CHAPTER X

THE ART OF LEARNING

Nṛtya-gīta and abhinaya are styled as the gāndharva-vidyā. It is no doubt a kind of deva-vidyā, i.e. a celestial art. According to tradition a deva-vidyā can never be perfect until and unless it is learnt under the strict guidance of a guru. The treatises of music state that in the context of the learning of the gāndharva-vidyā a guru is essential. The ojadāli art may also be included in the ambit of the gāndharva-vidyā, and hence the learning of ojadāli art can never be completed without the proper guidance of a guru.

According to a tradition prevalent among the ojadāli-circle he is not a perfect ojā who has not learnt the ojadāli art from a guru.¹ The art of ojadāli is primarily learnt traditionally. The traditional learning of the ojadāli art is handed down from guru to guru or father to son or daināpali to daināpali or pāli to pāli.² The sukāni ojadāli circle believes that the tradition of the sukāni ojadāli begins with Vrahnālā, i.e. Arjuna, the third Pandava. They believe that Vrahnālā is their first guru.³ The active bearers of the biyāh-gowā-ojadāli think that it was Paṭijāti who taught firstly the art of learning of the biyāh-gowā ojadāli.⁴ Another tradition is prevalent among the biyāh-gowā

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1. Informant: Late Thanuram Kalita, Pithakhowa, data collected on the July, 1973. By courtesy of Sri Babin Chandra Sarma

2. Informant: Nareswar Sarma, Barua, Dipila, Darrang, data collected on 4.1.85

3. Supra Chapter - II

4. Supra Chapter - II
ojāpāli circle that the art was taught initially by one Vyasakalai.5

From the aforesaid discussion it is clear that the learning of the art of the ojāpāli is primarily based on gurus, i.e. the ojāpāli art is such type of science which can be learnt only by the guidance of a preceptor.

We would try to illustrate the theory mentioned above with some examples from a few case-studies:

(a) Late Chandrakanta Deva Sarma commonly known as ‘Cando Ojha’ (1829-1907 A.D.) was one of the most popular and renowned ojas of the biyāh-gowa school of the districts of Darrang and Kamrup. It is not easy to know about his guru from whose guidance he could learn the art. 'Cando ojha' now appears to be a tradition particularly in Darrang district. He taught the following famous ojas.

(1) Late Dehiram Sarma, Vyāsapārā, Darrang
(2) Late Gadapanda Sarma - do -
(3) Late Dinaram Deva Sarma, - do -
(4) Sri Bhābiram Sarma, - do -
(5) Late Bhadiyadeva Sarma - do -
(6) Late Jayadeva Sarma, - do -

5. Supra Chapter - II
(b) Shri Bhabiram Sarma (1890 A.D.) a very well-known living ojā of the biyāh-gowa form. He learnt the art from late 'Gāndo Ojha' (or Chandrakanta Deva Sarma) and late Dehiram Sarma. Sri Bhabiram Sarma initially worked as a pālī under the guidance of late Dehiram Sarma for a couple of years. He started his career as a pālī when he was sixteen years old. At the age of twenty he started his career as an ojā. Now he is unable to perform ojāpālī due to old-age. He had education only in a primary school. Sri Sarma teaches the following ojās:

(i) Sri Sarat Chandra Sarma, Vyāsapāra, Darrang
(ii) Late Hahiram Keot, Hatimara, Darrang
(iii) Late Madhuram Sarma, Charandhara, Darrang
(iv) Late Dhaturam Sarma, Athiyabari, Darrang
(v) Sri Jolei Sarma Saru Vyāsapāra, Darrang.

(c) Among the living active bearers of the biyāh-gowa-ojāpālī the name of Sri Sarat Chandra Sarma is worth mentioning. He also learned the art from his ojā and guru Sri Bhabiram Sarma. His father and grandfather late Paniram Sarma and late Dhuluram Sarma were also ojās of the biyāh-gowa school. Till now he teaches only two ojās, viz (i) Sri Birendranath Sarma Goaljhar, Darrang. (ii) Sri Tabendranath Sarma, Vyāsapāra, Darrang.

7. Informant: Sri Sarat Chandra Sarma, Vyāsapāra, Darrang, data collected on 16.1.85
(d) Another living as well as an active bearer of the biyāh-gowa ojāpāli is Sri Dorgeswar Nath Ojā (65 years). His father and grandfather late Bangdhar Nath ojā and late Ganganath Ojā respectively were also ojās of the biyāh-gowa school. Sri Dorgeswar Nath ojā received only primary education. He got the ojāpāli education from late Geniram Nath ojā and Ghato Ojā as well as from Haliram Sarma. He teaches two ojās only, viz. (1) Shri Harendra Nath Ojā, Dhekiapara, Darrang, and (ii) Sri Yajnaram Nath ojā, Nayakapara, Darrang. 8

The learning of the suknani ojāpāli art also depends on the guidance of a guru. As for example, we may mention a few cases:

(a) Late Layanuram Bhattacharyya one of the most illustrious ojās of the districts of Darrang and Kamrup. He was born in the month of Chaitra in the Saka year 1762 (1762 + 78 = 1840 A.D.). He received the education of ojāpāli art form a well-known guru. Late Layanuram Sarma taught the following ojās:

(i) Late Rajat Sarma, Bargaon, Kamrup,
(ii) Late Sonaram Kumar, Badigaon, Darrang
(iii) Late Dadhiram Sarma, (Bengera ojha), Gopalpur, Darrang

8. Informant: Sri Dugeswar Nath Ojā, Sipajhar, data collected on June, 1972
(iv) Late Sundar Sarma ojā (commonly 'Sondar Ojha'), Anandipara, Darrang. He survived for 93 years. He died in the month of Phālguna in the Saka year 1855.

(b) Late Thanuram Kalita another very skilled suknāni ojā is still known as bar-ojā, i.e., 'ojā in excellence' was born at Pithakhowa (Hazarikapara), Darrang in the month of June, 1866. His father was late Memadhu Kalita. Late Thanuram Kalita read up to class I of the primary standard. Then, he was directed by the snake goddess Manasa in a dream to learn the ojāpāli art. He, then, learnt the ojāpāli art under the guidance of late Dayaram Sarma, a non-professional expert in the field. Thereafter, he was taught the ojāpāli art by late Phukan Kalita who was a professional and well known ojā. He started his career of an ojā when he was 15 years old and continued up to the age of 98 years. Many received training of the suknāni ojāpāli art from him. Among them the following are worth mentioning:

(i) Late Budhiram Nath, Bijelbari, Darrang
(ii) Sri Lalitchandra Nath, Ghorabandha, do
(iii) Sri Bhagiram Deka, Charanadhara, do
(iv) Sri Dadhiram Kalita, Bagharbari, do
(v) Sri Tapeswar Koch, Bhuktabari, do

(vi) Sri Muktaram Barua, Rayanakuchi, Darrang
(vii) Late Phatik Chandra Kalita, Pithakhowa, do
(viii) Late Bhem Chandra Deka, Devananda, do
(ix) Sri Umacanta Deka, Sarabari, do
(x) Sri Jonaram Keot, Rangamati, do
(xi) Sri Ramakanta Deka, Bokani, Nowgong
(xii) Sri Ratan Koch, Bhebarghat, Darrang.

He died at the age of hundred and eight. 10

(c) Late Phatik Chandra Kalita ojā's father Late Phukan Kalita was also an ojā of the sâkñāni school. Late Phatik Ojā was born in the month of November, 1910. He did not have schooling, however, he learnt the Assamese alphabet at his home. At the age of twenty he started to learn the ojāpāli art under the able guidance of late Thanuram Kalita. A few ojās were taught by him. He breathed his last on the 6th Bhādra of the Sāka year 1895. 11

The learning of the sattriyā ojāpāli art of both the Sānkara-deva school and the Dāmodara-deva school invariably follow the gurukula system. The new learner of the ojāpāli art gets all facilities from his guru regarding6 feeding and lodging. The guru teaches the art. The new learner has to undergo some physical exercise at the early period of his life so that his physical structure would be favourable for different dancing

movements. The exercise is known as the māti-ākharā. According to the Natya-śastra the physical exercise may be of two kinds: (i) māti (earth) and (ii) ākāsa (sky). Mentions the Natya-śastra:

\[ \text{teiḷabhyaṅktena  gātrenā yavāgūmrditena ca} /\]

\[ \text{vyāyāmāṁ karayeddhīmah bhittavākāsake tatha} /^{12} \]

Most of the sattrīyā oja receive their ojāpāli-learning during the period of 14 years to 16 years. R. Saikia Bayan is of opinion that the suitable time for learning of sattrīyā ojāpāli art is from 16 to 20 years.\(^{13}\) According to him at that period the bones remain soft which go in favour of the exercise of the different limbs. Secondly, memory also remains sharp in that period.\(^{14}\) Ojāpāli in the sattras is known as raja-vidya\(^ {15}\), or royal art.

The māre-gan gowa ojas also learnt the art with the guidance of gurus.\(^ {16}\)

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12. Quoted from M. Neog’s Sattriya Dances of Assam and Their Rhythms, p.62


14. R. Saikia Bayan: op.cit., p.42

15. Informant: R. Saikia Bayan, data collected on 3.3.84

16. Informant: Praneswar Rabha, Darranggiri, data collected on 21.10.83
Secondly, in many cases, the \textit{ojās} learn the art traditionally, i.e., from grandfather to father and father to son and so on. Beliefs are also current that one of the sons of an \textit{ojā} must keep the profession alive, otherwise the raga of the snake goddess may fall upon him. As for example, the father of late Phatik Chandra Kalita \textit{ojā} was an \textit{ojā}.\textsuperscript{17} Sri Lalit Chandra Nath \textit{ojā} (1923 c) commonly known as Lalit \textit{ojha}, 'one of the recipients of an award from the \textit{Saṅgita-Nātaka Akādemi} and a winner of the title of '\textit{Sukhami Saṅgita-caryya}' from the \textit{Darraṅgi Kala Krāti Unnayana Samgha}, Darang is said to be an exponent of the discipline. His is the only family in the district of Darang which has cultivated the \textit{sukhami ojāpāli} for seven successive generations, e.g.

(i) Megho \textit{ojha} \\
(ii) Sisu \textit{ojha} \\
(iii) Jiu \textit{ojha} \\
(iv) Dekhan \textit{ojha} \quad \text{brother (v) Bisu \textit{ojha}} \\
(vi) Bhuban \textit{ojha} \\
(vii) Lalit \textit{ojha} \textsuperscript{18}

In the same manner the learning of the \textit{biyāṅ-gowā ojāpāli} is also handed down from generation to generation. As for example, the father of Sri Durgeswar Nath \textit{oja} was an \textit{ojā} of the \textit{biyāṅ-gowā}

\textsuperscript{17} N.C. Sarma, \textit{op.cit.}, p.138
\textsuperscript{18} Informant: Sri Lalit Chandra Nath \textit{Ojā}, Sipajhar, Darang data collected on 27.9.73
variety and his grand father was also an ojā of the same form. The father and grand father of Sri Sarat Chandra Sarma ojā were ojās of the biyāh-gowa school. Late Bhadiya Sarma ojā(1893-1980 c) of Vyāsapāra was a very reputed and well-established biyāh-gowa ojā. His father late Sabharam Sarma was also an ojā of the same variety.20

In many cases the daināpāli teaches the ojāpāli art. If some ojā dies or becomes unable to continue his profession due to physical or mental ailments the daināpāli of the troupe teaches an interested young man or one of a son of the ojā with a view to keeping the tradition of his family alive, viz., Sri Hara Kanta Deka, Dhokapara, Lokrai, Darrang, an ojā of the suknāni ojāpāli school received his training of the art from a daināpāli.21

In the same way, Sri Jonau Kalita ojā, Hazarikapara, Darrang received his ojāpāli learning from late Basiram Kalita who was a daināpāli of the same village.22 Late Dhatiram Nath ojā took the instruction in the context of the rāgas and the rāginīs from late Kasiram Nath who was a daināpāli of the biyāh-gowa ojāpāli.23

According to the active learners of the bhāirā ojāpāli the ojā generally does not impart the teaching to a newcomer,

19. Informant : Sri Durgeswar Nath, ojā, Sipajhar, Darrang data collected on June 1972
21. Informant : Sri Hareswar Deśa, ojā, Dhokapara, data collected on 5.12.78
22. Informant : Sri Nabin Chandra Sarma, Gauhati, data collected on 11.3.85
23. Informant : Sri Nareswar Sarma, Athiyabari, Darrang, data collected on 7.7.75
but only the daɪnəpæli gives the instruction of the art. 24
Sri Pratap Bezbarua informs us that the learners at the very outset of the learning offer betel-nuts and betel-leaves to the daɪnəpæli, i.e., guru.

Occasionally the pæli also teaches the art of the ojəpæli to a newcomer. As for example, Sri Giridhar Deka, Dipila, Darrang received his ojəpæli learning from Sri Baneswar Barua who was a pæli. 25 Sri Haliram Kalita oja, Pithakhowa, Hazarikapara, Darrang was given the instruction of the ojəpæli art by late Hangshadhar Kalita who was a pæli. 26

Sometimes the ojə comes from the daɪnəpæli or the pæli, Sri Kinaram Nath initially was a daɪnəpæli of Sri Lalit Chandra Nath ojə. But ultimately, he left Sri Lalit Chandra Nath Ojə and formed a new troupe of ojəpæli under his leadership. 27 Sri Sarat Chandra Sarma ojə was firstly a pæli. Initially, Sri Bhabiram Sarma also acted as a pæli. 28

Sometimes the active bearers but not professional ojəs teach the ojəpæli art, viz. Sri Nareswar Sarma Bamua (85) is an expert of the ojəpæli learning but he is not a professional ojə. He teaches as many as six troupes of the biyəh-gowə form of ojəpæli and three troupes of the sukənə ojəpæli. 29

24. Informant: Sri Pratap Bezbarua, Jaga, Kamrup, data collected on 8.4.85
25. Informant: Sri Giridhar Deka, Dipila, Darrang, data collected on 9.7.75
26. Informant: Sri Nabin Chandra Sarma, Gauhati, data collected on 7.7.75
27. Informant: Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua, Dipila, Darrang, data collected on 18.2.85
28. Informant: Late Narayan Chandra Sarma, Baladevapara, Darrang data collected on July, 1974 by courtesy of Sri Nabin Chandra Sarma
29. Informant: Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua, Dipila, Darrang, data collected on 4.1.85
Acharyya Manoranjan Sastri, the well known Sanskritist is not a professional oja, yet he teaches a few troupes of the biyāh-gowa ojāpāli.\(^{30}\)

Late Dayaram Sarma was an active learner of the suknāni ojāpāli art but did not accept ojāpāli as his profession. He taught the art to late Thanuram Kalita oja.\(^{31}\)

Presently, the Voluntary organisations like the Darang Kalā krati Unnayana Saṅgha and the Kāmarūpa ojāpāli-Bhawariya Kalyaṇa parisad have made necessary arrangements for imparting instruction in the ojāpāli art.

To become a well-trained oja one must have to undergo at least 5 to 6 years of training. He must be physically strong so that he can perform the dance and other movements successfully throughout the night until dawn. To become a good oja he must have a suitable voice. At least, an elementary education is essential for an oja. His memory should be sharp so that he can memorise the padas of the Assamese versions of the Epics and the Purāṇas.\(^{32}\)

Most of the ojāpālis whom we have met so far have received education in a primary school. In many cases the pālis are

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30. Informant : Sri Manoranjan Sastri, Nalbari, data collected on 6.10.84

31. N.C. Sarma, op.cit., p.135

32. Informants : Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua, Dipila, Darrang, data collected on 4.1.85
   : Sri Bhadra Kanta Sarma, Baladevapara, Darrang, data collected on 13.5.84
   : Sri Durgeswar Nath, oja, Sipajhar, Darrang, data collected on 6.8.84
illiterate. The following table will show the educational level of young and old ojas (in percentages):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.N.</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Young (16 - 45)</th>
<th>Old (46 - 70)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No schooling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M.E. standard</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Under-Matric</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Matric</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially, the learners have to get by heart of the entire Assamese padas or verses of the Abhuta-Ramayana and the puspa-harana-parva as well as the Manicandra ghosa Vana parva and so on.

According to Sri Lalit Chandra Nath Oja and Sri Bhabendra Chandra Sarma, at the very beginning of the sukmani ojapali learning the new comer has to memorise the entire Assamese version of the Garuda-Purana.

33. Informant: Sri Lalit Chandra Nath Oja, Sipajhar, Darrang data collected on 23.7.84
Bhaben Chandra Sarma, Kamrup, data collected on 13.6.84
At the first stage of the ojapali training, the new comers are not given any idea of the ragas and raginis. It appears to be the last stage of the learning of the biyāhar-ojapali art. According to Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua Saranga-rāga is taught at the beginning of the first stage of the raga-ragini teaching. And Malava is the rāga which is taught at the end. In the context of the tālas it is said that the new comer should learn the ekatāla at the very beginning and then he should know about the Cautāla or thokatāla and so on.34

The new learner is commonly instructed about the mudrās, movements and dances while he sings the song with his gurus.35

"The ojapali-circle believes that the Tauryyatrika-sāra is the only book on which the biyāhar-ojapalis have to depend for learning the art. But the work has not so far been discovered by the scholars."36 M. Neog maintains that the Tauryyatrika-sāra might simply refer to the Nātya-sāstra of Bharata or the Abhinayadarpana of Nandikesvara.37

34. Informant: Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua, Dipila, Darrang data collected on 4.1.85
35. Sr Informants: Sri Maniranjana Sastri, Nalbari, data collected on 6.10.84
: Sri Durgeswar Nath Oja, Sipajhar, Darrang data collected on 6.8.84
: Sri Nareswar Sarma Barua, Dipila, Darrang data collected on 4.1.85
: Sri Jagat Chandra Sarma, Kataklpara, Darrang data collected on 1.10.83
36. N.C. Sarma: Origin and Development of the Ojapali(Folklore) p. 255
37. M. Neog: Sattriya Dances of Assam and Their Rhythms, p. 9