The ojapali art form has continued to be one of the very popular performing arts from very ancient times. One thing here should be borne in mind that the popularity earned by the ojapali is wedded to devotion since it is born out of the religious background. Secondly, the religious consciousness is not apart from the social consciousness. So, it would not be irrelevant if we say that both the religious consciousness and social consciousness are interrelated to some extent. As the ojapali serves both the religious urge and the social need, the art form definitely has acquired a social status particularly among the non-elite rural people.

The ojapali institution is surely a deeply ingrained part of culture which has a very long and strong tradition and may go back more than a thousand years. The ojapali originally was associated with temples. The ojapali in the long past worked as teacher, expounder and friend as well as guide of the masses who took refuge in the temples to listen to the songs and recitations of the ojapali. Hence, it will not be apocryphal if we say that the ojapali is continued to be worked as an institution. It appears that, to-day the ojapali is an inseparable part of the society in certain areas. So, the social status of the ojanali is very high. In the Indian view gita-nrtya and
abhijnaya are gifts of the gods through Brahma and Siva. And hence, the performers of gita-nrtya-abhijnaya enjoyed high esteem from the general people.

In many respects the social status of the performers of any art form was determined to a large extent in the past by the tradition in which he worked. "A performer in the folk tradition was a local villager first and a performer second, for he was a villager every day to his neighbours, a performer only occasionally. His status within his village primarily depended upon his usual position of the village and only secondarily upon his theatrical association, though his status usually was enhanced by his theatrical work because his skill was prized." The same position occurs in respect of Assam's ojapali. Because both the oja and the palis are the local villagers first and are performers second, their status within the jurisdiction of their village depended naturally upon their usual positions in the village and the status they enjoyed by their performances seem to be secondary and it is nothing but the outcome of their merit and skill shown in respect of their performances.

The ojapali received royal patronage. We have already mentioned that kings like Bhaskara Varman (7th c) seemed to

1. James R. Brandon: Theatre in South-east Asia, p. 267
2. Ibid., p. 268
have been patronized the ojāpāli institution. The Ahom kings were also patrons of the ojāpāli. King Siva Simha patronized the ojāpāli art form. The Ahom kings honoured the sattriya ojāpāli, hence it was known as rājā-vidyā i.e., royal art. Even to-day the sattriya variety of ojāpāli is known as rājā-vidyā. The biyāhgowā-ojās were specially honoured by the kings. S.K.Bhuyan observed that once Tipamiya Gohain sent one maid of him Rupahi by name to one biyahiya-ojā when the Gohain himself was busy with hatching a conspiracy against the king Lakṣmī Simha. That ojāpāli institution received the royal patronage could be proved from the two copper-plates granted to Sagara ojha(ojā) and Cantai ojha(ojā) by king Lakṣmī Simha. The text of the copper plate runs thus:

Svasti srijuta Kamakhya pādapadama madhu vrataḥ / sri lakṣmī simha bhupalah nurandara kulodhvah / / rimunrpakulamasta srenivyasta satudyumani samamani srismera pādaravindah / himakara kara kirtih kama samkasa mūrtih sunyanicaya talpodatti kalpadru kalpanah / / avam prādāt ksiti simām kāmarupa nisine / srikrti sri sagarakhyaya daivajña kula janmane / / tasmai gathaka varyyaya 

3. See Chapter II
4. See Chapter V
5. See Chapter X
6. S.K.Bhuyan: kowar Bidroh, p.3
Sagaraka sargadeve ei māṭi dile āru ei tamrapatro karidile
khetri paraganāta salamarā grāmata ropita māṭi 8 purā āre hada
puve salamarā nadi pacime garubāta, uttare rājaali, dakhine sastara-bāri gaipānīra gharara āgata 4 purā, bāmundiā medhīra bārika
pācata ṭokarara ḍuapara puve 4 purā pāti-darāṅga paraganāta
ranārā grāmata 8 purā 24 lecha āru darāṅga desa ḍhumāhā
grāmata 7 ro bādi 24 betanā grāmata gharabari 8 ro bādi
22 muthata 61 purā, āke biyāhāra ojhae putraptəṛādi krama bhoga
kari sargadevake āśīrvāda kari thākiba / ihāra kara-kātala pada-paṅcaka betha-begara-jalakara-javakāra cora-cīnāla-dhumusī-
mādesa-cāki-hūta ghatā-sarva bava purityāga baila / ihāta kono
jane anyathā nakariba, iti saka 1696 māsa āgrabāyana /

bhūposabhravino bhūpāla kṛta jñāna sama yacata /
mayākṛto nivandhayam bhavadbhūḥ pālyatamiti

Benediction to the king Lakṣmi Simha who is born in the family of Indra the king of gods, is like a black bee at the lotus like feet of goddess Kāmākhyā. His glory is as bright as the moon light, who possesses cupid like appearance. ** The king in the Saka year 1696; (i.e., 1696 + 78 = 1774 AD) donates this copper

7. Informant: Late Gurucharan Misra, Salmara, Dumunichaki, Kamrup, data collected on 4.4.84
Sri Karunamaya Haripada Goswama, Tangla, data collected on 3.3.84
plate to Sagara, an inhabitant of Kamarupa who is born of an astrologer family (Daiyañjākula) and is the best among the Purana singer (gāthaka) with a view to securing his livelihood.

It is informed to all the concerned officers of Kamarupa like Barua, Bara-Kāyastha, Caudhury, Patowary, Talukdār and Thākuriya that the king is pleased to donate the land containing the following boundaries to Sagara, a renowned ojā of biyāh variety of Sālamara village and this copper plate is issued.

*** *** ***

The copper plate has empowered the ojā to enjoy the lands mentioned above from generation to generation. The land with immediate effect shall be free from all kinds of revenues and taxes. The king issued the copper plate in the month of Agravana in the Saka year 1696 (i.e. 1774 AD).

The second copper plate issued by the same king to Cāntāi ojā goes thus:

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svasti śrī śrī juta kāmakhyapāda padma maddhubrataḥ / śrī lakṣmī simha bhūpālah purandara kulodbhavah ripu
arpakula mastaśrenibinyasta sastudyumani śrismera
padāravindah / himakara kara kirtih kama samkāṣa murtih
sunaya nioyay talpodutti kalpadrukalpaḥ / cāntayadāsāv
yoradadādidam / Kamarupasthayostāmra patram tadvṛti
rakṣakam / etadvivaranam kamarupa desāra baḍuvā o
barakāyastha o caudhuri o paṭovārī o talukdāra o thākuriyā
```
Benediction to the king who is a black bee at the lotus like feet of goddess Kamakhya. He is born in the family of Indra, the king of gods, is a destroyer of enemies. His glory is as bright as the moon light who possesses Cupid like appearance. He is the seat of good policies and resemblance a wish yielding in making gifts. The king donated this copper plate to Cāntāi Dāsa, an inhabitant of Kamarūpa with a view to securing his livelihood.

It is informed to all the concerned officers of Kamarūpa like Baruā, Barakāya, Caudhurī, Paṭovārī, Talukdārā, Thākuriā that the king is pleased to donate the land containing the following boundaries to Cāntāi Dāsa an ojā of Hāzo and in that connection issued the copper plate.

8. Informant: Sri Umesh Chandra Ojā, Ojātālā, Hāzo, data collected on 5.8.83.
The copper plate has empowered the oja to enjoy the lands from generation to generation. The land with immediate effect shall be free from all kinds of revenues and taxes. The king issued the copper-plate on the saka year 1697, (i.e. 1697 + 78 = 1775 A.D.).

The Koch kings were lovers of the ojaṭāli art. According to a tradition current among the ojaṭālis of the districts of modern Darrang and old Kāmrūp and Goalpara, king Naranārāyaṇa (1540-1584 A.D.) patronized the performing art forms like the dhuliya (drummer) and the Kāliya (piper) as well as ojaṭāli and so on.9 Chilarāi, the mighty brother of king Naranārāyaṇa was a lover of art forms like ojaṭāli. His son king Raghuḍeva was also a lover of the ojaṭāli art form. His son king Parīksita Narāyaṇa and his worthy son Bali Nārāyaṇa alias Dharma Nārāyaṇa were also active patrons of the performing art forms like dhuliya, Kāliya, deodhani, Khuliya etc. Bali Nārāyaṇa was the founder king of Darranga rājya who took necessary steps to enrich his kingdom in respect of language and culture. He patronized different scholars and poets and they were encouraged to compose literature in the Assamese language. Among those scholar-poets, Sukavi Narayanadeva, Ratikānta Dvija, Khagesvara Dvija, Narottama Dvija, 

9. Informant: Late Thanuram Kalita Ojā, (105), Hazarikapara Darrang, data collected by Nabin Ch. Sarma on July, 1966
Visvesvara Dvija, Rama-Sarasvati are worth-mentioning. Tradition goes that king Dharma Narayana alias Bali Narayana introduced Vasudeva-puja and Durga-puja as well as Manasa-puja and Jagara-puja in Darrang-rajya and these pujas were performed in the royal family. And in these pujas both forms of ojapali such as the biyaha-gowa-ojapali and the suknani-ojapali were introduced. According to the ojas of Darrang the kings of Darrang-rajya were patrons of the ojapali arts. Even to-day the descendants of the kings of Darrang rajya try to uphold the old tradition to some extent.

From the above discussion it is clear that the ojapali art form has continued to enjoy the royal status.

In the context of rituals also the oja and the pali used to enjoy status next to the priests. In the Vasudeva-puja or the Jagara-puja the biyaha-ojas are ceremoniously welcomed by the worshipper generally with chaddar and a dhoti as well as a gamochha along with the priest. They are offered sidha, or bhojanai, i.e., uncooked eatables by the worshipper. The worship is never completed without the singing of songs of the biyaha-ojapali. In the Manasa-puja or Manasa-puja the suknani ojas are ceremoniously welcomed with dhoti and chaddar, and gamochha.

10. N.C. Sarma : Asamiva Lokam Samskrtirg Abhaasa, pp.117-140
   Informant : Late Thanuram Kalita, oja, Hazarikapara, Darrang
   July, 1966


12. Informant : Sri Naraswar Sarma, Barua, Dipila, Darrang data collected on 16.9.31

13. Informant : Bhadrakanta Sarma, Baldevapara, Darrang, data collected on 13.5.34
The sattri\textit{vā} oj\textit{ā}s are also adored with \textit{varana} if they are invited outside the four-walls of the \textit{sattra} and if they are permitted to go by the \textit{Sattradhikara}.\textsuperscript{14}

In the \textit{Mārā-\textit{pūjā}} current among the pāţi Rabhās of the district of old Goalpara the oja performs the function of the priest, since there is no tradition in their society to appoint a priest as in other societies of non-tribals.\textsuperscript{14(a)}

After the completion of ritual i.e., \textit{pūjās} the ojapālis receive \textit{daksinā} from the worshipper. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the amount of the \textit{daksinā}. Generally, the audience decides the amount. But now-a-days the \textit{daksinā} or \textit{parisramik} or \textit{darmahā} or \textit{mānani}, or \textit{arcanā}, is fixed at the time of the invitation. According to a tradition the singing or recitation of ojapāli should not be heard without paying anything such as rupees or clothes. Writes Rāmasarasvatī (16th c) thus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{\textquoteleft;vito jane Vanaparva parhiyā \textit{śunāve} /} \\
\textit{ta\textit{kā-vastra diya \textit{āśvasi}bā bahu bh\textit{āve} //}\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

He (i.e. ojapāli, of the \textit{biyaha-gowa} variety) who sings the stories of the \textit{Vanaparva} should be made satisfied with gifts of money and clothes.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Informant: Sri Sri Vignuchandra deva Goswami, \textit{Ami\textit{tā} Sattra} data collected on 9.11.84
  \item \textsuperscript{14(a)} Informant: Praneswar Rabha, Darranggiri, data collected on 21.10.83
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Rāmasarasvatī: \textit{Vadhakāvya} \textit{(Asamiya Mahābhārata, ed H.N.Datta Barua)p.823, V.12114}
\end{itemize}
The copper-plates also testify this. According to a copper-plate found at the Pingalesvara temple of Kamrup an oja gets more share than the pālis of the total amount of the daksinā received from the worshipper. The following table will exhibit the proportion in which money is divided among both the oja and the pālis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>oja</th>
<th>Pāli</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( at the beginning of the 20th century)
( at the middle of the 20th century)
(at present)

It has been mentioned that both Saṅkaradeva and Dāmodaradeva as well as Mādhavadeva and Harideva as well as Kaviratna Vaikuntha Bhāgavata Bhattacaryya attached great respect as well as importance to the oja-pāli art form.

The oja and the pālis particularly the oja enjoys special status in the village-courts that are held in the village-Nāmagharas, i.e. prayer-halls. At the time of judgement the president of the village-court requests the oja to comment on the affair. At the village Nāmagharas the oja usually gets

   The copper-plate was donated by the king Siva Simha in the Saka year 1661(i.e. 1739 A.D.)

one thagi or sarai of māh-pāul, i.e., prasāda. Very often the ojā earns his status by giving service as a village-doctor or a charmer and so on.

After the freedom of India the social status of the ojāpāli seems to be increasing. The ojāpāli performances are being broadcast through the mass media like the radio. Above all, the ojāpāli programme is telecast through the television. The ojāpāli performed in the 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, Amritshar, Bhubaneswar, Goa, Calcutta, Imphal, Shillong to show their performances by the Government of Assam.

The merit and excellence of the ojāpāli is now being appreciated by the central Government of India also. As for example, Lalit Chandra Nath Ojā, an exponent of the art of sukāni ojāpāli, has been honoured. He is one of the recipient of the reward of Rastrīya Saṅgīta Nātaka Akademi in the year 1983. The reputed ojās have been rewarded by the State Govt. of Assam. Sri Durgeswar Nath Ojā an exponent of the art of biyāh-gowa-ojāpāli is rewarded with the literary pension by the State Government in 1984.

The ojāpālis feel proud for the honour and status they have been received from the contemporary society. They even claim that

18. Informant: Sri Ramanikanta Sarma, Nazarikapara, Darrang data collected on 7.7.82

19. Welcome address in connection with the public reception offered to Lalit Chandra Nath ojā by the Director of Cultural Affairs, Gauhati, on 2nd January 1984
they are widely known and respected by the all strata of society and they have not found any caste discrimination in respect of the ojāpāli performances. Even muslim ojās were also in vogue in Darrang district. Even muslim ojās such as late Parasu Sekh were honoured by the kings of Darrang rajya.

In the modernizing societies it appears that the popularity of the ojāpāli art form seems to have been reduced to some extent but among the non-elite rural people it remains unaltered. The social status of the ojāpālis depends to some extent on the inherited social position, education, financial condition, personal conduct and artistic talent, of the performers. But it is correct that the social status of an ojā completely depends on the standard of his performance irrespective of caste and creed.

20. Informant : Sri Gunin Rabha, oja, Tangla, Darrang data collected on 1.10.84
22. Sri Bhadra Kanta Sarma, Baladevapara, Darrang, data collected on 13.5.84