a rich and diverse tradition of folk theatre rooted in ritual, mythology, and oral storytelling. While the exact origins are hard to trace, it is widely believed that Bodo folk drama emerged from the ritualistic *Kherai* dance. Early forms like *Thakri Pala* and *Khemta Gan* paved the way for the development of *Jatra Gaan*, the most dominant form of Bodo folk drama. This genre, heavily influenced by Bengali *Jatra*, played a vital role in both entertainment and social reform.

The musical instruments used in *kherai* performance are traditional musical instruments. The male folk play musical instruments like *Kham* (big drum), *siphung* (long flute with five holes on it), *Zotha* (cymbal) while the *Doudini* and the devotees sing and dance rhythmic dances with body movement and gestures.

Other forms like *Ek Thengiya Gaan*, *Kherai*, *Musukha Bhaothina*, and *Solo Bungnai* reflect the typological diversity of Bodo folk theatre. While some genres are in decline due to modern media, they continue to serve as important cultural expressions during festivals and social functions. They

not only entertain but also educate and preserve the socio-cultural identity of the Bodo people

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