CHAPTER XII

RITUAL DANCES AND SONGS
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(As in other regions of the country, in Cachar also some special kinds of songs and dances form an integral part of some of the folk rituals. Among these the Gurmī dance, the Dhamail song and dance and the Bounach (bride's dance) deserve special attention.)

1. The Gurmī dance

(a)

'Gurmī' is a local term that denotes a eunuch. In northern and western India, the eunuchs live in groups, but in the Sylhet-Cachar region, the Gurmīs or the professional eunuch dancers live individually. Throughout their life, they keep long hair, use cosmetics and wear the female dress. Their way of life is completely feminine and at times it becomes difficult to distinguish them from the ordinary female. The dance by the eunuch is an essential feature of the worship of a local deity called Darai. It is believed that the goddess Darai cannot be propitiated unless a eunuch is available to officiate as a priest. Though on some occasions a Brahmin priest may perform the worship, his position is always secondary to that of the eunuch. The worship of Darai is a rare feature now-a-days since professional eunuchs have become a rarity in this region.
Darai is a local goddess having an obscure origin. She is worshipped in an image that depicts her as a stark-naked deity with a reddish complexion. She sits on a tortoise. Also it is obligatory to sacrifice tortoise on the occasion of her worship. There is no fixed date for her worship. She is worshipped at midnight for three consecutive days. Throughout the night the Orami or eunuch-priest and his associates dance and sing before the deity. There is nothing artistic in the dance, it is composed of rhythmless quick movements accompanied by vulgar physical gestures. The songs are composed of the most obscene words of the local vocabulary having a common content—sex and coition. Darai is worshipped normally by a childless person for having a child. She is a popular deity among the lower castes, particularly among the fishing community.

The meaning of the term darai is not clear. In Bengali, dar means fear and Asutosh Bhattacharyya suggests that Darai is so called as the presiding deity of horror and fear.¹ She is propitiated when children suffer from acute fear-fobia. But this explanation does not clarify all features associated with her worship. Rather the name of the deity might have been derived from either Assamese

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¹ Asutosh Bhattacharyya, *Benáiya Lokasangeet Ratnákar*, p. 847, Vol. II.
**dura** which denotes a hard-shelled tortoise or the local word **dar** meaning the deepest portion of a river or a lake. **Ai** in Assamese means mother, so **Darai** may mean 'the tortoise-mother' or 'the mother deity of the deep'. In either sense her aquatic association cannot be doubted. Yamuna, a recognised river-deity, has been depicted as riding a tortoise in some ancient sculpture.² Darai might be a local variation of the same deity. Originally perhaps she was worshipped by the fishing people as the fertilising deity of the water to ensure multiplication of fish so that they could catch them in abundance. This fertilising attribute, initially confined to the aquatic region, gradually gave her scope to expand her domain and ultimately she became a mother goddess capable of bestowing children on a votary. "The custom may have arisen from the belief that water-spirits are the bestowers of life and fertility, whose kindly gifts of rain from above and springs from below produce pasture for the cattle and fruits for the service of man ....... As authors of fertility in general, it is in accordance with the working of the primitive mind that these water spirits should come to be regarded as the bestower of offspring."³

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². Two such images, found at Ambari, are preserved in Gauhati Museum.

It is difficult to conjecture as to why services by the eunuch-priest form an essential part of Darai worship. Mention may be made of some ancient Mediterranean and West-Asian practices that appear relevant in this context. At least three mother goddesses, the Greek Artemis, the Roman Cybele and the Syrian Astarte were used to be ministered to by eunuch-priests. These priests were not natural eunuchs. To enter into the services of these mother-deities, able-bodied males used to castrate themselves. Frazer gives a lively account of the festival of Astarte which inspired even the reluctant onlookers to join the fraternity of the eunuch priests. "While the flutes played, the drums beat, and the eunuch priests slashed themselves with knives, the religious excitement gradually spread like a wave among the crowd of onlookers, and many a one did that which he little thought to do when he came as a holiday spectator to the festival. For man after man, his veins throbbing with the music, his eyes fascinated by the sight of the streaming blood, flung his garments from him, leaped forth with a shout,

4. Maria Leach (ed.), The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, p. 352
and seizing one of the swords which stood ready for the purpose, castrated himself on the spot. "These goddesses of fertility, according to Fraser, "required to receive from their male ministers, .. the means of discharging their beneficial functions; they had themselves to be impregnated by the life-giving energy before they could transmit it to the world."

Darai may be regarded as a local parallel of these celebrated mother-goddesses. The orgy that accompanies Darai worship resembles closely the festival of Astarte. Perhaps she too was initially ministered to by the castrated males. Natural eunuchs perhaps substituted them when necessity arose to abandon the cruel practice of emasculation. It may not be insignificant that the tortoise is sacrificed to Darai by chopping off its head from the body. The head of a tortoise bears a crude resemblance to the male genital. Such sacrifice might be a substitution for an earlier custom in which the votary or votaries used to emasculate themselves as in the practice prevalent in Syria in connection with the festival of Astarte.

(c)

The Qurais or the eunuchs also perform the recital of Manasamangala (locally called Padmapuran) on the
occasion of Manasa worship. The recital is composed of songs, dances and instrumental music in which the Mridanga or tabour plays a dominant role. The Gurmì, dressed in female attire, plays the role of the chief performer. Though not free from occasional obscenity, the Gurmì here displays better taste and artistic acumen. He sings the songs composed by renowned composers of Manasamangala, like Narayandev, Dwija Bangsidas, Shasthibar Dutta. The dance here maintains a steady rhythm to the accompaniment of the beat of the Mridanga and there is an effort on the part of the Gurmì to imitate by his movements the zigzag course which a snake usually takes. While dancing, the Gurmì undulates two chamaras (a kind of hand-fan made from the tuft of the cow-tail) with his hands, the significance of which is obscure. It may be mentioned that the Pala dancers of Orissa and Ojapali dancers of Assam both used chamaras the same way. Since the chamar is made of the tails of a special kind of cattle called chamri (yak), which is available only in the Himalayan region, it might have some remote association with the Tibeto-Burman people.

It is not clear as to why in this region the recital of Manasamangal becomes more or less a monopoly of the Gurmìs. A plausible reason may be that there is a growing
tendency among the common people to equate Darai and Manasa. Actually often people use the term Darai-Bishahari to denote one and the same deity. There are instances where Darai has been actually worshipped in the image of Manasa; in some cases on the occasion of Darai worship, both the images of Manasa and Darai are being installed. The popular Manasa myth ascribes an aquatic birth to Manasa. Also she has been described as a sister of Basuki, the lord of the netherworld. The myth of Jalo and Malo describes how Manasa became a deity of fishermen. So, Darai being a deity associated with water and fishermen is likely to be absorbed by the more dominant cult of Manasa. Rather it goes to the credit of the inner vitality of her cult that Darai still retains her separate identity. However the participation of the Gurmis in the recital of Manasamangal suggests that the process of amalgamation of these two cults has attained considerable progress.

(d)

Now-a-days, the number of eunuchs willing to take up the professional life of the Gurmi is on the decline. So their trade (the recital of Manasamangal) is being fast

taken up by another class of people known as the Ojha. Originally Ojhas were the village magicians, believed to be capable of curing snake-bite. Naturally, as ardent devotees of the snake-deity, they have a special claim to perform such a recital. Their performance is in toto an imitation of that of the Gurmis, which even includes wearing of female attire. It is noteworthy that the Pala dancers of Orissa also wear female dress. In South India, the Mala Pujaris, the recognised priests of a local mother-deity, also dress themselves in female costume while performing the worship. In far off regions of Tahiti and British Guinea some tribal priests throughout their life put on women's dress and act as such.

The facts mentioned here tend to indicate a process of evolution. Perhaps initially it was customary for some ancient deities with fertilising traits to be worshipped by priestesses; gradually their place has been taken over first by emasculated males and then by natural eunuchs, and a present these eunuchs are being replaced by normal

7. H. Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, p. 150
10. Merline Stone, *The Paradise Papers*, pp. 64-65
males dressed in female attire. G. Glotz while examining the position of women in the religious life of ancient Gete puts forward similar suggestion. "The priestesses long presided over religious practices. Woman was the natural intermediary with divinities, the greatest of whom was the woman deified. Host of objects represent the priestesses at their duties....the participation of men in the cult was, like the association of a god with a goddess, a late development. Their part in the religious ceremonies was always a subordinate one, even part in the king became the high priest of the bull. As if to extenuate their encroachment and to baffle the evil spirits to whose power this act has exposed them, they assumed for divine services the priestly costume of women."11

II. Dhamail
(a)

While discussing Surya vrata, some traits of Dhamail have already been discussed. It is a combination of dance and song performed on the occasion of marriage, annapra- shana (the first rice-feeding ceremony of a baby) and a number of other ceremonies in which a good number of women assemble. It is the most popular folk recital of

11. G. Glotz in The Aegean Civilization, 1925; quoted from Merlin Stone, The Paradise Papers, pp. 64-65
the region and is enjoyed by the participants and onlookers alike.

Normally ten to fifteen women form a circle when the dance starts. All of them at a time take a step forward to make the circle smaller and instantly step back to restore the original circle. With a forward movement they bend their body downward and swing back to normal position with the backward movement. At the same time, each action is accompanied by a side-step towards the right to make the circle moving. The dance starts in a slow motion which gradually attains a faster pace to be ended with some very quick speedy movements. In addition to vocal music, the participants maintain rhythm with the clapping of hands.

Dhamail retains some remnants of the tribal past of the local rural population. A group dance in which old and young women participate freely, irrespective of their age or marital status under an open sky and where expertise or specialisation is never considered as a pre-requisite, it may be presumed that it has an unsophisticated origin. Actually an observer cannot help comparing Dhamail with Santhali dance, for both have a number of common features. Particularly, forward and backward movements, side steps and bending of the body are common features of a Santhali female dance.
Dhamail songs, it is apparent, underwent a change with the advent of Vaishnavism. At present, these songs centre round the love episode of Krishna and Radha. But this theme appears quite alien to the composition of the dance since the movements and actions of the latter do not express or reflect anything which might have even a remote association with the myth of Radha and Krishna. Hence Dhamail furnishes us with the typical example of a hybrid art-form whose one part has retained its original features whereas the other part gave way to an alien influence.

(b)

Conjecture as to the origin of the term Dhamail reveals some interesting and significant facts. Dhamail is perhaps a local corruption of the word Dhamali, a medieval Bengali word used in Chandidasa’s Srikrishna-kirtan to denote fun or jest. Subsequently, the word has been abandoned from the Bengali vocabulary and it is not being used in modern Bengali composition. But in Assamese language the word dhemali is widely prevalent to denote fun, jest, sport and romping. In this language, the word
also bears a special technical meaning. An Assamese Satriya dance is preceded by two preliminary recitals termed Saru Dhemal and Bar Dhemal (short performance and long performance). It appears that in old eastern Indian languages, the word dhemal/dhemal/dhemal was used to denote a wide range of human activities which includes fun, jest, sport, romping, dance and some other means of recreation. Due to some unknown reasons the word has been lost completely from the vocabulary of Bengal proper. But in the local dialects of Cachar and Sylhet the word retains a crippled existence whereas in Assamese it is being used still to-day retaining most of its original denotation.

III. Bou-nach

(a)

Bou-nach is at present almost an extinct folk-dance. According to village elders in earlier days it was compulsory for a new bride to display her skill in this dance before the women inmates on her first arrival at her father-in-law's house. Barring a very few exceptions, the custom is no longer prevalent now-a-days, However,

12. Dr. Biren Dutta, Principal, Pandu College, gave this information
some local enthusiasts of folk culture have taken interest in its revival. In some remotest pockets of the district, a few elderly women still have a first-hand knowledge of the dance and from them they collected materials and some girls are being coached to perform the dance on the stage. So, even if their attempt succeeds, the dance will live as a stage art cut off from its original association and significance. Either way, the days of Bou-nach as a ritual dance are numbered.

Bou-nach is a solo dance. The performer, i.e. the bride, dressed in her new bridal attire, stands in the open courtyard surrounded by her newly-gained female relations. She keeps her feet together on a Kamalasana (lotus-designed carpet cover) beneath which some abir (red powder) is placed. At the end of the dance, the cover is removed. It is expected that out of this handful of abir a perfect dancer will depict a design of a lotus with the measured strokes of her feet. This dance begins in a low key keeping conformity with the natural shyness of a newly-wedded bride. Throughout the dance, the bride keeps her heels together though her feet expands and shrinks in the fashion of a pair of scissors. She swings her body to face each portion of the encircling spectators,
i.e., using her heels as the only support, she makes repeated rounds with her body. All along, her palms manifest the blossoming of a lotus—closing and opening alternately. The dance attains considerable speed at its final stage when the apparent shyness of the bride is completely lost. Bou-nach is accompanied by songs of secular theme that helps in maintaining a steady rhythm.

(b)

Being a solo dance Bou-nach is obviously a product of the post-tribal society when a break had been effected between the performer and the spectator. In tribal community dances, where everybody has a right to participate irrespective of one's skill or ability, such a demarcation is impossible. Bou-nach is not merely a recreation, it is an art-form to be learnt and cultivated and there is a set standard of measuring the skill and degree of attainment of its performer. The society in which such a dance flourished might have attained a cultural level where artistic refinement was not altogether unknown.
It is believed in the locality that the origin of Bou-nach is directly associated with the Manasa legend which bears a tremendous influence on the rural masses. The legend narrates how the dancing skill of Behula was instrumental in bringing back the life of her dead husband Lakshminar. So it is expected that each bride should have a fair knowledge of dancing so that she can deal with a similar situation. While the theory gives a plausible explanation as to the origin of the dance, the fact remains that a folk-dance cannot be retained by a community only on the basis of a legendary tale if it does not have a root in the soil. In this context, it should be remembered that the Charyyapada mentions a domini (a woman of a lower caste) dancing on a lotus. Devoid of allegory, the domini dance bears close resemblance with Bou-nach which tends to depict a lotus with movements of the feet. Perhaps Bou-nach is a ramification of the indigenous variety of a solo dance that flourished in eastern India in ancient times particularly amongst the people of the lower strata of the society. The Manasa legend might have added a new justification to this dance and helped its survival.