CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

Dance is found in all human societies and cultures of the world. Dance is a widespread occurrence in most societies and an integral aspect of culture. This universal phenomenon has been a part of society since its inception. It is, therefore an obvious topic for anthropological curiosity, yet curiously it remains lesser researched in the academic circles. This work on dance has been carried out as a part of the ritual process of festivals, among the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas, the two plains tribes of Assam mainly inhabiting the Goalpara district of Assam (Map 1).

This work explores how folk dances embody the perception of a self identity of the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas. The concern is with how people's idea about themselves, their distinctiveness vis-à-vis others are articulated in the folk dance form. Dance reinforces the cultural identity of the people and also incorporates changes in people's perception of identity. Dance is an integral part of the society. What better way to express this view, "To Dance is Human" as stated by Judith Henna (1979) which also forms the title of her book. Anthropological literature primarily concentrates on the relationship of dance to society. Kaeppler (1978: 32) had expressed dance, "as a cultural form that results from creative processes which manipulate human bodies in time and space. The cultural form produced, through transient, has structured content, is a visual manifestation of social relations, and may be the subject of an elaborate aesthetic system- surely a domain of anthropologists".
Since its inception, anthropology has dealt with dance. It is found mentioned in the ethnographies as a part of society and culture. Anthropologists have of late recognized that a study and understanding of dance- which is sometimes a very conspicuous part of culture- may actually assist in an understanding of the deep structure of a society and bring new sights into understanding other parts of culture.

Early anthropologists like Spencer (1857), Evans- Pritchard (1949), Malinowski (1929), Radcliffe-Brown (1964), and Boas, who have addressed the aspects of dance in their works, emphasizing on the social functions of dance. Herbert Spencer (cited in Spencer, 1985) explored the variety of emotions that expressed themselves in muscular action, first in relation to an ingenious theory of the origins of music (1957), then the laughter (1860) and then briefly of dancing (1862:234.5). He viewed emotion as a form of nervous energy outlet that had to be released through some other channels. Evans- Pritchard (1928) speaking in the same lines suggested that the Azande beer dance served among other things, ‘to canalize the forces of sex into socially harmless channels’. Spencer (1985) described Harting’s work on pre-colonial dancing among the Kerebe as an inter-village competition during the stack dry season that provided an outlet for men in striking contrast to their toil at other times under the stagnation and decay of an oppressive regime.

A functional approach to the role of dance in society was summarized by Radcliffe-Brown (1964) as the basic conditions for an orderly social existence that depended on the transmission and maintenance of culturally desirable sentiments, and this leads us to turn from impregnating the youth with such sentiments, to revitalizing the sentiments of adults through dance. This power of music and dance, beyond words to act as a moral force on the individual was central to Radcliffe-Brown’s analysis of
dance in *The Andaman Islander*. (1922) Radcliffe-Brown perceived the dancers and singers performing together as one body. The rhythms generated a force that acted on the dancer from outside and yet also found a response from within.

In Samoa, Mead (1928), explained dance as a medium that separated the adept from the in-adept children, preparing them respectively for success or failure in later life. Through their dancing, children were helped to develop an adult grace, proficiency, and confidence, whereas clumsy children were rebuked by their peers and less confidence. In this way the more precious children cultivated adult values that discriminated against clumsiness, while the less skilled came to accept their inferiority. Margaret Mead suggested that the informal dance of Samoan children provided a release from their rigorous and subordination by adults in their spheres. Later in the early seventies, working on the lines of Mead, John Blacking explained the Domba dance. Blacking referring to girls' initiation schools among the Venda of Southern Africa reflected on how girls learn a sequence of dance over a period of one to four years, which had contrasting styles that symbolically prepared them for motherhood and culminate in the unforgettable collective experience of the Domba dance.

Dance during this period was also viewed as a cumulative process, the theory of self generation and self-fulfilling prophecy a topic that is quite often cited by anthropologists, but seldom pursued. Merton (1957) first coined the phrase in an economic context to describe the onset of the depression in America in 1929 and the progressive loss of confidence that spread like an epidemic across the country. The self fulfilling prophecy was extended to dance also, whose success breeds upon success and failure upon failure.
The element of composition in dance is an integral part of theories of boundary display. Anthropological classics have frequently allotted to the element of mounting competition through display in dancing. Benedict (1934), the Kwakiutl regarded the exclusive title to a dance as a treasured possession to be jealousy fought over if it were captured by a rival through deceit or force. The Maidu held contests in which, the victor was the shaman who danced down in the others. Rivalries between Trobriand villages built up to an intense emotional display of dancing during the month of harvest, marked by envy of successful dancers, fears of black magic, and the resort to counter magic was explained by Malinowski (1922). In the Azande Beer Dance, Evans-Pritchard (1928) promoted a competitive display among men for leadership and for the attention of girls. Ray Rappaport (1967) has described mass dancing, displays among the marring of New Guinea, where population pressures led to disputes boundary areas and fighting.

Dance as ritual drama is based on the theory of communities and anti structure. John Middleton (cited in Spencer, 1985) considers the significance and dancing among the Lugbar of Uganda in situations where there is uncertainty and disorientation. These include the women’s dance following a bumper harvest or a long dry season and even dramatically the men’s dance after the death. In each of these situations there is sudden change in everyday existence and a general notion that orderly time and the normal pattern of social relations have been thrown into confusion. Dancing may also be viewed as an expression of the paranormal among mythical beings that lie beyond society. With regard to the Dance of death in medieval art, for instance, Sach drew attention to the contrast between the youthful vigour of dancing and the awful and eternal stillness of death.
Horton's (1963) analysis of the ritual cycle of masquerade dances among the Kalahari, also associated with spirit possession in Nigeria. More widespread generally are beliefs in the weird dances of mythical witches, as in the witch’s Sabbath in medieval Europe or at the hut or grave of their victims parts of Africa. In Africa, the term ‘dancer’ or ‘singer’ is often a euphemism for a witch. Where, for instance, an Ndembu chief was ritually humiliated at his installation and told: you have danced for your chief ship because your predecessor is dead, the insinuation was that he had killed him through witchcraft.

Dance till the early 1960s was seen as a part of rituals in a society. An attempt to study in its entirety was yet to be done. All the above works on dance looked at it as a part of society. The initiation ceremony involving dance described by Mead the Azande beer dance of Evans-Pritchard, the description of dance among the Andaman Islanders by Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski’s account of dance to show rivalries in the Trobriand Islanders were all description of dance as a phenomenon in a society. It formed a part of the ethnographic description. Dance was not studied as ethnography. These earlier studies did not explain the phenomena of dancing or the reasons for display of emotions through dance. Rather it was explained as a means of displaying emotions dance as an outlet for releasing pent up emotions. However, Boas proposed a definition of dance as; ‘ordinary gestures and actions can become dance if a transformation takes place within the person; a transformation which takes him out of the ordinary world and places him in a world of heightened sentivity’ (Kaeppler 1978, Reed 1998, Henry 2001).

Boas was empirical, and he stated that such things as dance must be analytically situated in the context of the society of which it is a part, rather than from the observer’s
point of view. He also pointed out the difference between the dances of different
societies comparing with contemporary western society of the period.

Following on the same lines Kealiinohomoku (1978:25) defined dance as a
transient art of expression, performed in a given form and style by the human body
moving in space. Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic
movements; the resulting phenomenon is recognized as dance both by the performer
and the observing members of a given group’.

It was only in mid 1960s that the study of dance in anthropology had taken a
new turn. Williams (1970a, 1976b), Snyder (1972), Royee (1977), Kaeppler (1978,
1981) and Henna (1979) were some of the anthropologists who studied dance from
different perspectives. They examined dance within the theoretical paradigms inspired
by Boas and Herskovits. Dance during this period was studies as ethnography, in it’s
totally not just as a part of the society. It was studied for its own self. These studies thus
stressed the form and function of dances, the deep structures of dance, and dance as
nonverbal communication.

These anthropologists used the methodologies and theoretical technique to study
dance. Fieldwork during this period widely used the technique commonly used in
linguistic and increasingly used in ‘new ethnography’ the concept of ‘etic/emic’. 
Dance was based on this concept trying to elicit an inventory of small pieces of
movements. A similar methodology was being developed during the same time in
Eastern Europe.
Williams (1978, 77) insisted that dance is a 'language based rather than a behavioural science.' Her work centered round the uncharted deep structures of dance. These structures probed the pattern of dance movement for some hidden meaning. Williams work dealt with the conceptual space of the dance, i.e. the larger context of the transformational syntagmatic rules' (Kaeppler, 1978). Gell (1998) examines the pattern of dancing among the Umenda of Papua New Guinea, and shows how the symbolism of their Ida ceremony exaggerates and distracts culturally significant features of everyday life and this gives it powerful associations and subtle meaning.

Kaeppler (1976) states that the anthropologically relevant works on dance has viewed dance as a reflection of culture, that is, that dance is somehow separable from other parts of culture and of which it can be considered a mirror. Snyder (1972) and Heib (1972) and the study by Kealiinohomoku (1972) of Hopi dance as a microcosm of Hopi culture takes this stance. This view is acceptable if looking from the viewpoint of both dance and anthropology, it tends to mask the integral association of this cultural form with others. Whereas, Henna (1977) strongly felt that dance is linked to the life of a society of affecting cultural patterns, tensions management, goal attainment, adaptation and integration. She cogently describes the process of gradual legitimization of dance studies in anthropology and their emergence as an important subject of concern.

Spencer (1985) reviewed the range of themes that emerged in the study of the anthropology of dance in the study of dance as a legitimate field of enquiry. The first theme dealt with dance as a safety valve that releases pent-up emotions, tensions and drives. His second theme was based on the educational role of dance and transmission of sentiments. The third theme viewed dance as transmitting and maintaining culturally
desirable sentiments that underlie orderly social existence of society and promotes solidarity. The fourth theme treated dance as a cumulative process in which collection passion rises as dancers lose themselves in the dance becoming absorbed in the unified community and being transported to a state of elation. The fifth theme was related to the elements of competition in dance. The sixth theme describes dance as a ritual drama lifting people out of their structural routine into the realm of spiritual beings. The seventh theme regards dance as a shared activity with non-verbal mode of communication and exploration of pattern of dance movements of unearth the hidden meanings.

Another emerging trend in the anthropological study of dance during the 1980s and 1990s were the studies based on politics of dance, and the relations between culture, body and movement. Studies in these areas drew from semiotics, phenomenology, postcolonial, post structural and feminist theories. The expression, prohibition and regulation of indigenous dances under colonial role are an index of the significance of dance as site considerable political and moral anxiety. Colonial administrations often perceived indigenous dance practices as both a political and moral treat to colonial regimes. Local dances were often viewed as excessively erotic and colonial agents and missionaries encouraged and sometimes enforced the ban or reform of dance practices (Comaroff 1985, Kaspin 1993).

Colonial rule played a critical role in the transformation of dance. Udall (1992) analyzed the impact of the Euro-American photographers, illustrators, painters etc. on the practice of the Hopi snake dance. He explored the transformative and intrusive aspects of colonial and post colonial visual representations on ritual practice.
Representations of Javanese performed by the Dutch and the legacies of colonialism in contemporary performance scholarship were explored by Schechner.

In the 1960s Lomax initiated a cross-culture survey of ‘Choreometry’, claiming that “Dance movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture”, and that ‘dance style varies (with)...the level of complexity and the type of subsistence activity of the culture which supports it’

OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The primary objective of the study is to describe the various forms of folk dances prevalent among the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas inhabiting Goalpara district of Assam with a view to achieving the primary objectives the following aspects, have been taken into consideration in the present study.

1. Social and historical factors which led to the emergence of some of the folk dances of the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas.
2. To understand the social relationship between the performers and the audience, perception of folk dances as a part of their cultural heritage.
3. To understand how the dancer’s position within the social organization and the way the dancer’s role has been modified by the influences from outside.
4. To make an attempt to understand the functional role of folk dances in the study groups.
In the course of my working with the research problem, certain pertinent questions came to my mind regarding the study of folk dances of the two study groups i.e. Bodo-Kacharis and Rabhas. As I am belong to the study area where I was born and brought up I have observed since my childhood the various aspects of life of the people inhabiting study area. As I have grown up and started studying Anthropology as a student I could notice that various change have occurred in the life style of the people of the study area including the folk dances. The question that has come to my mind is that what are the forces and factors that have resulted changes in numbers of visible aspects of their life. It can be hypothesized that visible changes in the case of the study groups has taken place. Certain contacts, impact of various outside agencies and organizations and various forms of media have resulted changes in an aspect of their traditional life i.e. folk dances. Thus it can broadly be hypothesized that changes are due to the impact of various forces and factors. This is what I have tried to deal with in this thesis under the heading changing aspects of Bodo-Kachari and Rabha folk dances.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sach's (1933) *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes*, was the first book publication in dance with anthropological relevance and was translated into English in 1937 as *World History of Dance*. This book is being widely used in anthropology but Kaeppler (1978) states that the book does have a place in the study of the history of anthropological theory but it has no place in the study of dance in anthropological perspective.
According to Kaepler the book follows the German Kulturkreis school of Schmidt and Graebner relating to diffusion resulting in a form of unilineal evolution.

Jenning’s (cited in Spencer, 1985) account of the Temiar of the Malay Peninsula showed how dancing may provide an outlet from the emotional straitjacket of their restrained existence, commonly known as the cathartic theory. The cathartic theory in dance faces pitfall as Sach’s (1933) book *World History in Dance* made a pertinent point. If dance is an expression of excess energy and the joy of living in all mankind, then it is only of slight importance for anthropologists and social historians.

Vatsayan (1987), in her book *Tradition of Indian Dance*, fully illustrated with photographs, choreographical patterns and line drawings which is an attempt at understanding the living traditions in the context of the performing arts, particularly dance. This present study examines the physio-geographical, ecological, linguistic, ethnic and social environment in which movement patterns emerged and developed. This study emphasized on the traditions of contemporary survivals of Indian traditions. This book is a broad framework of the attempt to identify the paths of mobility between levels in a region and amongst different region.

Vidyarthi’s (1986) book *Art and Culture of North-East India* is an account of origin, history, rich culture heritage, customs, traditions and beliefs of various tribes now live in different parts of North east. This book depicts the economic conditions, occupational patterns, arts and crafts, traditional dormitories and inherent concepts, dresses, entertainment and rapidly changing cultures and economic scene of the North East India.
Saxena (2006), in his book *Swinging Syllables: Aesthetics of Kathak Dance* has studied the dance forms both folk and classical from Southern India. This book is the second venture of the writer into the region of aesthetics relating to Indian arts today. The task in this book is clearly multiple. This present book depicts the classical Indian dances in the way of Philosophical aesthetics. This study may be said to meet the long-standing need for a full-length analytical study of Kathak as an art, and to indicate the lines on which similar works could be attempted on the other forms of classical dance.

Nath’s (2008) book *Panorama of North-East India* is a modest attempt to present a panoramic overview of North East. This book describes the day-to-day lifestyle, the cultural and social life, the historical background along with the different aspects of the people of eight sisters of India’s north east.

Frank (2013) has edited *Dance Research*, the Journal of the Society for Dance Research. This journal is an important source material for those who are involved in the study of dance. It’s a peer-reviewed journal, which is published twice a year by Edinburgh University Press and contains articles and book reviews reflecting the range of members' interests. Dance Research is essential reading for those involved in the study and practice of dance. It is edited and published in Britain with the assistance of a distinguished group of editorial consultants based in Europe and the USA. The journal provides an international forum for the presentation and discussion of contemporary dance research and contains a section of comprehensive book and journal reviews.

Borgohain (2011) in her book *Female Dance Tradition of Assam* explores the roots of the female dancers in Assam. Through this book the author has outlined the birth and growth of the dance tradition along with its recent development in recent times. This book portrays the evidence of the dances to dancers of Assam and its
development extensively. This book also depicts some of the folk dances along with their dresses, gestures and instruments of some of the indigenous groups of Assam.

Pam's (1992) book *Karha Nolor Mou Sora Sur* is an attempt to depict the oral histories of the Rabha folk songs, dances and some of the cultural and social life of the Rabha people. In this book he also portrait some of the folk songs of his own compositions.

Rabha's (2002) book *The Rabhas* is a monograph on the Rabha group of people of Assam. This book is the result of a massive as well as fairly thorough ethnographic survey on the parts of areas scattered with the Rabha people. This study is an useful one to the readers as an insider's account with a lot of insights into the culture and society of the Rabhas.

A souvenir entitled *Kherai* (2008), which was brought by the 'All Bathou Religious Union' (ABRU) have been elaborately described about the 'Bathou' and the dances performed in this, the religion which is a part and parcel of the Bodo- Kacharis which they have been practicing this religion since time immemorial. This Anthology has helped to focus the fundamental theme, ideals and values of Bathau religion of the Bodo- Kacharis.

Rabha's (2005), book *Rabha Sanskritir Dhara* deals with the cultural and social aspects of the Rabhas. In this book he describes the various folk dances and songs of the Rabhas.

Singha (2006), in his book *Socio-cultural Activities and Reformers of the Rabhas* Volume- 1 has depict a collection of life sketch some of the eminent Rabha
personalities who are the reformers of the Rabha culture and tradition. This book also
portrait the Socio-cultural activities of these personalities of Goalpara district.

METHODOLOGY

Before undertaking Field Work, I did library work in the K.K. Handique Library
of Gauhati University, District Library, Guwahati and Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra
Library. In these three libraries I have consulted all available Anthropological books
pertaining to the topic of my study.

Data for the present study were collected at two levels: material from extent
library research and secondary basic ethnographic materials pertaining to the study were
collected through field study among the two study groups i.e. Bodo-Kachari and Rabha.
Before undertaking the field library work was undertaken. The field data for the present
study were collected between 2009-2012 in a number of phases.

1. Observation was the most important tool of this Research work. Observation
method was used there in various performances of both the tribal groups in
different situation from household functions to village level function to
community level function.

2. Both Participant observation as well as non-participant observation method was
also used in this work.

3. Information was also collected by interviewing dance experts and dancers with
the help of questionnaire.
4. A few key informants were selected from among both the groups to collect pertinent information of the present study.

5. Case study method was also one of the important methods in this present work.

6. Photography as well as video recording of the dances was captured as and when required.

PRESENTATION OF MATERIALS

The following chapter, chapter II describes the study area as a setting and presents ethnographic profiles of the study groups. Chapter III describes the various aspects of different dance forms prevalent among the study groups. Chapter IV takes into consideration the folk dance performers among the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas of Goalpara district. Here also the experts are described. In so far as the folk dances and concerned we have described various folk dancers in terms of sex. Chapter V takes into consideration about the changing aspects of Bodo-Kachari and Rabha folk dances. In chapter VI this study has been summarized and conclusion has been drawn.