



Research Paper

Cultural Sustainability and Gender Equality: Reinterpreting Ojapali through the Lens of Gender and Sustainability

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Abstract:

Ojapali is a traditional performing art of Assam. The term 'Ojapali' referring to both the performers and the performance, has social, ritual and cultural significance in the state. Broadly divided into two categories as Epic based and Non-Epic based Ojapali, the art form is very popular in Darrang, Udalguri and certain parts of Kamrup districts of Assam. Like any other forms of pan Indian 'Kathakata' tradition, the group of performers comprises one narrator or Kathak and assistants or Dharak who help the narrator tell the mythological stories in a rhythmic way. Delivered to the audience, mostly comprising women, the performers are necessarily men. Though most of the narratives of Ojapali in general and Sukanani Ojapali in particular, have the characters of women centrally placed in them, they are only allowed to be narrated and performed by men. A ritualistic performance which is a profession for many in the particular region is not considered appropriate for the women due to several social norms. Such restrictions when analyzed through the lens of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal, Gender Equality, a strong and insightful research angle can be explored. The particular research paper attempts to explore the intersection of indigenous cultural performance and gender equality by examining Ojapali. By revisiting the art form through Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) – which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – this study examines how Ojapali can serve as both a site of patriarchal reinforcement and a potential medium for feminist intervention.

Keywords: SDG 5, Ojapali, Gender, profession, performance.

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India is a rich tapestry of various colorful culture and traditional practices. Assam, one of the Northeastern states of the country adds to the vibrant mosaic quite significantly. Among many rituals, customs, performing arts of the state, Ojapali, a dance drama of the state is noteworthy among many other. Mostly popular in Darrang, Udalguri and some parts of Kamrup district, the performing art is a seamless blend of dance, music and drama. According to the renowned folklorist of Assam, Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma, Ojapali is a form of the Pan Indian Kathakata tradition. Like other forms of Kathakata tradition, the Ojapali troupes (comprising 5 to 7 members) derive stories from Purana or myth and narrate them in a rhythmic way to the audience on various cultural, ritualistic or social occasions. Broadly divided as the Epic based and Non-Epic based Ojapali, the performers recite and enact the tales of Mahabharata and Ramayana for the Epic based forms and relies on the Padmapurana, the oral epic of Assam and other local myths and tales.

It is fairly understood that 'culture' refers to the way of living. Though at times 'tradition' and 'culture' seem to be synonymous, it can actually be accepted that both the terms are found to be contradicting each other

at several contexts. When 'culture' indicates the way a group of people live at present, taking their food habits, rituals, beliefs, stories, attires, greetings and many more under the discourse; 'tradition' hints towards the historicity of the practices. It refers to the customs, beliefs, practices and knowledge passed down from generation to generation within a culture, society, or community in a certain way. The various cultural performances showcase such traditional beliefs of a community. Dr. Gitali Saikia in article "Performance and Society"(2002) opines that "Performance as a social act involves collective thoughts, memories and obligations. It is "related to life and living, after all, it is determined by the culture of a society and a community (Saikia,185)." Saikia also mentions that "In Assam as well as in other parts of India *nats*, *bhaona* and some other religious plays were enacted only with male actors (Saikia,196)." Through this standpoint, the tradition of Ojapali can be observed as a gendered practice. Though the audience is mostly comprising women, the performers are necessarily men. The term 'Ojapali' refers to both the art form as well as the group of performers. Every troupe of performers have one Oja or narrator and usually four to six Palis or assistants. When Oja tells stories rooted in mythology or epic, Palis assist the Oja by bringing a conversational tone to the process. However, neither the term 'Oja' nor 'Pali' can be used to refer to any woman performers. Because, traditionally, women are not allowed to be a part of the performance as Oja or Palis. But the only role associated with the art form, a woman can play is that of a 'Deodhani'.

'Deodhani', etymologically meaning the 'sound of Deo or God' or 'one who is possessed by God' is a shamanistic practice. The practice of Deodhani or Deodha (referring to the male practitioner) is not restricted to Ojapali only. However, the performance of a possessed woman or a group of possessed women, known as Deodhani has special role on the occasion of Marei Puja, where Sukanani Ojapali, most popular form of Non Epic based Ojapali, performs. Interestingly the myth and tales on which the Non Epic based Ojapali is based have women characters centrally located in them. Such as, the tale of Manasamangal have Chandi, Mahamaya, Manasa, Gauri, Behula as the core characters around whom the tale is weaved. However, the women who are not considered pure enough to participate in the performing art as the narrator or assistant, not even allowed to touch the 'joydhol' (the auspicious drum), can only be part of the performance as a body that is possessed. It raises questions on taboo around the female body as well as social norms restricting the participation of women in the cultural life. Piers Vitebsky in his work *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon*(1995) states, "Shamanic power depends on keeping control over the trance state.(Vitebsky,22)" It is opined in the same text that "in many parts of the world possession by spirits, as opposed to mastery over them, is particularly common among women. This has been seen as a form of compensation for their social and political powerlessness. For the same reason possession may be prominent among subordinate classes or ethnic groups (Vitebsky,24)." Considering the women as subordinates is the key idea against which Sustainable Development Goal 5 is adapted.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development holds a transformative vision. It establishes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among which gender equality is listed among priorities. Especially the goal 5 addresses women empowerment by mainstreaming gender equality across the SDGs. In fact the 2030 Agenda is a commitment to "leaving no one behind". The SDG 5 covers the following key goals: Eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere, eliminate all forms of violence against women and harmful practices, recognize unpaid care and domestic work, ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making, universal access to sexual and reproductive rights, equal rights to economic resources, use of enabling technology, lastly, adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality. All these aims of SDG 5 are set to achieve equality and inclusivity in terms of gender. The discourse of inclusivity is incomplete without the mention of cultural inclusivity.

The tradition of performance art of Ojapali in Assam is an area which can be insightfully explored through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 5. Historically, Ojapali has been a male-dominated art form, rooted in religious storytelling and ritualistic performances. The only way a woman performer can traditionally associate with the art form is by performing as Deodhani on the occasion of Shakti puja along with the troupe of Sukanani Ojapali. Depending on the setting and occasion, the practice of Deodhani can be divided as traditional Deodhani and commercial Deodhani. The core belief of this shamanistic practice, similar to many other shamanistic performances, is that the body of the practitioner is believed to be the medium to communicate with the supernatural power. Therefore it is of utter importance to maintain the chastity of the body. There are many norms to be followed by the women practitioner to attain the required status of purity. In the thesis, titled, *A study of the Deodhani performance with special reference to Oja Pali tradition of Assam* (2018), Purabi Barua has commented that "the female Deodhani performers cannot get married once they dedicate to this profession or service of god. However, situation has changed nowadays and married persons (both male and female) also act as Deodhani practitioners. But the number of practitioners has declined in recent times." (Barua, 90) . When Sarma mentions about the declining number of performers, the stage Deodhani performers, which is a modern phenomena and can be categorised as the commercial Deodhani is not considered. The statement is covering only the traditional women practitioners.

A prominent Ojapali practitioner, Lalit Chandra Nath, in his work *Sukanani Sangitor Rengoni* (2008), puts forward the four circumstances in which girls or women used to take up the life of a Deodhani.

- A male devotee of goddess Manasā offered his daughter to Ojā for the profession of Deodhani,
- A girl or woman, accused of committing several socially unacceptable act and devoted to god and remains unmarried,
- A girl who willingly comes to this profession to learn the dance she is fascinated about
- The daughters of poorer families who learn Deodhani as a profession to survive.

As discussed above, in most of the cases, the women or girls used to choose the profession out of compulsion as their lives are under the control of either the males of the families or the society. Moreover the set of norms to be followed by the women to be a part of this traditional performance is not same for men. Men, performing as Oja or Pali are not expected to follow any path of ‘purity’ by remaining unmarried for life or by holding difficult fasts before the rituals. Though the traditional Deodhani performers receive respect from the believers but such women are not considered to be suitable for marriage and family.

The indigenous performing art, Ojapali, in its all forms, is not just a part of the culture and tradition of the people living in certain region, but also a means to earn in various ritualistic occasions or social gatherings. The Ojapali troupes perform on Shakti Puja, Basudev Puja, Jagar puja, Vaishnav puja or religious gathering. The performance of various forms of Ojapali is also witnessed as a part of fair, public gatherings and religious meetings. According to Nabin Chandra Sarma ‘Api Ojapali’ (Api means women) is a new phenomenon which is made for stage only. But they are never invited to perform on ritualistic or cultural occasions. Before the evolution of ‘Api Ojapali’, women could not consider the particular performing art to be a profession for them. Traditionally dominated by male performers, Api Ojapali is now witnessing a gradual inclusion of women, which marks a significant shift in both the cultural and gender landscapes of Assam. SDG 5 emphasizes ending all forms of discrimination and promoting equal participation in cultural, social and economic life. By tracing the increasing involvement of women in Api Ojapali, we observe the breaking of patriarchal barriers in folk performance spaces.

In a conversation with Jitendra Sarma, Principal of Samukha L.P. School and the secretary of Byas Ojapali Research and Training Centre: Byaspara, Sarma revealed that “women performers of the art form, also known as ‘Api Ojapali’ were never invited for the traditional purpose but only for commercial purpose or social gathering. However, in 2023 the first team of women performers was trained and formed who have received invitation to perform on traditional ritualistic occasions as well. However, this initiative is limited within the practice of Epic based Ojapali, such as Byas Ojapali. The Sukanani Ojapali, the most popular form of Non-Epic based Ojapali, dedicated to the worshiping of Shakti, do not welcome women performers(except as a Deodhani) due to cultural norms.”

This inclusion empowers women by providing them platforms for expression and livelihood. Studying this evolution offers insight into how indigenous art forms can be reclaimed by women, allowing them to become custodians and innovators of cultural heritage. Moreover, initiatives that support women performers as Api Ojapali and the newly formed team of women performers in Byaspara – through training, performance opportunities, or financial assistance – align with SDG 5 targets, such as enhancing women’s leadership and ensuring equal access to cultural resources. Thus, the journey of women performers of Ojapali from a male-centric form to a more inclusive practice mirrors the broader goal of gender equity as envisioned.

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