CHAPTER VII

THE ART OF LEARNING AND THE SOCIAL
STATUS ENJOYED BY THE PERFORMERS OF
THE PERFORMING ART FORMS
A. The Art of Learning:

The performers or the art forms are basically artists and therefore the essence of art of learning is not only a technical learning about the art forms but it has certain social, moral and spiritual values. And they give vent to their artistic creative potentiality. Although the art forms are confined to an aesthetic taste by giving pleasure and joy, nevertheless they give it by learning about the world and himself. Therefore the creative principle of an artist can do a great deal to preserve culture, civilisation and life itself.

The basic foundation of the quasi-dramatic performing art forms of the undivided district of Kamrup includes both \textit{nrtya-j	ext{\footnotesize{ita}}} and \textit{abh	ext{\footnotesize{in}ya}}. These art forms (e.g., \textit{Oj	ext{\footnotesize{apali}}, phul	ext{\footnotesize{iya}}, putila-n	ext{\footnotesize{ec}} and so forth}) are styled as the \textit{g	ext{\footnotesize{ar	ext{\footnotesize{ch}}arva-vidya}} or \textit{dev	ext{\footnotesize{a-vidya}}}. According to a tradition current among the activebearers of these
forms, a deva-vidyā can never be perfect until and unless it is learnt under the strict guidance of a traditional guru. The treatises of Indian music also testifies this statement. As such, a guru is essential in the context of the learning of such deva-vidyā.

1) Putalā nāc:

The learning of the Putalā nāc art form can never be completed without the proper guidance of a guru. According to a tradition prevalent in Kamrup, the Mohakhuli bati-putalā party and the Bhālukā bati-putalā gal seem to be the oldest troupe of puppetry of the undivided district of Kamrup. Late Kalikanta Barman was the chief puppet maker of the Mohakhuli puppet troupe and late Haragovinda Sarma was the pioneer of the Bhālukā puppet troupe. Late Kalikanta Barman learnt the art of puppetry at his childhood from a guru hailing from Koch Behar of North Bengal.1 Again from the father of Kalikanta Barman, as a guru, his son Harikanta Barman learnt the art form.2

So the art of learning of puppetry among the Mohakhuli

1 Informant: Sri Harikanta Barman (62), Mohakhuli, Kamrup, data collected on 3.6.37.
2 Informant: Same as mentioned in the reference no. 1.
The pioneer of the Bhalukā puppet troupe was late Haragobinda Sarma. He learnt the art form Ramaseswar Pandit of Mathuraipur, Tihu.

Generally, the chief of a troupe teaches the art of puppetry to his assistant. Late Kalikanta Barman, the chief of Mohakhuli puppet troupe taught the art of puppetry to his assistants, like Sri Karuna Bayan as Sūtradhārā, Sri Thaneswar Haloi as cymbalist and Sri Saniram and Sri Biroam as dress masters of the puppets.¹

The art of Sūtradhāra is traditionally acquired. The son learns the art from his father. The father might have learnt the same from his grand father.²

Thus the art of Pūtalā performance is traditionally learnt from guru to sīsya or father to son.

Furthermore, presently the art is taught to the interested persons by the trained artists of the profession through the Government agencies of both the State

¹ Sarna, Debashree: Samskāri Parampārā, p. 25
² Informant: same as mentioned in the reference ¹.¹
Government of Assam and the Union Government of India.

The case-study of Sri Bhubaneswar Malakar (age 47) the leader of the Sankari Putalā Nāc Theatre of Dakhin Cuccuri, Barnadi, Nalbari shows that he has learnt the art of puppetry from late Gajen Malakar. He was also taught by late Gopiram Malakar. Although Bhubaneswar Malakar is well-versed in the art nevertheless he has participated in a week long workshop on the puppetry held at the Rabinra Rhaban, Guwahati sponsored by the Directorate of Cultural Affairs of Assam, Guwahati. Sri Malakar mentions that he is very much benefitted by the said workshop.

(ii) Phulīyā:

Like the Putalā Nāc the art of Phulīyā performance should also be learnt under the proper guidance of a guru. It is seen that the ghai Phulīyā, i.e., the chief of a Phulīyā troupe learns the art of learning of Phulīyā performance from a guru.

6 Informant: N.C. Sarma, G.U., data collected on 6.10.89.
Generally, an expert and active bearer of a dhuliya troupe emerges as ghāi dhuliya at the event of death of the original ghāi dhuliya. He may act as the chief of the original troupe or he may form another troupe. On the other hand an expert and active bearer of the general dhuliya form may come out from his troupe and may form a sabha-gowa-dhuliya troupe. Again, a skilled member of a sabha-gowa-dhuliya may form a new general dhuliya troupe and he may function as the ghāi dhuliya of the troupe. Furthermore, the ghāi-dhuliya's son may also be an expert active bearer of a dhuliya troupe in which his father is the ghāi-dhuliya. At the death of the old ghāi-dhuliya, i.e., father of the son, the son (i.e., ghāi-dhuliya's) may emerge as the ghāi-dhuliya of the troupe. Again, a new comer may be taught the dhuliya art form by a well known ghāi-dhuliya who is still active in his profession. At the end of the learning of the art, the new comer may form a new dhuliya troupe and may offer function as the ghāi-dhuliya after retiring from his profession due to old days, may teach the art to a new comer and at the end of the learning the new comer may organize a dhuliya troupe and he may act as the ghāi-dhuliya of the troupe.
In this context also, we can point to a case study of Shri Mohan Ch. Barman. He is rather known as bhāirā, Shri Barman is a prominent ghāi-dhuliya of the Kahiñāti Dhuliya troupe. He learnt the art of learning of the Dhuliya performance from a well known ghāi-dhuliya of the Bhakatpara Bodo Dhuliya troupe. Shri Barman still regards that ghāi-dhuliya as his guru in the context of the art of learning of the Dhuliya performance.

Again, a dhuliya, i.e., a drummer, can learn the art under the guidance of another guru if he thinks that the art he learnt from the first guru is not sufficient. The case study of Shri Mohan Bhāirā shows that he was not satisfied with the art of learning that he learnt under the guidance of his first guru. So he was compelled to learn the art of Dhuliya performance from another guru of the Jowaddi Dhuliya troupe.

Shri Mohan Ch. Barman also emerged as prominent guru in the field. Many ghāi-dhuliyas of different troupes, such as Jamalabari Dhuliya troupe, Benengā Hawai Dhuliya troupe, Bagaribari Dhuliya troupe and so forth learnt the

7 Sarma, Rohanathan, Cr. cit., p.2.
art of learning of the Dhuliya performances under the able guidance of Shri Mohan Bhairā.9

Similarly, among the living Dhuliya troupe, the name of the Agni Śāla Dhuliya troupe should be taken into consideration from the stand points of sylisitic drums, impressive dramatic performances and acrobatics. This troupe produces a few well known bhairās such as Sambaru, Gopī and so on. Both Sambaru and Gopī have attracted many new comers to learn the art.10

A new comer should begin his learning by beating of drums and playing on cymbals. He must be acquainted with the various bādis, i.e., rhythms of the drums and ṭālas of the cymbals. Then he may be allowed to perform his performance as an āgar-dhuliya, i.e., frontal drummer. If he gets proficiency then he may be allowed to learn the art of acrobatics. If he can show dexterity as an acrobat he will be allowed to act as a gor-dhuliya, i.e., back drummer. At this stage, he can learn the art of cuču and dramatic performances.11 After that he can learn...
as a gor-dhulīyā, i.e., back line drummers and cang players. Thus he may acquire proficiency in the art of dhulīyā performance fully.12

(iii) Ojapali:

Like dhulīyā and putalā nāc, the Ojapāli art cannot be learnt without the proper guidance of a preceptor. According to a living tradition current among the Ojapāli circle, an Ojapāli is not a good Ojapāli if the art is not learnt by the grace of a guru. The Biyān-gowā Ojapāli circle believes that the tradition started with Parijātī. They regard Parijātī as their guru. Similarly, the Suknānī Ojapāli circle believes that the art form emerged from Brhannalā. They, therefore, traditionally regard Brhnnalā as their guru.

From the aforesaid discussion it can easily be assumed that the Ojapāli art cannot be learnt without the guidance of guru. In the same manner, guidance of a guru is essential to learnt the art of other forms of Ojapāli such as gatṛiyā Ojapāli, Raīman Ojapāli or Bhāirā, Durjāvarī Ojapāli, Māre-yān, Paddā Purānan gān as well as Tukuriyā Ojapāli.

12 Informant: Same as mentioned in the reference No. 10.
The Biyāh-gowā ojāpāli current in the Barpeta Sattra is also known as the Sattrīyā ojāpāli. The tradition of this form of the ojāpāli was started by one Laksman Ojha, towards the end of the sixteenth century A.D. at Barpeta Sattra. The tradition of this form of ojāpāli is handed down from that period to the present day from father to son, and son to grand son and so on. In this respect, father is regarded as guru by his son.

The learning of the Sattrīyā ojāpāli art of the Śatkaradeva school and the Dāmodaradeva school generally follow the gurukula system. The new comer or new learner of this art form generally gets fooding and lodging from his guru. He has to learn the art form from his childhood. It is a kind of dictum to undergo some physical exercise by the new learner at the early period of life. This kind of physical exercise helps the new learner in making his physical structure favourable for different dancing movements. The physical exercise is called mēti-ākhāra.

The Natya-Sastra records that there are two kinds of physical exercise, e.g., (i) mūti, i.e., earth and (ii) ākāsa, i.e., sky.  

\[13\] Quoted from Myeong's Sattriya Dances of Assam, Their Rhythms, p.52.
The ojāpāli art of learning should be started during the period of 14 years to 16 years. This period is suitable because, the bones remain soft and memory also remains sharp.

The ojāpāli art is also learnt traditionally, i.e., from grandfather to father and father to son and son to grandson. Beliefs are also prevalent among the Sukrāṇi ojāpāli circle that one of the sons of an ojā must keep the profession alive, otherwise the snake goddess Manasā or Padmāvatī may take it otherwise and as a result her rage may fall upon him.\(^{14}\)

In the context of the bhairā ojāpāli or commonly bhairā, the ojā never imparts the art of learning to a new comer. It is gāināpāli, who plays the role of guru and he naturally gives the instruction of the art.\(^{15}\)

Sometimes an ojā may come from an dāināpāli or the pāli. Shri Durgā Kalita of Rāndiya initially was a pāli. At the death of the ojā, Shri Durgā Kalita emerges as the ojā. Again, an ojā may come from dāināpāli also.\(^{16}\)


\(^{15}\) Informant: Shri Pratap Bezbarua (55), Jagra, Malamati, data collected on 22.3.89.

\(^{16}\) Informant: Shri Durga Kalita (60), Rāndiya, data collected on 10.10.89.
Attempts would be made in the following pages to illustrate hypothesis mentioned above basing on a few case-studies:

(a) Late Chandra Kanta Deva Sarma commonly known as 'Cānīa Ojā' (1829-1907 A.D.) was one of the most popular and renowned ojās of the Biyāh-gowā school of the district of Darrang and Kamrup. He taught the following famous ojās:

1) Late Dehiram Sarma, Vyasa para, Darrang.
2) Late Godapanda Sarma, -do-
3) Late Dinaram Deva Sarma, -do-
4) Sri Shabiram Sarma, -do-
5) Late Bhadiyadēva Sarma, -do- 17

(b) Late Layanuram Bhattacharyya (1762-1840 A.D.) was one of the most illustrious ojās of the sukāni form of the districts of Darrang and Kamrup. He taught the following ojās:

1) Late Rajat Sarma, Margaon, Kamrup.
2) Late Sonaram Kumar, Badiqaon, Darrang.
3) Late Dadhiram Sarma, Goalpara.18

17 Informant: Late Narayan Chandra Sarma (48), Beli-jewa-pata, data collected on July, 1973, by courtesy of Dr. G. Sarma, Gauhati University.

18 Informant: Shri, as mentioned in the reference -17.
(c) Sri Deben Baishya Ojā (65) hailing from the village Jagara, Karnrup and Sri Dhainā, commonly known as Dhainā Gāṅūpālī (70) of same village, taught many ojāpālis of the Bhira and the sukrūni forms throughout the district of Karnrup, such as:

1) Shri Indumohan Das (53),
2) Sri Shrekanta Ojā (57),
3) Sri Carita Nath (45),
and 4) Sri Rajen Ch. Barman, commonly known as Rajen dainā (52), etc.

Generally a new comer with a view to getting instruction in the field of the ojāpāli art comes to the residence of a guru, who may either be an Ojā or a Gāṅūpālī or a tālī and makes offer of a gāmochā and a bhuni or dhuti along with a pair of areca nuts and a few betel leaves as well as a few ṛādiśā-hādiśā, i.e., a little amount of money to the guru by saying:

Lihājvānok śākhā kuri mila-gaṅūharva-viśvā
sikhā nimitte śrupāk guru bheji sevā kallu /
muk apunar śīya karo /

i.e., in the name of you, I say that I accept you as my

19 Informant : Sri Rajen Ch. Barman, commonly known as Rajen dainā, Kalabari, Bhabara, etc. collected on 9.10.69.
20 Informant : Sri Indumohan Das (58), Kalabari, Bhabara, etc. collected on 9.10.69.
respected guru and I bow down on your feet. O my guru, I have come to learn the gandharva vidyā, i.e., oṣṇopali art from you. Kindly accept me as your śīya.

The statement mentioned above can furnish a definite evidence that the art of learning of the oṣṇopali can never be completed until the grace of an expert guru.

Presently the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Assam, Jorhat and other voluntary organisations, like the Ṛṣṭi Ṛṣṭi-ōṣṇopali-pahāraṇya Ṛṣṭi-ōṣṇopali-śāh, Jorhat Ṛṣṭi Ṛṣṭi Ṛṣṭi-ōṣṇopali-shāh and so forth have successfully made attempts in giving methodical instructions of the art form to the young people interested in the field.

B. Social status enjoyed by the performers:

The Putala Ṛṣṭi, Phulīya and Oṣṇopali can serve both the religious urge and the social need. That is why these art forms are enjoying social status among the village people from the remote past. In the Indian view gīta-nṛtya and abhinaya are gifts of the gods through r̥ṣhata and Śiva.21 As such, gīta, vādyā and

21 Brandon, James R.: Theatre in South-East Asia, P. 267
The Dhulīyā and Olārāli received royal patronage from the different kings of Assam as they were associated with the worships of the deities of different temples. Some worships are never completed without these performances. Hence, they not only get dakṣinā but also enjoy a status next to the priests. In the Vasudevajī pūjā or the Jāgar pūjā or the Rākaṇ pūjā or Māra pūjā, the Vivāhar-oja and the Graphi oja are ceremoniously welcomed by the worshipper generally with a Cheddar and a dhuti as well as a gīmoche along with the priest. They are offered pūjā or bhojani, i.e., uncooked eatables by the worshipper. These worships are never completed without the singing of songs of the Ojpālī and Dhulīyās performances. That is why, both the dhulīyas and the olārāli are specially invited in connection with the different rites and rituals.

In the Māra-pūjā current among the Pāti Rebas, the oja generally performs the function of the priest.

Informant: Ramprasad Bhim, Baraithān, date collected on 21.10.64, by courtesy of Dr. A. Gama.
Due to the impact of modernity the popularity of the putela-nāc and the phuliyā as well as the ojāpāli performances, seems to have been reducing to some extent. But it is also correct that their social status has been still continuing unabatedly. After the freedom of India, the social status of these performing art forms is increasing. Now the performances of these art forms are being broadcast through the mass media like the radio. Above all, their performances are telecast through the television. The phuliyā and the ojāpāli perform their performances in different national festivals like the Independence day and the Republic day at the courtesy of the Government of India. Ojāpāli troupes are now and then being sent to different cities like New Delhi, Chandigarh, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Bhubaneswar, etc., Calcutta, Imphal, Shillong to show their performances by the Government of Assam.

The performers of the putela-nāc, phuliyā and ojāpāli feel proud for the honour and status they have received from the contemporary society. They even claim that they are widely known and respected by all the strata of society. Even though the performers come from the lower strata of society they command respect from even the higher classes and this fact indicates that there remains no caste discrimination among the performers.