Chapter XI

FOLK-DRAMA, FOLK-DANCE AND FOLK-MUSIC

I Folk-drama

A very important ingredient of the cultural build-up of the district consists of the indigenous folk-plays. Not only are there full-scale dramatic performances popular in the different parts of the district, but there are also a number of other institutions that contain parts with a distinctly dramatic character. These latter can easily be identified as semi-dramatic institutions. Such dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions represent a distinctive art form which has been popular in these regions since a long time past.

Of the two categories of dramatic institutions, the full-fledged folk-play is represented by the Kushan-gan, the Pala-gan or Dotra-gan, the Bhari-gan or Bhao-gan, etc. while the semi-dramatic elements are contained in the ritualistic mimetic performances connected with Padmapuran or Marai-gan, Kati Puja and Charak Puja, etc.

(a) Kushan-gan

The most important as well as popular folk-plays of Goalpara are those that are known by the name Kushan-gan. The origin of the term Kushan is not known for certain. Different explanations are

2. In the dialects of these parts, the word gān has two connotations. Ordinarily it means a song. But it also means a play or dramatic performance. Thus, such formations as Kushan-gān, Pala-gān and Bhari-gān mean particular types of plays. Even a modern jātra performance is called jātra-gān. This particular connotation of the word is also found in the dialects of Kamrup.
put forward; but the most plausible explanation is that it has been derived from Kusha, one of the two sons of Rama, who are said to have been the first singers of the Ramayana under Valmiki's training. It is said that in the past the Kushān parties drew their themes exclusively from the Ramayana. Many people of the older generation still call it Rābān-gān, Rābān being a corruption from Ramayana. The argument in favour of the above explanation gains additional strength when we take note of the mode of presenting Kushān (or Kushāne) plays in North Bengal where the practice is for two boys to take the main part in the singing of the narrative. The two boys are said to represent Lava and Kusha, recalling a very ancient mode of presenting the Ramayana.1

Kushān plays are presented by semi-professional troupes consisting of about fifteen to twenty people, including grown up men and boys. These persons are generally drawn from the peasantry. They are normally engaged in agriculture or some such occupation but train themselves up in their spare time and give performances when invited, especially during winter when they have plenty of free time and also the demand for such entertainment is great.

Every Kushān troupe is organised under a leader who is the principal singer, director and manager, all rolled into one. He is

   In some parts of North Bengal the term Abāyan-gān is also to designate this form of folk-plays. Abāyan is a corruption of Ramayana. — See S. K. Bhattacharya : Uttar Banger Sahitya O Sanskriti, pp.181-182.
called mul or moul in some parts and gitāl or gidāl in others. Of course, mul or moul is the terms applied to the leading artist in any such singing or dramatic troupe. Gitāl or gidāl is also a general term to designate an expert singer. Sometimes a person who has distinguished himself as a leading Kushān artiste earns the title of kushāni.

The mul or gitāl in a Kushān play invariably carries during a performance a small one-stringed bowing instrument called benā with his he accompanies the singing. Benā-playing is such a distinguishing characteristic of Kushan plays that they are sometimes called Benā-gān.1

Dohāri/Dowāri: Next to the mul or gitāl, the dohāri or dowāri performs the most important function in a Kushān play. The term is obviously related to the term dohār which in standard Assamese colloquial means an assistant singer or the chorus of a song. The function of the dohāri or dowāri in a Kushān play is to act as the principal assistant of the leader, and he has to be adept at singing and dancing. Besides, the dowāri also helps the leader in conducting dramatic dialogues which he makes lively with his home-spun humour. In fact, in the present form of the art, the most sought after quality in a dowāri is his capacity to make the people laugh by the introduction of humours sequences, by witty dialogues or even by buffoonery. Often the dowāri dominates the show and it is not infrequently that a famous dowāri proves to be a greater draw than even a well-known mul.

1. It appears that in North Bengal the term Benā-Kushān is also current. - Ibid.
Pail: The pails are the assistants (c.f. Assamese pāli) of whom there are usually several in a troupe. Their main function is to provide the choral support to the singing of the mul by repeating the refrain and to maintain the continuity in the singing of the narrative by putting in such pieces as ṣa ṇā etc. at the end of every movement. The chief among the pails are the dāinā pāil and the bāwā pāil; the dāinā pāil is the principal singing assistant while the bāwā pāil's normal function is to play the small cymbals.

Chengra: Chengra in the local dialect means a boy, and the chengṛas in a Kushān play, generally numbering four or five, are boys dressed as female dancers. They also take part in singing, and occasionally in acting, when dramatic pieces with female characters are introduced. But their chief function is to dance, and usually they go on dancing almost throughout the performance.

Bain: A bāin or bāyen is an instrument-player, and bāines in a Kushan play provide instrumental accompaniment, chiefly with the khol.

(ii) Mode of Presentation

A Kushān performance is generally organised on the occasion of a puja or some other ceremony. Kushān plays are big attractions at fairs held in connection with festivals especially during the winter months. The custom is for the organisers to arrange for a performance with the payment of some advance (bāinā) to the troupe. Besides board and lodging, the party is paid an amount depending on the resources of the organisers and the popularity enjoyed by the troupe.
The performance generally starts late in the evening and sometimes continues throughout the night, the arrangement for lighting being made with high-powered lamps.

The stage: A Khushān play needs no raised platform for a stage. It is usually takes place in a pandal put up in the open. At the centre of the pandal is kept a circular space called Āsar where the Bāins and the Pāils sit. Also, when a performer has no particular function to perform, he takes his seat here. On the whole, the Āsar serves as some sort of a green-room during a performance except for the make-up which is done earlier in any convenient place. The audience sits all around the Āsar leaving a space of about six to eight cubit between the Āsar and themselves. This ring-shaped space is the stage where the play is performed.

The performance starts with an invocation to Saraswati to grace the Āsar and to bless the performance. The participating artists take their respective positions after making obeisance to the Āsar and the assembly. This is called Āsar-bandana and only after this is the play introduced.

First comes the mul who, bendā in hand, leads the singing, while he keeps up a circular movement in the ring-shaped stage. Next to him comes the dowāri and last of all the chengrās; they all follow the mul and give him support in the singing. While the dowāri and the chengrās maintain a dancing movement, the mul himself maintains a relaxed and restrained posture. 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 the speed which is normally slow, but occasionally the movement...
becomes faster and at particular moments the artistes are seen to circle the stage at a tremendous speed.

The story of the play mainly proceeds through the singing of narrative songs which, however, does not continue without pause. Every now and then, there is a break or interlude of some kind or other in the narrative singing. Short breaks are sometimes meant for the introduction of some song-and-dance number. Frequently also there are short explanatory dialogues between the mul and the dowari. This is called bhangti dewā. Sometimes there are longer breaks with regular dramatic sequences in which the same set of artistes take part in different roles. For example, in a play based on the story of King Harishchandra, the mul may take the role of the Harishchandra's father, the dowari may become the king himself and one of the chengrās may appear as queen Shaibya, and so on. There is no set script for such a sequence and the acting is on the whole extempore although the overall pattern is previously arranged and some preparations are also made. The sequence is based on some episode in the story of the play but the dowari generally adds a comic touch to it. Sometimes he also presents, with the co-operation of others, purely farcical pieces. These dramatic breaks are called ghāṭ. Kushan performances in which there is provision for regular acting with appropriate make-up and other accessories are called ghāṭ-bāndhā Kushān.

Pavār and Khemtā : As mentioned above, the interpolation of short interludes into the narrative singing is often meant for song-and-dance numbers of which there are two types, pavār and khemtā. In fact pavārs are an adjunct of all long narrative songs. But in Kushān plays they constitute an additional attraction as their selection helps
to project particular moods at particular points of the plays. There are various types of payārs but the majority of the popular Kushān payārs are those depicting love and yearning. Khemtās are on the other hand light and crisp songs, of the chatkā type, that are introduced to break the monotony of the narrative and to provide relief to the audience especially when the tempo of the performance seems to be sagging. Such songs generally have no link with the prevailing mood of the play and are accompanied by vigorous and even provocative dancing by the chengrēs. The demand for a khemtā may even come from a bored and tired audience (with such shouts as 'Let's have khemtā, let's have khemtā') and it is customary to respond to it. It is an excellent example of rapport between the artistes and the audience.

(iii) Dress, Make-up and Language

Dress and make-up: The dress and make-up of a Kushān play are a simple and unobtrusive. Generally the mul wears a dhoti of some length with its fore-part folded and hanging in front; he also has a shirt, and a wrapper, folded lengthwise around his neck, the two ends hanging on both sides in front. The dowāri has a shorter dhoti, worn in the fashion of an average peasant and a vest or a similar short-sleeved shirt. As he also acts as a clown he sometimes dons an outlandish headgear. The mul and the dowāri, however, use no make-up. It is only the chengrēs who are more or less elaborately and showily dressed and made-up. They wear a petticoat, veils and gaudy tinsel ornaments, apart from wigs and false breasts.

Language: It is said that all the proceedings of a Kushan play were formerly conducted in the local dialects. However, the language
used in much of the performance today is a patois of the local dialects and Bengali. This is particularly true of the narrative pieces and some of the dramatic dialogues. The comic scenes, however, are always in the local dialects; so are the payārs and khemtās.

(b) Pālā-gān/Dotrā-gān/Kechchā-gān

The Kushān is the most important of the folk-plays found in Goalpara not only because it is the most popular form of such plays but also because it is the archetype of a whole lot traditional folk-plays of this region. Thus Kushān is the genre that may be said to include several other types of folk-plays. Particularly the Pālā-gān or Dotrā-gān has so much in common with Kushān that laymen generally use the single term, Kushān, to designate both the forms.

The points of difference between the Kushān plays and the Pālā or Dotrā-gān plays are subtle but significant:

(1) The theme of a Kushān play is drawn from the epics and has at least an indirect religious appeal. In a Pālā or Dotrā play, however, this religious aspect is absent and it is built up on a popular tale. A tale in the local dialect is called kechchā (from Urdu qissā, a story) and hence the name Kechchā-bandī. And since it also involves the recitation of a popular tale in a drama form, it is also called Pālā-gān or Pālā-bandī gān, the word pālā in the local dialect standing for a play.

(2) Another important difference between the Kushān and the Pālā or Dotrā play is that while the playing of the one-stringed benā by the leader is a peculiarity of the former, the leader of the latter
has in its place a dotrā (or dotārā). This is the reason why this particular type of plays has the alternative name Dotrā-gān—just to mark it out from the Kushān.

(3) There are also some differences in the modes of presentation, especially in the musical structures of the two forms.

But on all other points such as the manner of composition, the formation of the troupes, the different functionaries and their respective functions, the techniques of singing, dancing and acting, Pālā-gān or Dotrā-gān form has practically no difference with the Kushān-gān form. There are the mul, the dowārī, chengrās and the bāins performing in the same manner, the same type of stage, a similar technique of singing the narratives and of introducing dramatic and musical breaks; even the dress and make-up are identical.

(c) Khārā-tāli, Boisnā-tāli

The folk-plays, especially of the Keetcha-bandī type, may be presented in two different techniques. The first, known as khārā-tāli or tāli, involves the elaborate full-scale presentation as described above. In it the main players are on their feet (khārā = standing), moving, dancing and gesticulating, and they are assisted by a number of other singers and instrumentalists. In the other technique all the inessential accessories like the pāils, the bāins and the chengrās are dispensed with. Only the mul and the dowārī sing the narrative in the sitting posture, whence the name boisnā-tāli (bois=to sit). In the boisnā-tāli form of presentation, there is no regular acting as in the other form, but the two singers occasionally break into dramatic
dialogues. 1

It may be pointed out here that in the western parts of the district, the practice of presenting tales with musical and dramatic embellishments is very common. Every such tale is known as a gan or jatra but that does not mean that each represents a distinctive dramatic form. In fact, each follows the pattern of folk-plays we have described above, with certain variations here and there. Thus, Nayanshari depicts the story of an unusual love-affair between a young widow and a mendicant, Manai-Jatra narrates the story of two brothers, Manai and Tanai, Char-Jugi-gan is built upon the theme of the four stages of human life from infancy to old age, and so on. The materials of some of these are drawn from the Muslim society and often the artistes themselves belong to that community. Formerly, dramatic representation of jari songs, narrating the story of Karbala, was common among the Muslims. The playing of the shanai, besides the khol and the cymbals, used to be a speciality of these performances. Sometimes the Kushan style was also followed in presenting the story. Another pala that used to be popular among the Muslims is Satyapir. But such performances are fast going out practice and are seldom to be seen today.

(d) Bhari-gan and Bhao-gan

In the southern and eastern parts of the district is found another type of folk-plays called Bhari-gan (in the south) or Bhao-gan.

1. In many areas of the eastern parts of the district north of the Brahmaputra, all folk-plays of the Kushan or dotra variety are called khara-tali, probably because of the fact that only the khara-tali mode of presentation is prevalent there and the boisna-tali mode is practically unknown.

2. T. C. Khakhliari: 'Goalpara Oja-Pali Aru Bhari-gan' in Ramdhenu, Year 12, No. 4.
(in the east). They are said to have been widely popular in these areas in the past and their popularity is at present at a low ebb and the whole institution is now in a moribund state. While Bhāri-gān performances are still occasionally held in some villages in the south, practically no Bhāo-gān performances are to be seen in the east now-a-days.

The Bhāri-gān plays also derive their themes from the epics. Here also there is a principal singer and a number of assistants, the former being known as mul gāoniyā and the latter as pālā, pāli or doharyā. Here also the performance leans more heavily on narrative singing than on acting. In a Bhāri-gān, the gāoniyā, with a whisk in his hand, leads the singing with appropriate steps and gestures and the doharyās join in chorus and also provide the musical accompaniment. There is no dowāri and the comic relief is provided by some outlandishly made up characters called ketuas. There is not much dialogue, while the story proceeds with the singing of songs and the characters have resort mainly to action and gesture. The comic scenes with humorous dialogues that are inserted from time to time generally have no link with the story of the play.

A striking feature of the Bhāri plays is the use of masks by many characters. Some characters like Rama, Lakshmana, Sita are customarily not supposed to wear masks, whereas in case of such characters as Ravana, Hunuman, Jambuvan masks are essential. We have already mentioned the ketuas. They not only use an incongruous type of make-up but also wear the most odd-looking masks, and they indulge in all kinds of clownish pranka to make the people laugh. Sometimes the ketuas enter the stage following Ravana carrying torches in their hands.
The masks are made by the members of the troupes themselves with wood and tree-barks.

Another interesting feature of the Bhāri plays is the awe and reverence with which those engaged in them regard the whole process. For example, the masks used in the plays are believed to be possessed by spirits and new masks are used only after formally worshipping goddess Kali. When not in use, the masks are kept in a house with care; and earthen lamps are regularly lighted in the house, failing which, it is believed, the spirits residing in the masks fight amongst themselves during the night. In some places, the faith in the sacredness of the institution is so deep-seated that no other performance except a Bhari-gan is allowed within the precincts of a thān (holy place) for fear of defiling its sanctity. It is also to be noted that in a Bhari gan performance no modernistic furniture is used. For example, a king is given a wooden mortar to sit on and not a chair, as in a modern jātra. Even kerosene oil is not used for lighting.

Although the etymology of the terms Bhāri-gān and Bhāo-gān is not definitely known, it is most likely that they are related to bhāorīyā and bhāo respectively. Bhāorīyas are professional song and drama performers popular in Kamrup and west Darrang, whose acting is known as bhāo. The relation between the Bhāri-gān or Bhāo-gān with the Bhāorīyā troupes is suggested not only by the similarity of the sounds but also by the closeness of the forms which we discuss later in this chapter.
(e) Goālani Jāṭrā

This is another type of crude folk-play in which masks are freely used. These masks are made of the hard crust of the bottle-gourd.

The Goālani Jāṭrā is by no means a regular dramatic institution. There is neither any well-integrated story nor any standard mode of performance. It consists of some loosely-knit dramatic scenes among which the episodes of a milk-maid (goālani) occupy the place of importance. Hence the name Goālani Jāṭrā. The following gives a rough idea about the nature of scenes that are enacted.

1) Bherākānta is anxious to get married. The marriage takes place. But to his dismay and consternation he discovers that the bride is only a boy made up as a girl.

2) A man comes to a household seeking a job and is engaged as a servant. He is not good at any of the household chores. But he claims that he knows the art of curing patients. A girl of the family has an unwanted pregnancy. The new servant helps her in having an abortion.

3) The milkman and the milkmaid go to the dairy farm (bāthān). They have an encounter with a barkāndāj, a petty official of the zemindar. Then appears a buffalo-herd, dotārā in hand, and sings moishāli songs.

There are also other characters, both human and animal. The animal characters like the tiger, the bear and the buffalo are particularly interesting as they appear with masks. The actors have some...
sort of mutual understanding but the dialogues are by no means previously set and are practically impromptu.

Aside from these, two other forms of folk-drama, leotâni and jurir-gân, are said to have been prevalent in some parts of the district in the past but neither is alive today and practically nothing is definitely known about their nature.¹

II Semi-Dramatic Institutions: Dramatic Material Incorporated in Some Religious and Ritualistic Performances

Padmapurân or Mârâi performances have much in common with the important folk-drama form: there is a leading singer (mul or gîtâl) who carries a whisk. There are a number of assistants (pâîl or pâîlê) who provide both the choric support and the musical accompaniment. And there is also the provision of breaks (bhângtî) for dramatic dialogues between the leader and the principal assistant.

But there is generally no regular acting, only some symbolic representations of episodes of the story. For example, Lakhindar's death and his return to life are represented respectively by placing the whisk on the ground and then lifting it up. However, in the Mârâi-gân performances of South Goalpara, such dramatic representations are much more realistic and elaborate. For example, the return of the merchant Chândo to his home after the disaster of his fleet is enacted most vividly. A man made up as Chândo with jute hair and beard appears on the stage. There ensues a scene in which the

¹ See editorial article in Souvenir of Asam Sâhitya Sabha, 39th Session, Dhubri, pp.154-155.
deodhani takes up the role of Saneka. The discomfiture of Chāndo, who is most shabbily treated by Saneka as she fails to recognise him, provides much amusement to the audience.¹ In some South Goalpara Marāi performances again, the deodhani also gives mimetic representation of such things as a bird building her nest, laying her eggs, and so on.

Some dramatic elements are also to be found in the Kāti Puja rituals as mimetic acting also forms an important part of them.² For example, in that part of the rituals known as Kāti-sijjan (birth of Kāti), the young wife who offers the puja impersonates Kāti's mother. A pair of bananas and a pair each of areca nuts and betel leaves are made into a bundle with a piece of cloth and placed in her lap. The bundle is supposed to represent the foetus. The growth of the foetus from mouth to mouth is represented by the tying of a loose knot for each month, and the delivery of the baby by the loosening of all the knots together with a pull. The bringing of the midwife/help in the delivery of the child, the bringing of a barber for the ceremonial removal of uncleanness etc., are all gone through with the progress of the songs narrating these acts.

The most interesting dramatic sequence comes in the ḍag newā part of the rituals during which the whole agricultural operation is enacted through mime. A woman dressed up as a man simulates ploughing with an imaginary plough, two small girls on all fours taking the place of the bullocks. Suddenly comes the roaring of a tiger

1. T. G. Khakhlari: op.cit.
and in no time the bullocks are lifted by a tiger upon which the 'villagers' come in a large group with weapons and rescue the bullocks. After that the operations like ploughing, weeding etc. are gone through. Then comes the ceremonial reaping. The woman for whom the blessing of a son is being sought, kneels down before the puja platform and cuts a sheaf of corn, earlier planted there, amidst the auspicious sounds made by the woman. After this comes the simulation of thrashing, winnowing, storing, etc. Sometimes even the selling of the grain is enacted. There appears an 'upcountry' trader to whom the grain is sold after much haggling and haggling.

Last of all comes the badul hara part in which the women imitate, with small specially made bows and arrows, the action of chasing bats that are supposed to represent the enemies of the crops.

Mimetic dancing is also found among the tribal people of the district. For example, the Kokrajhar Bodos have the interesting Māgāine-Mochānāi or Rice-planting dance. 'This is a mimetic affair performed in the month of Ahar and starts with a ceremonial visit to the field with ploughs and harrows, rice, rice-beer, and even the chillum. While the men do ritual ploughing the women follow on with ritual planting. But some of the details, often comic, are throwing off of leeches with spittle or tobacco chewing and feigning fatigue and hunger. The men and women all the while go on singing accompanied by the siphung flute.'

In some parts of eastern Goalpara, there is also the institution of Bachati signifying the fifth-day birth rites of Krishna,

in which women play the roles of Yashoda, the gopinis, and so on.

The ritual dancing and 'playing' that accompany the performance of Charak puja also contain considerable material with a dramatic character. Apart from the awe-inspiring dance sequence featuring goddess Kali, god Mahadeva and their retinue of goblins, which in itself has the character of a ballet, the party of players perform regular humorous skits. Given below is the description of a typical skit.

The players simulate fishing with an imaginary net and pretend as if the fishes have proved elusive. Then the main player almost breaks down exclaiming that an enormous rui fish has escaped from his clutches. In despair, he gives up fishing and goes home to his wife.

At this point, another member of the party impersonates the wife. (It may be pointed out that no player takes any special make-up and everybody appears in whatever dress he is in). The fisher asks 'her' about the dishes she would have prepared had he been able to catch the fish that escaped. The wife naturally points out the futility of doing this but on his insistence casually names a few dishes, one of which is an alkaline preparation (seka). At this the 'fisher' gets furious as he cannot tolerate the idea of his precious fish being spoilt with alkali, and gives her a sound thrashing. The flabbergasted wife leaves him and goes to her brother's place. Our friend the fisher gives a lecture on the infidelity of women and sets out, ostensibly to try his luck at trade. But on this pretext he actually goes to his brother-in-law's house. The brother-in-law, who was looking for an opportunity to avenge the injustice done to his sister,
beats him up on the plea that he had berthed his boat at the for­
mer's ghát. On his protestation that he was unjustly beaten since
he did not have any boat, the brother-in-law explains that he had
invited this fate by beating his wife for spoiling a non-existent
fish.

It is true that such folk-plays and skits have neither
technical polish nor refinement of taste when judged by modern stan­
dards. They are naturally characterised by what may be called rusti­
city and they often betray elements of vulgarity. But the vigour and
zestfulness of their presentation make for a directness of appeal
which amply compensates for the lack of polish, for which, in any case,
the ordinary villager cares little. The ungrudging manner in which
they are accepted by the village-folk and the wide popularity they
enjoy even in these days of the cinema and the professionally compe­
tent jātra shows the measure of attractiveness of these folk-plays.

We have learnt that there were a few puppet-show parties in
a few villages in the eastern parts of the district till some years
back. But from all accounts it appears that not a single party is
active today and the institution is as good as dead.

III Some Interesting Parallels

The more important dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions
of Goalpara, viz., Kushān-gān, Bhāri-gān, and Mārāi-gān, etc. have so
much of similarity with comparable institutions of Kamrup and Darrang
that even a casual study of these similarities do not fail to make
one conscious of the existence of a common traditional pattern.)
In Kamrup and Darrang there are no independent folk-plays like the Kushān, the Pālā-gān and the Bhāri-gān but a lot of dramatic material is incorporated in the popular institution called Ojā-Pāli and the shows of the drummer parties (Dhuliyā). The Kushan-gān, the Bhāri-gān, the Mārāi-gān and the Ojā-Pāli are particularly close to one another in that they are all popular institutions of folk-entertainment combining singing, dancing and acting; in all of them there is a leading singer and number of assistants and instrument players; generally there is also a principal assistant with specific functions; dramatic dialogues and burlesque-type skits are an important ingredient of all of them.

An analysis of the nature of the dramatic elements of the Ojā-Pāli and Dhuliyā performances will bring out the closeness of their techniques with those of the dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions of Goalpara.

The Ojā-Pāli parties belong to three different categories—

- the Suknānni, Byāh-goā and Kāmāyan-goā.

The Suknānni parties are those that recite compositions from Nārāyanadeva (Sukavi Nārāyana) based on the story of Manasā and Chāndo. A most interesting feature of their performance is the occasional introduction of breaks with dramatic dialogues between the principal singer (Ojā) and his chief or 'right-hand' assistant (dāina-pāli). The dāina-pāli makes them lively by adding comic touches. On some occasions when the Beulā-Lakhindar episode is recited, one man (not necessarily of the Ojā-Pāli), appearing as Lakhindar, remains aside; when the padas relating to the biting of Lakhindar by the snake are recited, the man falls prostrate on the ground and becomes senseless
as if dead ... He remains in that position till the Padas, relating to the recovery of the life of the dead Lakhindar, are cited at last. It is only then that the man in the role of Lakindar rises up ... This resembles a drama scene.¹  

(b) The Byāh-goā parties recite verses from the Puranas and the Mahabharata. They specialise in dancing. However, explanatory dialogues of a dramatic nature are also a special feature of their performances.

(c) Rāmāyana-goā parties, again, recite verses from the Ramayana and apart from the customary explanatory dialogues, they present regular dramatic scenes. A person (generally from behind a curtain) recites verses from the Gīti-Rāmāyana, and persons in different roles appear on the scene, dancing and making various kinds of gesticulations so as to express the meanings of the recitations merely by physical movements and poses.²

'The last two classes are also commonly known as Bhāvariya parties.'³

Some form of drama is also included in the repertoire of the professional parties of drummers of Kamrup and Darrang. They 'not only beat drums and cymbals, but also exhibit varieties of physical feats like the modern circus-parties; at the same time, they exhibit scenes of drama-pieces also often borrowed from the epic stories; sometimes they show rural scenes in a lighter vein in their own dialects,

¹ H. Bhattacharya: Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and the Stage, pp.35-36.
² Ibid., p.36.
³ Ibid.
partly extempore and partly prepared. Again, there are the *Bardhuliya* (a special kind of drummers) parties who during their performances refer to the Rajashuya sacrifice. They for some time, stop beating the drums and open dramatic dialogues, that are often self-composed. ... They make use of paints of powdered rice where necessary, masks of goblins, demons etc.

These are also often called *Bhuliyā-Bhāoriyā* (drummer actors).

(1) Thus is clear that the *Marāi-gān* of Goalpara and the Sukhnandi *Ojā-pāli* of Kamrup and Darrang are practically the same institution with local variations.

(2) The Kushān-gān based on stories from the Puranas and the Mahabharata is comparable to the Byāh-goā form of Ojā-Pāli but while the Kushān is a full scale dramatic institution, the dramatic element in a Byāh-goā performance is limited.

(3) The Rāmāyaṇa-goā form of Ojā-Pāli with different people appearing in the different roles is clearly akin to the Bhāri-gān of Goalpara. Again, the use of masks in Bhāri-gān has its parallel in the Bardhuliya dramatic pieces. The term *bhāoriyā* is generally applied to the actors of these semi-dramatic institutions. This adds weight to the suggestion that *bhāri* could be a corruption of *bhāoriyā*.

1. H. Bhattacharya: *The Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and the Stage*, p.34.
2. Ibid.
3. There are some *bhāoriyās* in Eastern Goalpara also. They specialise in comic songs and mimicry.
Similarly bhāo means acting and bhāo-gān can easily be said to have originally meant 'acting performances'.

From the above it becomes clear that the traditional folk-drama institutions of the Goalpara and Kamrup regions have a common genesis. It must, however, be admitted that the tradition of folk-drama is richer and more vigorous in the former region than in the latter: the Kushān and the Bhāri-gān are more complete forms of folk-play than the dramatic material contained in the Ojā-Pāli and the Dhuliya-Bhaoriya institutions. Again there is nothing comparable to the Pāla-gān and similar popular folk-plays of Goalpara in the Kamrup region.

**Ankiyā-Bhāonā and the Folk-Plays**

Scholars in Assam have pointed to the possibility of the distinctive dramatic form — Ankiyā-Bhāonā — introduced by Sankara-deva, having drawn from the traditional folk-drama institutions. The Ojā-Pāli, the Dhuliya-Bhaoriya and the Pachati institutions of Kamrup and Darrang are mentioned in this connection.¹ The Kushān and other traditional forms of folk-play of the Goalpara region having a fuller dramatic character, there is scope for examining whether there could be a any link between them and the origin and development of the Ankiyā-Bhāonā. Like these folk-plays, the Bhāonā is a combination of singing, dancing and acting; comic sequences are frequently introduced in popular Bhāonā presentations; the use of masks is a very common in Bhāonā performances. These features naturally point to the

affinity of the Bhāona with the Kushān form of folk-play. However, this much is certain that some particular modes of Bhāona presenta-
tion have features that are specialities of the folk-plays of the Goalpara region and are technically different from the regular Bhāona style. For example, the Dhura Bhāona, found in some sattras of Majuli, has the following features that recall the Kushān and other such forms:

(1) The leader of principal performer is called the mul
(2) He carries a whisk
(3) There are a number of assistants who repeat the refrain.
(4) Payār songs are sung much in the same manner as in a Kushān play.

Another form, the Bangāli Bhāona, also has more or less similar features. In Bangāli Bhāona, prevalent specially in the Darrang district till sometime back, there is a leading singer with a whisk and a number of assistants and at certain points 'all the players move round and round in a circular way.' All these features are to be found in the modes of presenting some of the popular dramatic and semi dramatic institutions of the Goalpara region.

IV Folk-Dances

The folk-dances of Goalpara can be broadly divided into two categories: (a) the non-tribal dances and (b) the tribal dances.

(a) The non-tribal dances may again be classified in the following manner:

(1) those having religious or ritualistic significance, which include the Kāti Puja dance, the Kāli-Chandi dance, the Bās Puja and Mādār dances, etc.

(2) Those pertaining to social ceremonies of which the most important is the dance performed in Muslim marriages.

(3) those belonging to the dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions.

Kāti Puja Dance: The Kāti Puja dance is one of the most interesting ritualistic dances performed by women alone. 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, although repetitive, are attractive. Some particular movements with the two hands holding the two ends of a wrapper hanging from the shoulders across the neck recall to mind the movements of the famous bāgurumbā dance of the Bodo maidens. Much mimetic acting is also performed through the Kāti Puja dances.

Another ritualistic dance exclusively performed by women is the Hudum Deo dance but since this ritualistic dance is marked by esoteric practices dominated by eroticism, little is known about its form.

Kāli-Chandi Dance: This is an extremely vigorous and powerful dance performed on the occasion of a Kāli Puja. But its performance on the special occasion of Charak Puja is most effective. The dancer (the deodhā) wears a Kāli-mask. He also carries a huge chopper in his hand. Two whisks attached to his head form the hair and from-
his waist hangs a red petticoat. With this make-up, when the dance is performed in the middle of the night with powerful sweeping steps and jerky movements of the masked face and the chopper-carrying hand — the drummer providing appropriately thunder-like beats in keeping with the steps — the effect is both thrilling and awe-inspiring. Such measured boldness of steps and sharpness of movements are seldom come across in a folk-dance.

There are also some group dances performed as part of the Charak Puja rituals by the ḍeodhā and his party. The steppings and movements of these dances are characterised by careful planning and rehearsals. Such choreographic arrangements in a folk-dance is a rarity.

**Bas Puja and Madar Dances:** These are male group dances performed on the occasion of the Bas Puja and Madar ceremonies respectively. Both are similar in that both are performed with a small decorated bamboo pole held with one hand and pressed on the belly of the dancer, the free hand making gestures in with the various intricate steppings. In a particular variety known as chāṭāli bās, one carrying a decorated harrow (moi) takes the central place and the others dance surrounding him. The instruments used are two types of drums (dhol and karkā) and the flat bell (kāshi). There are different rhythmic patterns called khoshā, bātni, etc.

Comparatively the Madar (Mādārer Bās) dance is much more elaborate and colourful than the Bas Puja dance and is full of manly vigour.

The Marriage Dances: Dancing to the accompaniment of songs is a speciality of Muslim marriages. They are almost like a rituals gone through by women surrounding the bride before the actual marriage rites. The steppings and movements are simple and resemble to some extent those of the Kāti Puja dance. Sometimes some expert dancers also use elaborate symbolic movements in keeping with the sense of the song.

Women sometimes dance similar dances even without any such special occasion. There is for example, a delightful song-and-dance number centring round a 'dancing elephant' in which a girl is made up as an elephant and a number of others join, keeping the 'elephant' at the centre.

The Dances of the Folk-plays: Dancing has an important place in each of the institutions of folk-drama like Kushān, Dotra-gān, etc. In the Kushan form, the doāri and the chengrās keep up a dancing movement almost throughout the performance. These are a puppet-like staccato movements and are not very graceful. Nor are the full scale dances performed with payār and khemtā songs. At least in their present form, they betray the influence of cheap jatra dances. In Bhārī plays, the actors maintain dance-like steps but it is the ketuās who perform full-scale comic dances. Although there is no regular dancing in Padmapurāṇ performances, in some areas the assistants move their feet and swing their bodies in agreement with the rhythmic patterns of the songs.

There are besides, the rhythmic movements of the parties singing Sonārāy, Ori and Bhāluk-nās songs. The capering resorted to by boys made up as bears or wearing masks is also popularly called dance. But there is little of grace or harmony in it.
(b) Tribal Dances

The Bodos are rightly famous for their folk-dances of which there are many varieties. The dances of the Kokrajhar Bodos of Goalpara are particularly famous for their polished brilliance and wealth of colour.

One of the most important dances of the Bodos is the ritual dance of the deodhani performed in the Kherai and Marai pujas. In the Kherai Puja in particular, the deodhani performs numerous dances connected with different rites of worshipping the various god and goddesses. Through these dances the deodhani makes various symbolic representations as riding a horse, jumping on a drum, catching a dragon-fly in a trap, rowing a boat, and so on. The dances are known by such names as garāy dābrāynay, khapri chipnāy, māusā khāuri, sā gālau bānāy gāndoulā bānāy, khāmāo barkhānāy and māusā gelenāi. The chatrāoli is a particularly impressive dance showing the great powers of the goddess of war, Ranachandi, which the deodhani performs carrying a sword and a shield. She even performs the feat of dancing on the sharp edge of a chopper. The deodhani also performs a frenzied dance with vigorous movements of the head, swinging and tossing the dishevelled hair.

One of the most graceful and captivating dances of the Bodos is the famous bagurumbar dance which Bodo maidens dance to relax themselves. It is full of vivacity: and they hop and swing, they bend and unbend themselves; and at times they give the impression of fluttering butterflies, with the two ends of their colourfully designed wrappersons held aloft on both side by their outstretched hands.

Ehaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārir Samaj Āru Samskriti, pp.245-250; Boro-Kachārir Jana-Sahitya, pp.57-58.
The important dances of the Rabhas are ritualistic in nature and are connected with their chief religious and social festivals. The Baikhu dances performed by young men and women are clearly inspired by the fertility concept and have erotic overtones. They have several forms:

(1) Young men and women dance together but grouping themselves separately,

(2) One youth and one maiden dance together holding each other by the waist or by the neck,

(3) One group of young men and another of young women dance side by side, the dancers holding one another by the waist or the neck,

(4) Young men and women dance in separate groups but each group directs its songs at the other.

The Rabhas also have the interesting pharkanti dance performed on the occasion of the elaborate shraddha (pharkanti) ceremony. The pomp and colour of this dance, performed with shields and swords, are most eye-catching. The Rabhas also dance on the occasion of a marriage ceremony.

V Folk-music: Musical Modes and Instruments

(a) Musical Modes

The various types of folk-music of the district have different kinds of melodic and rhythmic patterns. While some of the

Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārīr Samāj Āru Sanskritī, pp.245-250;
Mani Rabha: Chāthār. See Introduction.
musical structures of the eastern parts are more or less akin to those of the contiguous areas of Kamrup, the bulk of the musical modes of the district, especially of the western parts, have a close affinity with those of the neighbouring districts of North Bengal.

The tunes of most of the songs of religious and ritualistic associations have a repetitive and rather monotonous quality. They are also set to simple rhythmic patterns. So it is with the narrative songs of the folk-plays in general. Of course the choral embellishments of such songs add some zest to them. However, considerable variation in both melodic and rhythmic structures are found in the Padmapurān and Māraī-gān songs. Among the songs with a religious or spiritual content, the jhali-māti songs have fairly rich variety and intricacy of musical modes, both melodic and rhythmic.

The songs of female association, like the marriage songs, Shitilār-nām and Gupuni-nām, have simple yet attractive melodies. The marriage songs in particular have a lilting quality. The rhyme-like songs, such as the Ori songs, have elementary musical patterns with a very limited combination of notes.

But the most important and distinctive musical modes of this region are the bhāvāya and the chatkā that are extremely popular in west Goalpara and large areas of North Bengal. They are, as indicated earlier, as much of two types of lyrical compositions as two distinct melodic patterns.

The bhāvāya is characterised by slow and floating movements with a tendency to linger on some particular notes. A sentiment of

1. See Hemamgo Bhaawast 'Lok-Sangiter Nāg-Sadā Riti' in 10th Year, Puja Number.
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 bhāwāiya has some affinity with the bhatikali of East Bengal, it is by no means a variation of the latter as wrongly assumed by some: it is very much of an independent and distinct style.

Many folksongs of Kamrup also have the basic melodic and rhythmic structures of the bhāwāiya and the chatka. We are giving below a few specimen notations of songs of the bhāwāiya and chatka styles:

**Notes:**
- S stands for Sa
- R stands for Re
- G stands for Ga
- g stands for Komal Ga
- M stands for Ma
- D stands for Dha
- n stands for Komal Ni
- S stands for Sa in the higher octave
- n stands for Komal Ni in the lower octave
- P stands for Pa in the lower octave

(i) A typical bhāwāiya melody of Goalpara

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+   O   +   O   
| M P | G - M - P - D P | D - n |
| Nā Kān di sh Nā - Kāndish Re | Bhe 10 wā |
| D n D P | - P D | D M P |
| Pn Dn P | - | - | S S R M | M M M |
| Kā - le | - | - | (Ā re)To r | Bhe 10 wā r |
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(ii) A māut song: an interesting variation of the bhāwāiya type
(iii) A typical chatkā song

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(iv) Another variation of the chatkā type: set to a lyric of the māut theme

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+   O  +   O
D D - D D S' S' S' - N D -
Ga d̄ē - dha re r Pā re - Pā re -
P - - P P M P P N D P P
Re - - O Mo r Mā u te Cha rā y
M - - G R - R R - G G M
Hā - - ti - - Kī Mā - yā Na -
R G G G R S S - - S S S
-gāi le n Mā u t Re - - O To r
S R R R R R M - - G R -
Gā lā y Ra se r Kā - - ti - -
R R - G G M R G G G G R S
Kī Mā - yā Na - gāi le n Mā u t
S - - - - - -
Re r - - - - -
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(b) Musical Instruments

The following are the important musical instruments of Goalpara. Some of them are also popular in North Bengal.¹

(i) Stringed Instruments

The dotārā: Literally meaning two-stringed, the dotārā or dotārā is a four-stringed stroking instrument. The two centre strings separate only at the bridge and provide the tonic note, the first and

fourth strings providing the notes above and below respectively.
The body is shaped from one piece of wood with the belly hollowed out and covered with iguana skin. The strings are of muga silk and the striker is made of ivory or buffalo horn. It is used to accompany different types of songs, specially the bhawaiyas and chattás. It is also the instrument which gives its name to the Dotra-gan form of folk-drama.

The sārinda: It is a bowing instrument. It is also made of one piece wood but is shorter than the dotāra and has a wider base. There are two hollows, the lower one being covered with skin. The strings are made of twined muga threads. The bow is very similar to that of a violin.

The benā: The benā is a one stringed instrument with a wooden cup as the resonator. A bamboo stick passes through the cup. One end of the string is attached to one end of the stick and the other end passes over a bridge placed on the skin covering the cup. It is played with a small bow. It is used almost exclusively in the Kushan type of folk-drama.

The ektārā, the ras-mādli and the tendrā are all one-stringed stroking instruments, not very commonly used. They are generally favoured by the mendicant singer.

(ii) Percussion Instruments

The khol: It is the most commonly used percussion instrument meant for accompaniment. It is used not only in singing the samkritan type of songs but is also essential in such dramatic and semi-
dramatic institutions as the Kushān-gān, the Dotrā-gān and the Padmapurān.

It is an earthen cylinder, fatter at the middle, with one head bigger than the other. Two leather pieces are attached to the two rinds. The bigger end gives the bass sound while the sound given by the other has a higher and sharper pitch.

A peculiar type of khol, known as māti is used in singing Jhāli-māti songs. The cylinder of this khol is not fatter at the middle but it topers gradually from the bigger to the smaller head.

The dhāk: It is a big-size drum with a straight wooden cylinder, both the sides being covered with skin. However, the drummer beats on only one side with two sticks and the other side acts as the resonator. The sound it emits is very strong and sharp. The dhāk is played in such religious ceremonies as Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, etc. But it has a special place in the Kāti Puja and Charak Puja ceremonies. The Kāti Puja dance and the Kāli-Chandi dance cannot be thought of without the playing of the appropriate beats on the dhāk.

The dhol: The dhol is another big drum which is played with a stick on one side and with a hand on the other. Unlike in the dhāk the cylinder slightly bulges towards the middle, is made of thicker wood and the leather used on the beating sides is also heavier. There are bracing cords and metal hooks with which the skins can be loosen and tightened according to need.

The dhol is generally played in combination with the karkā and the shānāi, both described below. The dhol and karkā are also
essential for the Bas Puja and Madarer-Bas ceremonies and the dances of those names.

The karkā: The karkā is a kind of snare drum with a short wooden cylinder, one end being slightly wider than the other. Both ends are covered with skin but only the bigger side is beaten upon with two small sticks. It gives out sharp rattling notes.

In some parts it is called the thertheri and in others tāsi.

The nāgrās: The nāgrās, played in pairs, are like kettle-drums with earthen hemispheres. They are beaten upon with two sticks and are almost exclusively used in the singing of congregational devotional songs of the Assam Vaishnava school.

(iii) The Wind Instruments

The shānāi: It is a wood-wind instrument with a long conical body, to one end of which is fitted a palm-leaf mouthpiece slightly resembling the aboe. It has a nasal and penetrating tone quality. It is played mostly in a dhol-band, particularly in marriages.

The mukan-bāsi: It is a peculiar kind of flute. Apart from a sound-producing device it also has a wind-preserving device because of which a continuous sound can be produced on it. (Thus it is like a small modified version of the bagpipe-like flute used by the snake-charmers). It is made of a bamboo cylinder and the mouthpiece is fitted with a ring-like bamboo attachment of bigger diameter into which wind is constantly blown from the mouth. It is this
which is played with Bāsi-purāṇ songs and some parties also use it to accompany Padmapurāṇ songs. It is also called bām-bāsi by some.

(iv) Cymbals

The juri: The most common type of cymbals are called juri. They are small slightly concave round metal pieces with holes at the centre. Strings are attached to them through the holes. The player twines the strings to his fingers and plays them by striking one with the other, producing sharp notes. They are generally played in combination with the khol. But sometimes they are also played independently to keep time with some songs, say in a boismā-tāli performance of a narrative song.

The khupi-tāl: These are smaller and hollower cymbals used in some parts in singing Marai songs. The player generally ties both the pieces in one hand plays them by striking each other by skilful movements of the hand in the same fashion as in the Oja-Pali of Kamrup and Darrang. This is called khuti-tāl in other parts of Assam.

The ghāu-tāl: They are very big-size cymbals each weighing several pounds and producing very strong clanging and booming sounds. They look like big metal hats. They are used in singing congregational Vaishnava devotional songs in the eastern parts. They are extremely popular throughout the rest of Assam as the bhor-tāl (believed to of Bhot or Tibetan origin).
The **jhalī**: They are peculiar cymbals, bigger than the **juri** and **khupi-tal** and smaller than the **ghau-tal**. But they are almost flat and much thinner. They are used exclusively in singing **jhalī-māti** songs.

(v) **Musical Instruments of the Tribal People**

The important instruments of the Bodos are:

1. The **khām**: a large-size drum beaten on with the hands.
2. The **siphung**: a long bamboo flute with five holes.
3. The **serjā** (also called **serenjā**): the same instrument as the **sārindā** described above.
4. The **jothā**: small cymbals similar to the **juri** cymbals described above.
5. The **gangāra**: a kind of jew's harp made of bamboo, played mostly by young women.
6. The **tharkā**: made of a piece of bamboo split into two, used particularly by young women to keep time while singing.

The two last-named instruments are very widely used in the Bihu music of Assam.

The list of Rabha instruments is longer, some of the items being very peculiar:

The **hem** or **mādal** or **dhāk**: a big-size drum similar to the **khām** above.

The **brāngsing**: a flute with four holes.
The lakhar or lukhar flute: a more primitive kind of flute with two holes.

The badungduna: an instrument made of an unsplit piece of bamboo with four strings raised from its body, which are struck with two small sticks.

The buburengā: an instrument made of a kind of grass.

The manselengkā: a kind of time-keeping instrument made of bamboo with a peculiar pulley-like device to work it.

The kārahā nāl: the peculiar bamboo pipe several feet long.

The gamenā: the jew's harp.
The puja being performed by a Brahman before their images of god Kāti

Kāti Puja Dance

The drummer (dhākua)
Kāli-Chandi Dancer

Muslim marriage dance

Bāsipurān performers with chengrās (boys made up as female dancers).
TRIBAL FOLK-DANCE

Bodo maidens of Kokrajhar performing the bagurumba dance.

Above and below: Rabha men and women performing traditional dances with some of their peculiar musical instruments.
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

- Dotārā
- Dhōl
- Dhāk
- Benā
- Ektārā
- Sārinda
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

- KARKA
- KHOL
- MATI
- GHAU TAL
- JURI
- SHANAI
- JHALI
- MUKH BASI
- KHUPITAL