

CHAPTER - VIII

PERFORMING FOLK ARTS

Performing folk arts concern primarily with traditional folk drama, folk music and folk dance. This performance is very old form of folk entertainment in India. A group of performers who joint the performance in the important social and religious rites are available in prose and cons of India and who bears these folk arts from generation to generation. But it varies place to place and region to region of India. These cultural diversities of the land multiplied the forms of these traditions and made them more colourful and more enchanting.

Like India, the state of Assam is also rich in the field of folk music, dance and drama. These performing folk arts are differed among the district of Assam. Although, there are considerable diversities with in the region or within the districts, yet the fact remains that there is a basic unity characterising among the districts making up a colorful Assam.

A big number of performing folk-arts in the form of music, dance and drama are found among the different communities in the district of Dhubri, such as, *Kushan jatra*, *Marai gan* and *Madan Kamer Bas Nritya* and so on. The fishermen Namasudras of Dhubri district of Assam are also associated with the folk arts mentioned above, which can be said in the words of Vatsayan Kapila 'is one such multidimensional sphere, which moves around its own axis and has a relationship of inter dependence and communicability with other such units' (1989:25).

FOLK DRAMA

A very important component of the cultural formation of this area consists of the indigenous folk plays. The folk-plays are represented in two ways, namely, dramatic and semi-dramatic institution of the two ways of dramatic institutions, the full fledged folk play is represented by the *Kushan gan* and the *pala gan* or *dotra gan*. The folk drama is locally called as *gan*. The word *gan* has two connotations. Generally it means song. But it also means a play or dramatic performance. Thus, such formations as *kushan gan*, *dotra gan* and *Bhaoea-gan* means particular types of plays. Even all modern *jatra* or theatre performance is called *jatra gan* or *gan*. On the other hand, the semi-dramatic elements are contained in the ritualistic mimetic performances connected with *Padmapuran* or *Maraigan*, Kati puja, Madan Kumer Puja and other type of performance with different rhythmic patterns.

(i) Dramatic Institution

(a) Kushan gan

The most important and popular folk plays of Dhubri district are those that are known as *Kushan gan*. 'The origin of the term *Kushan* is not known for certain different explanations are put forward, but the most plausible explanation is that it has been derived from *Kusha*, one of the two sons of Ram, who are said to have been the first singers of the Ramayana under Valmiki's training. It is said that in the past the *Kushan* parties draw their themes exclusively from the Ramayana' (Datta, 1995:234). Perhaps, for this reason, the *Kushan* plays in North Bengal is played by two boys –Lava and Kusha (two sons of Ram), recalling the narratives of *Ramayana*.

The folk plays like *Kushan gan* is performed by some of the fishermen of Dhubri district like other *Goalparia* folk. *Kushan* plays are represented by the non professional troupes consisting of about fifteen to eighteen people including grown up men and boys. These persons are generally gathered from different places when they are invited by the other villagers on the occasions of puja ceremonies or festivals. Before commencing the play, they perform their rehearsal during the off season of their fishing.

Characters

Every *kushan* troupes is organised under a leader who is the principal singer, director or Manager, all rolled in one. He is known as *gidal* or *mul*.

Next to the *mul* or *gidal*, the *dowari* or *dowaria* performs the most important function in *Kushan* play. The function of the *dowari* in a *Kushan* play is to act as the main assistant of the *gidal* and he has to assist at singing and dancing. In addition the singing and dancing, he also helps the leader or *gidal* in conducting dialogues which he makes lively with his homespun humor. In a matter of fact, in the present form of art, the most sought after quality in *dowari* is his capacity to make the people laugh by the introduction of humorous sequences by witty dialogues.

The *pails* are the assistants of *gidal*. There are more than one *pail* engaged as in a troupe. The main activity is to provide the *choral* support to the singing of *mul* by repeating the refrain and to maintain the continuity in the singing of the narrative by putting such sound as *a, ha, aha, ora, mari, baish, baish* etc. at the end of the every stanza. There are two types of chief *pails*, namely, *daina pail* and *bawa pail*. The *daina pail* is the principal singing assistant and *bawa pail* assist the normal function.

Chokra or *changra* in the local dialect means boy in a *Kushan* play, usually four or five boys dressed as female dancers are known as *chokra* or *Chengra*. The real female dancers are locally called *chukuri* or *chengri* which is a recent phenomenon. Their main function is to dance and usually they go on dancing almost through out the performance. Of course, when a troupe enacts a drama then the *chengris* take any kind of role allotted by the *mul*. A *bain* is an instrumentalist who provide instrumental accompaniment, mainly with the *khol*.

Dress, make-up and language

As for the make-up and dresses, in spite of some basic similarities there are considerable variations from troupe to troupe.

The dress and make up of a *kushan* play are simple and modest. Generally the *gidal* wears *dhuti*, shirt and a wrapper. The *dowari* wears a shorter *dhuti* like *gamocha* and colorful short shirt. The *gidal* and *dowari* and the *bain*, however, use no makeup. It is only the *chengra* or *chengri* who are more or less elaborately and showily dressed and make up. They wear veils, *petticoat*, *lal pari shari* and ornaments, apart from wigs and false breasts in case of *chengra chukri*.

The language of *kushan* play were formerly conducted in the local dialects. Some times the language used in much of the performance is often a patois of the local dialects or as per the nature of drama.

Mode of presentation

Kushan performance is usually organised on the occasion of puja or festivals or some other ritualistic ceremonies. In the past, some rich families of this district invited *kushan* play at the time of their child marriage and ritualistic performances. *Kushan*

plays are also invited at fairs locally is called *mela* held in connection with festivals. The performance generally starts late in the evening and sometimes continues throughout night. It usually takes place in open *pendal*. At the centre of the *pendal*, a circular space is kept which is locally called *ashor* where the *gaonia* (the players) party (kushan play party) sit. The audience sits all round the *ashor* leaving a space of about six to eight or ten cubit between the *ashor* and themselves.

Having sited the troupes, the performance commence with an invocation to *ma-Saraswati* to grace the *ashor* to bless the performance. This is called *ashor bandana* and only after this the play is introduced. After doing the *Saraswati Bandana* first comes the *gidal* and then *dowari* and last of all the *chukuri*. They all follows the *gidal* and give him support in the singing. Although, normally the movement of the group is towards one particular direction, at times the performers also move backward and forward alternately. There is also variation in speed which is normally slow, but occasionally the movement becomes faster and at particular moments they are seen to circle the stage and dancing accordingly.

The story of the play mainly proceeds through the singing of narrative songs which however, does not continue without pause.

As per the story of the play, they may be divided into two types one is classical and another is modern type. The classical type is based on historical, legendary and mythical types of story or tale such as *Raja Harish Chandrar palla*, *Nal-Damayanti* and *Satyapir*. Moreover modern types of *kushan* play include family planning adult education and poverty of poor family as their subject of depiction. All the stories are

depicted by singing, dancing and explanatory dialogues between the mul and *dowaria*. This explanatory dialogues are locally known as *bhangi-dewa*.

(b) Pala gan or dotra gan

The *pala gan* or *dotra gan* is performed by *dotra* instead of one stringed *bena* that is why this types of play (gan) is known as *dotra gan* or *palagan* and the *pala* means a complete fact or play or a popular tale which is performed at a stage. The tale in the local dialect is called *kischa*. It also involves the recitation of a popular tale in a drama form.

The points of difference between the *kushan* play and the *pala* or *dotra gan* plays are mentioned below as defined by Datta. B.

'The theme of a kushan play is drawn from the epics and has at least an indirect religious appeal. In a pala or dotra play, however, this religious aspect is absent and it is built upon a popular tale Secondly, Another important difference between the kushan and the pala or dotra play is that while the playing of the one stringed *bena* by the leader is a peculiarity of the former, the leader of the latter has its place a dotra ' (Datta : 1995:238-239).

There are also some differences in the modes of presentation, especially, in the musical structures of the two forms. So, these are the reasons why this particular type of play has the substitute name *Dotragan*.

But the other points, such as, the technique of signing and dancing and also the acting, the manner of composition, the formation of troupes, their function, the *dowaria*, *bai*, *chukri* are used in *kushan* play has practically no difference with *dotra gan* or *path gan*. The same type of stage, a similar technique of singing the narrative, dramatic and musical break and also the dress and make up are identical.

(ii) Semi-Dramatic Institutions

(a) Padmapuraner gan

In a Marai puja *git vadya* and *nritya* as well as some kinds of folk play (Abhinaya) are supposed to be essential in the worship of the Snake Goddess Manasa (see, Chapter VI) and in a nutshell which is known as Padmapuraner gan- by the fishermen Namasudras of Dhubri district. Specially, the *Beula-Lakhindar's pala* (play) is given much importance in the play of *padmapuran*. This performance has much in common with the important folk-drama form where a leading singer (mul or gidal) and a number of assistants (pail) take main role. There is also the provision of breaks (bhangti) for dramatic dialogues of the play between the leader and the principal assistant.

In a full scale puja all part of the *padma puran*, including *jagani* and *bhashani* are recited where as in a restricted performance only the *jagani* part is sung. Singing of song and play of a part of a drama (story of Beula Lakhinder) by specialized group form is an important adjunct of full scale Manasa puja performance. The core of the Maraipuja story in a nutshell is mentioned in Chapter VI.

There is generally no regular and continues acting, only a part of the above story is recited by the specialised troupes. For example, Lakhinder's death and his return to life are represented respectively by placing the whisk on the ground and then lifting it up.

(b) Kati puja gan

In the course of Kati puja, semi dramatic folk play is played by the women folk basing on the story of Kati. For example, in that part of the rituals, the young wife who offers the puja impersonates Kati's mother.

The dramatic play of the kati puja may be divided into two parts.

The first part of these rituals is known as *Kati- Srijjan* (the birth of Kati) which describes the marriage of Siva with Chandi, the consummation of the marriage, the conception, the birth of Kati and the birth rites. Another part is *Kati-ghama* and this part consists of open erotic expressions.

The entire theme mentioned above are shown in a dramatic enactment, for example, an old women takes a *sola* (a pith stick making her penis) and on poses to copulate with the women who is childless. It is believed to be making the childless women fertile.

(c) Mandan kamer puja gan

Another very importance ceremony of the fishermen of Dhubri district is Madan kam puja locally known Bas puja (bamboo warship). In many village, the decorated bamboo is believed to represent God Madan kam which is held on the *Madan chaturdarhi* day in the month of *Baishak* (April May). Only the males performed this dance and a number of songs are sung on the occasion of Bas puja.

Sometimes, the Krishna or Kamdev legend is also recited in the ceremony. In some of the village of this district the Kamdev play is enacted on the occasion of Bas puja. Moreover , in some places, the fishermen Namasudras worship, Madan Kam (puja)with two of bamboo one is male and another is female. The male symbolic

bamboo is decorated with white cloth and female is decorated with colored cloths. With this, other two small curvilinear bamboos are decorated like horse and these horses (like one male and one female) are earned by two boys. These two boys are represented *Rati* and *Madan*. In this act, they are engaged in sexual pleasure.

(d) Kirtan

Kīrtan has been an indispensable part of fishermen's convention. The term *kirtan* and *sankirtan* stand for the same meaning. To sing the name of God and his virtues to the human society in the accompaniment of drum and symbols in a high pitch with a particular rhythm is known as *kirtan*. 'In the second half of the century Sri Chaitanya founded the complete form of *kirtan* in Bengal and since then it has been widely popular. The main object was to propagate the mystic relationship between Radha and Krishna based on love' (Sarma: 1990:110)

There are three schools of *kirtan* current in fishermen society, namely, *Nama kirtan*, *Lila kirtan* and general *kirtan*.

The names of Lord Krishna are and to tune and sung and singing of his names is regarded as the highest form of worship. Love is roused in the mind of *bhakta* by singing about the sweet names of Krishna and in doing so a devotee can forget the external world. *Lila kirtan* is mainly confined to the young life of Krishna, Radha and Gopinies. General *kirtan* is generally sung by the male folk on the occasion of any kind of puja or when ever they (the fishermen) celebrated any festival in their society.

The playing of drum (khol) and cymbal (kartal) and blowing conch-shell (sankhya) jointly sets the beginning of every type of *kirtan*.

FOLK MUSIC

Music is a very important ingredient of the folk performance. Without music in folk drama, songs and dances are meaning less. Therefore, music is closely associated with drama, songs and dance from time immemorial. Generally, most of the ceremonies and rites and rituals are performed with the aid of drama, dance and music and the musical part are taken by so called lower caste people.

So, Dr. Taranath Das referred to the comments of Dr. D.R. Rigmi that 'Not all the artisans were sudras. Similarly not all traders were Sudras. Trading was certainly the occupation of Vaisyas. We shall however see that profession of dancing, singing and playing musical instruments are left to the caste below the Sudras' (1986:89). It is seen that some of the musical instruments are used by the fishermen in their area of engagement. One of the blessed land of Assam, Hajo, a temple city where also the 'fishermen were engaged in the temples of the area for this particular duty of drum beating' (Das : 1999:137). The *Goalparia* Namasudra fishermen also used various kinds of attractive musical instruments in various religious and ritualistic occasions.

(i) Musical Modes

Different types of folk music of the fishermen villages have different kinds of melodic and rhythmic patterns. While most of the musical structures of the fishermen are more or less similar with other non-fishermen. Moreover, some of the musical structures are more or less akin with erstwhile Kamrup district.

'While some of the musical structures of the eastern parts are more or less akin to those of the contiguous areas of the Kamrup region the bulk of the musical modes of the region, especially of the western part, have a close affinity with those of the neighboring districts of North Bengal' (Datta : 1995:251)

The important dances and songs of the fishermen folk are religious and ritualistic in nature and are connected with their main religious and social festivals. The tune of the most of the songs of the religious and ritualistic associations have repetitive and rather monotonous quality. Most of the songs set to simple rhythmic nature. Considerable variation are also found in both melodic and rhythmic structure in the maraipuja gan. The song of the female folk, like the marriage songs and song sung in the other ritualistic ceremonies have simple yet attractive melodies. The marriage song in particular have a little quality. Some other rhyme like song, have elementary musical patterns with a very limited combination of notes.

But the most important and interesting and also clear musical modes of the fishermen villages are the *bhawaiya* and the *chatka gan* that are extremely popular in erstwhile Goalpara district, CoochBehar and Jolpaiguri district of North Bengal. The old Kamatapur kingdom was the store house of colourful and artistic folk arts.

Datta. B. referred that 'the *bhawaiya* is characterised by slow and floating movements with a tendency to linger on some particulars notes. A sentiment of pathos dominates the style of its rendition. A *chatka* has fast and rather jerky movements and the prevailing mood is one of gaiety and mirth. Though musically the *bhawaiya* has some affinity with the *bhatiyali* of East Bengal, it is by no means a variation of latter as wrongly assumed by some, it is very much of an independent and distinct style' (1995:252).

As love and spiritual theme are the principal motif of most of the composition of *chatka* and *bhawiya gan* so mode of expression are characterised by an intensity of feeling and delicacy of tune.

(ii) Uses of Musical Instruments

The following are the important musical instruments (fig-9) used by the fishermen of Dhubri district in their different religious and ritualistic ceremonies for performing dance, drama and songs.

(a) The dotara

The *dotara* is used as accompaniment to different types of songs especially in the *Kharatal* (*Kushan gan*) play, *bhawaiya gan* and *chatka gan*.

(b) The sarinda

It is used to accompany different types of songs like *bhawiyas* and *chatkas*.

(c) The ektara

The *ektara* is generally used for performing *dehatatwa gan* by the *bairagi* (monk). That is the *ektara* is generally favoured by the mendicant singers.

(d) The bena

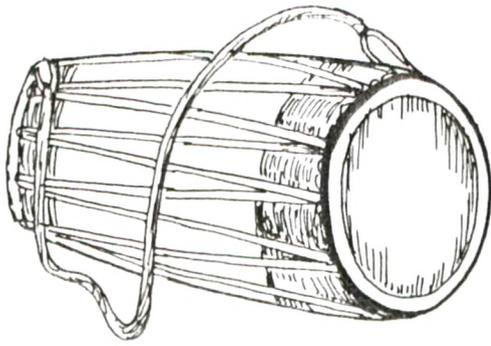
The *bena* is used almost exclusively in the *Kushan* or *Kharatal* types of folk-drama.

(e) The khol

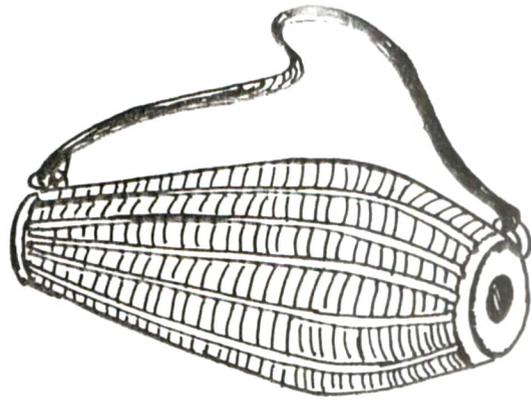
The *khol* is most commonly used percussion instrument for accompaniment. It is used not only in singing the *kirtan* type songs but also used in some dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions.

(f) The dhak

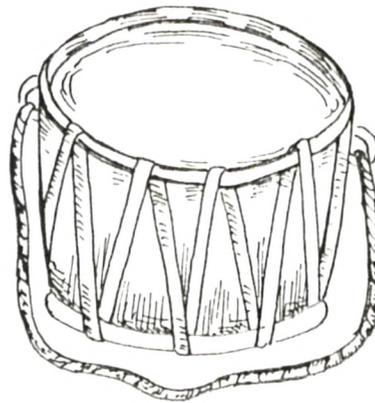
The *dhak* is an important musical instrument for each and every puja ceremonies. Moreover it is also used for some of the ritualistic function.



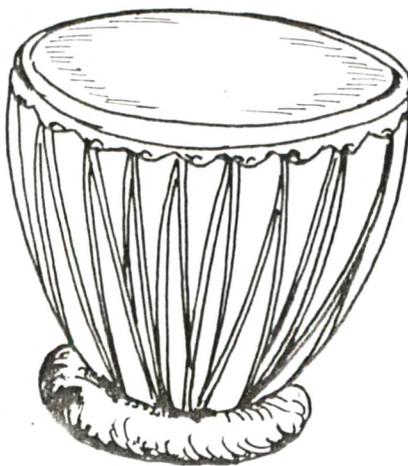
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KHOL



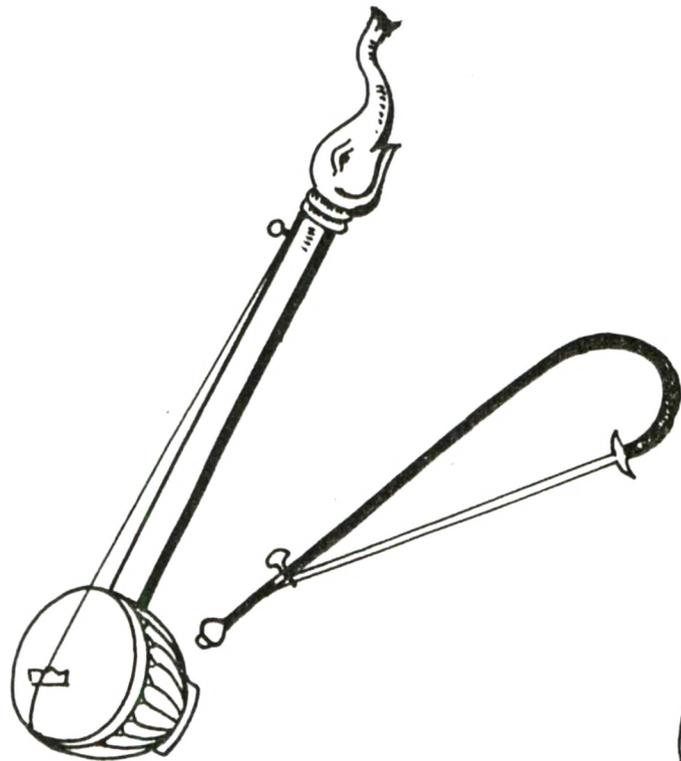
KERKA



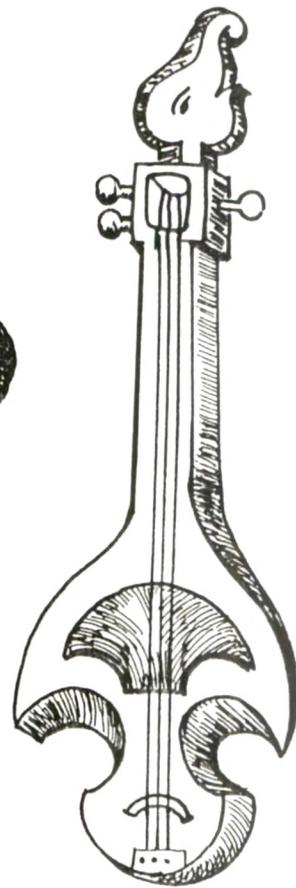
NAGRA

Fig. -9

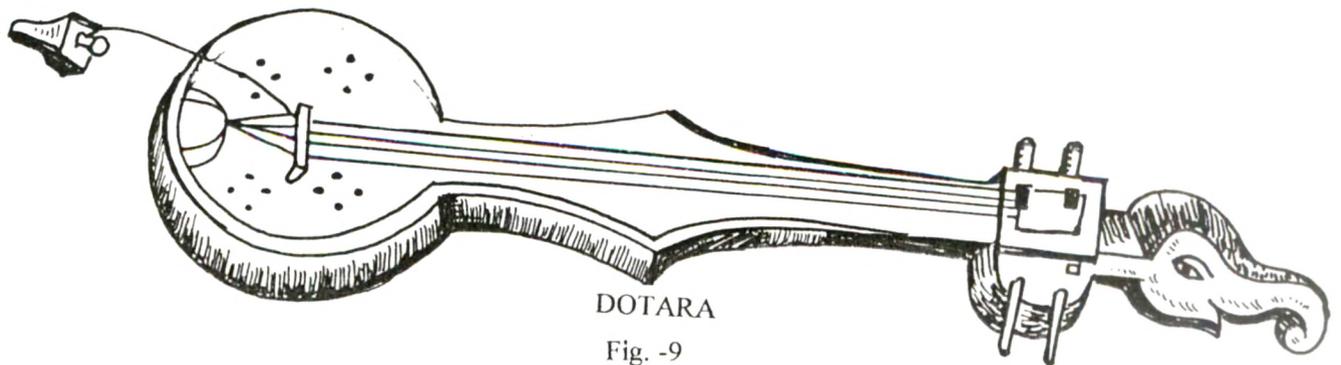
Diagram Showing the Musical Instruments Used by the Namasudra Fishermen of Dhubri District.



BENA



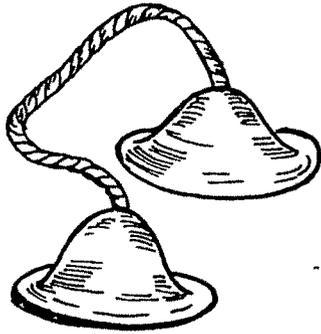
SARINDA



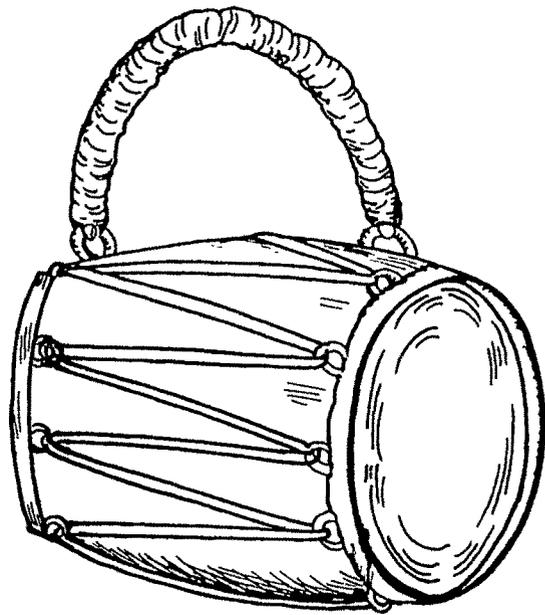
DOTARA

Fig. -9

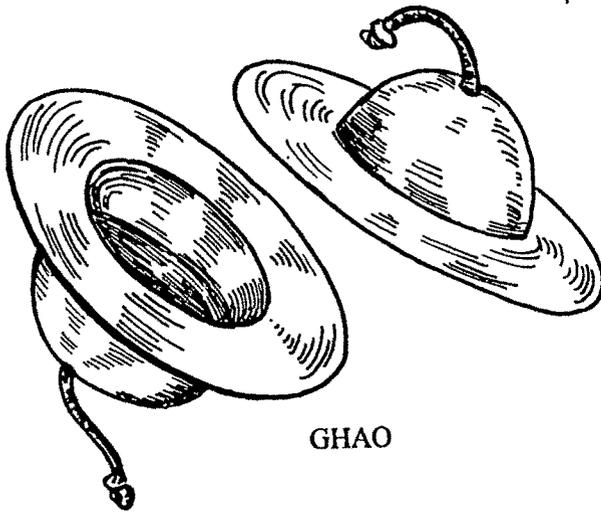
Diagram Showing the Musical Instruments Used by the Namasudra Fishermen of Dhubri District.



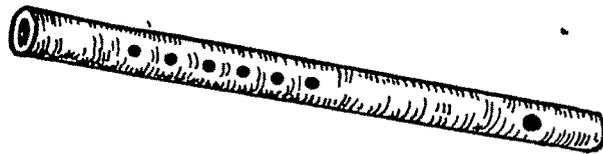
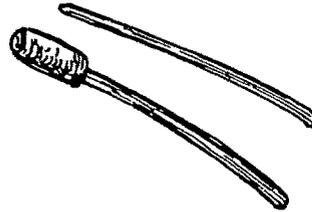
JURI



DHAK



GHAO



MUKH-BASI



SANAI

Fig. -9

Diagram Showing the Musical Instruments Used by the Namasudra Fishermen of Dhubri District.

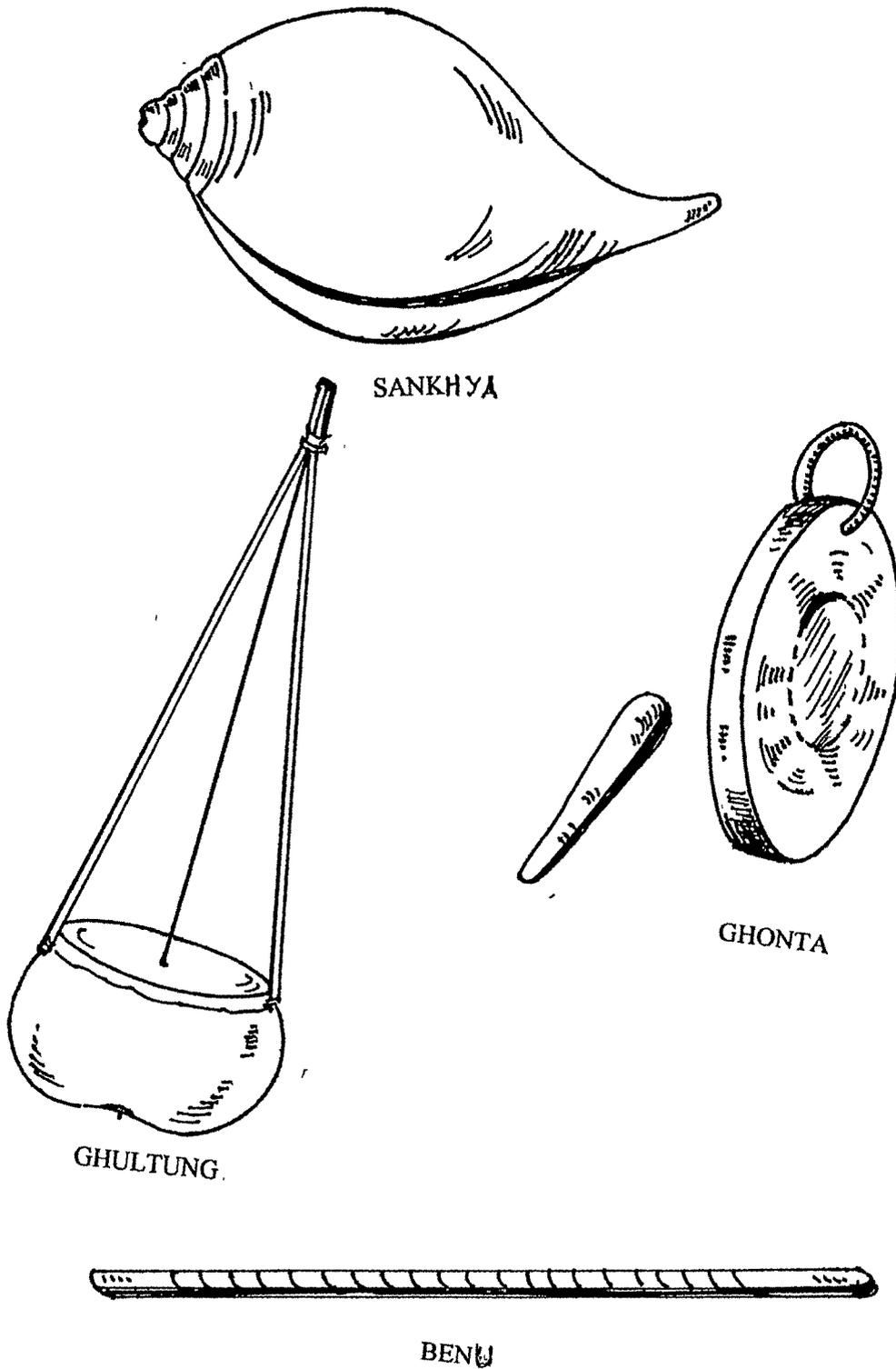


Fig. -9
Diagram Showing the Musical Instruments Used
by the Namasudra Fishermen of Dhubri District.

(g) The dhol

The *dhol* is generally played in combination with the *karka and shanai*. The *dhol* and the *karka* are also essential for the Bas puja, *Madarer Bas*, marriage and *annyaprashan* ceremonies and the dances of this name.

(h) The nagras

The *nagras*, played in pairs, especially in the *Pal nam*. They are beaten upon with two sticks and exclusively used in the singing of congregational devotional songs of the *Vaisnava* school.

(i) The ghultung

The ghultung is a kind of *ektara* where two bamboo pieces are fitted to a gourd shell. The two top is joined and string is fastened from the top to the bottom of the gourd shell. Pressing the bamboo strips the sound can be varied while striking on the string. This instrument is generally used by *boeragi* (monk).

(j) The mukh-basi

The *mukh-basi* is a peculiar kind of flute. It is made of a bamboo cylinder and the mouth piece is fitted with a ring like bamboo attached of bigger diameter into which wind is constantly blown from the mouth.

Moreover, other musical instruments are also used by the fishermen in their different songs and ritualistic ceremonies as per their utility and tune of music. These musical instrument are the *sanai, kerka, juri, ghao, sankhya* and *ghanta*.

FOLK DANCE

Various kinds of folk dances are found in this district and those have ritualistic and religious importance. Not only in this district but also the entire Goalpara region that is the erstwhile Goalpara are famous for *Goalparia git* (song) and *nir'tya* (Dance).

Datta has classified this folk dance into two broad heads :

'The folk-dances of Goalpara can be broadly divided into two categories (a) the non-tribal dances and (b) the tribal dances. The non-tribal dances may again be classified in the following manner :

(1) Those having religious or ritualistic significance, which include the kati puja dance, the kali-chandi dance, the Bas puja and Madar dance, etc. (2) Those pertaining to social ceremonies of which the most important is the dance performed in Muslim marriage. (3) Those belonging to the dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions.' (1995:248).

The fishermen of Dhubri district belong to non-tribal groups and they perform their social, religious and ritualistic ceremonies alike with other non-tribal folk of this region. Each caste of the non-tribal groups has its own stock of folk dances many of which are ritualistic in nature. The fishermen Namasudras are also associated with some of the dances which are mentioned below :

(i) Kali Puja Dance

The Kali puja dance is a most colourful and powerful dance in which a man, wearing a fearful Kali mask and waving a sword in his hand and dances in the role of Goddess Kali. Two Wisk's attached to his head form the hair and from his waist hangs a red petticoat. After performing the makeup, the dancer dances in the middle of the night with powerful sweeping steps and jerky movements of the masked face in front of Kali Goddess the drummer providing appropriately thunder like beats in keeping with the steps, the effect of both create awestruck atmosphere. The stepping and movements of these dances are characterised by careful planning and tradition. Such kinds of folk dances are rarely found in other locality.

(ii) Kati Puja Dance

Kati puja dance is entirely a female affair. The steps are effected by moving both the feet almost simultaneously, lifting them only slightly above the ground level. Movements of the hands and the body are repetitive and attractive with some particular movements with two hands holding the ends of a wrapper hanging. Some times so much mimetic acting is also performed through this Kati puja dances.

(iii) Bas Puja Dance

The Bas puja dance is also a vigorous masculine dance in which the dancers carry decorated bamboo poles which have their distinctive names. The Bas puja dance is one of the most interesting ritualistic dances performed by men folk alone. The dances are performed on the occasion of the Bas puja and *Madar* ceremonies respectively. In both the ceremonies, the decorated bamboo poles are taken by some expert dancer with one hand and pressed on the belly of the dancer, the free hand making gestures to go with the various intricate stepping.

(iv) The Marriage Dances

The marriage dances is one of the most interesting dance performed by women folk of the fishermen society. They are almost like a ritual gone through by the women folk surrounding the bride before the actual marriage rites. This rituals are also done in the house of the groom at the time of *adibash*,

Moreover, from the day of *gua pan kata* that is the day of settlement of marriage to *atmangla* ritual, the fisher women sing and dance reciting some ironical songs. At the time of dancing, the stepping and movements are simple and resemble to some extent to those of the Kati puja dance. Sometimes some expert dances also use

elaborate symbolic action in keeping with the sense of the song. In the marriage dances main part is taken by the sister-in-law or a grand mother like old woman of the bride and groom.

(v) The Dances of the Folk Plays

Dancing has an important place in the field of folk-drama like *Kushan gan*, *Padmapuraner gan* and *dotra gan*.

In *Kushan* play the *Chukuri* keep up a dancing movement almost through out the performance. There are a puppet like staccato movements and are not very graceful. Full scale dances are not performed.

There is no regular dancing in *Padmapuran* performances, in some villages the assistants move their feet and swing their bodies in agreement with the rhythmic patterns of the songs.

Besides these at the time of *kirtan* (singing song on spiritual line), the fishermen dances with the *tumul kirtan* (singing gorgeously). Gradually, the dances become slow and with restrained music and stepping the performers move in a circle.

With the change of times, all traditional art forms are undergoing changes and degeneration. To stop such degeneration and to keep these dying folk art forms alive with its original flavour researchers, performing artist, socio-cultural organisations as well as the Government agencies should come forward with a positive attitude.