CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

(a) Importance and significance of the study:

The ojāpāli art form is one of the ancient traditional art forms of Assam, it occupies an important and significant place in the classical music and dance of Assam. It consists of gīta, nṛtya and abhinava. Hence it fulfills the need of gīta and nṛtya, on one hand and on the other it contains narration with some gestures, thus it fulfills the need of abhinava.

The study of the ojāpāli art form is basically a study of the great tradition of kathakatā of India, since it is primarily based on the pan-Indian tradition of kathakatā. Secondly, the study of the ojāpāli institution involves the study of the great tradition of Indian performing art forms. Although the ojāpāli art form is mainly based on the themes of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata as well as the Purāṇas nevertheless this form has continued to be orally transmitted. The performance of the ojāpāli is preserved in the memory and handed down in continual reworkings from mouth to mouth from generation to generation. So, the art form may rightly be called a folk tradition.

The ojāpāli is continuing to fulfill the religious and social needs of the rural people. It sings songs from the
Epics and the Purānas and educated the listeners thereby. The people assemble in the nāma-gharas, i.e., prayer halls for different functions relating to the Vāsudeva-pūjā and the Manasā-pūjā as well as the Durgā-pūjā and so on, to hear the songs of the ojāpālis and thereby it fulfills a social need. Hence the ojāpāli art form has a special place in the socio-cultural life of Assam, and it has rightly been serving as one of the best factors of unification and sanskritization amongst the different ethnic groups of Assam.

The ojāpāli sustains the traditional music of India. Of course it is not recognised as an independent school of music till now, still it is based on the Nātya-Sāstra and the Abhinava-darpana and hence it would be logical if we say that the ojāpāli music is Indian music. Emphasizing the value of such type of traditional music R.C.Mehta observes: "We are waging a war against poverty — a much harder war but a more real one. In this war against poverty and in our task of the building up of our nation, the great energy lying in our folk songs and within our reach, should be harnessed ---. Our governments central and State — should very extensively employ the music and folk songs as an important tool for making the task of nation building more acceptable and cheerful to our millions of men and women."¹

In Assamese Villages, the significance attached to the jāpāli art form is connected with its social role or with the social functions which it fulfills. There are many diverse functions which the jāpāli art form fulfills. These may be broadly grouped into the functions of recreation or amusement, education, socialization, social control, social protest, propaganda and communication of knowledge and ritual functions.

(b) Objective of the study:

Modernisation or urbanization is the most dangerous enemy of tradition. Due to the onslaught of modernity the potent tradition suffers a lot. The jāpāli is also a potent tradition still it is affected to some extent by the modernity. Although it is still a living and appealing art form nevertheless many exponents of the art form are already dead. It is natural to fear that one day such a situation would arise when it would be very difficult to study the art form systematically.

It is a sad fact that outside Assam very little is known about a major art form like the jāpāli. This is due to the fact that no scientific and significant studies have been undertaken till now. Of course, isolated studies on particular aspects are available, but there has been no comprehensive study of the jāpāli institution as yet. The present study attempts to give for the first time a connected and systematic study of the
ojāpāli art form. In addition to putting down the origin and development of the ojāpāli art form in the context of the pan-Indian tradition of kathakatā and the all-India tradition of performing classical and desi arts of India. In addition to putting down the available sources of antiquity of the ojāpāli art form we have tried to analyse the similar art forms in Assam as well as in other part of India. We have tried to classify the different forms of ojāpāli and their performing aspects, musical instruments, place of occasion, style of performance and the different functions of both the ojās and the pālis including the dāināpālis. An attempt has been made to focus on the musical aspects of the ojāpāli viz. rāga, tāla, svara, nṛtya, rāgi, mudrā and about the art of the learning of the ojāpāli. We also add the different social functions of the ojāpāli and the status they have enjoyed in society.

Above all, we have attempted to focus on the various facets of the ojāpāli art form; historical, sociological, anthropological or ritual, economic, aesthetic and technical aspects.

(3) Methodology:

The present study is mostly based on fieldwork but printed material also been utilized. The relevant and contemporary works include the treatises on gīta-vādyav - nṛtya-nṛtta - nātya and abhinaya written in different languages, such as Sanskrit, English, Assamese, Hindi and Bengali.
The fieldwork has included both observation and interviews. The observation method has included both the natural context and the artificial context. I have met at least sixty troupes of different forms of ojāpāli and met many bearers of the art form. Many traditional gurus and the exponents of the different forms of ojāpāli have been consulted and interviewed. I have collected material either by questionnaire or by interviews throughout Assam. Both the 'close system' and the 'open system' have been applied (whenever necessary) in the context of the fieldwork.

The following considerations have formed the main bases for the collection of field-material.

(a) Places of visit: Important villages, towns, Sattras, temples, thanas, etc.

(b) Occasions: The calendar-cycle, rituals, fairs and Śrāddha ceremony and different pūjās, etc.

(c) Relevant information has been collected from the experts who are associated with performance directly.

Both the descriptive and historical as well as the comparative approaches have been applied in the present study.