



## Bharigan And Kushan Gan: A Comparative Study

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

Folk culture is the mirror of a community. The scope of folk culture is enormous. Folk culture includes the traditional works created by primitive and civilized people. Therefore, to know a nation better, it is very important to know about the folk culture of that nation. Assam is an ancient state of India full of various folk cultures. Assam plays a major role in the field of performing arts with its rich cultural resources of various ethnic communities. There are many different types of folk cultures in Assam. Among the North Eastern states, Assam is very rich in terms of folk arts. Folk drama is one of the performing arts of folk culture. Folk drama is a combination of song, dance, instruments, dialogue and acting. These folk dramas contain stories of joys and sorrows, religious and heroic stories of a society or nation. Folk drama has been a source of joy to all ethnic groups since ancient times. There are many different types of folk dances in Assam, including Putlanach, Ojapali, Dhulia, Khulia, Bhawaria, Bhaona, Kherai dance and Baisagu dance of the Boros, Kamrupia Dhulia of Nalbari region, Bharigan, Kushangan, Kharatal, Satyapir, Baul Yatra, Banshi Purana gaan, Gowalini Yatra, Hudum Pujar geet etc. of Goalpara district. Folk drama occupies a prominent place in the folk culture of West Assam. This region has its own characteristics of the folk drama tradition. The Bharigan and Kushan gaan are two distinctive folk dramas of Western Assam. Our proposed paper attempts a detailed discussion on the comparative study of Bharigan and Kushangan.

**Keywords:** folk culture, folk performing arts, folk drama.

### Introduction:

Folk drama is one of the most important forms of folk performing arts in folk culture. Folk drama is a composition of lyrical dance, song, instruments, acting and dialogue. One of the characteristics of this type of play is the predominance of song and dance over dialogue. Folk drama is the dramatic discourse that is recited orally and transmitted as an oral tradition against the background of rural life. In other words, folk drama is what is performed in combination with acting on an open stage crowded with folk stories, storybased characters, character-based dialogues, folk songs, folk dances, short dialogues and the unity of folk instruments. There is no specific speaker in folk drama, the folk society is its speaker. The storyteller, the audience, the actors, the characters, the dancers, the instruments and the accompaniment of the instruments are all from the folk society. There is no written form of folk drama. The story and form of folk drama has been traditionally continued unwritten since the past. Folk dramas are mainly centered around various religious rituals and festivals. In the words of Shailen Bharali, folk drama is theatrical performances associated with folk culture. Folk drama was born when dramatic elements were combined with the dances and songs prevalent in the festivals of ancient society.

Folk songs, folk dances and folk dramas are the true expression of people's aspirations, behaviour, social life, religion and rituals. There are many popular folk dramas programs that have been performed in the folk societies of different provinces of India for the entertainment of the people. Such popular folk dramas are Yatra,

Panchali, Baul, Jhumur and Gambhira in Bangladesh; Lalit, Tamasa, Gondhal and Dasavatar in Maharashtra; Yakshagan in Karnataka; Ramlila, Raslila and Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan; Bhavai in Gujarat; Kathakali and Kutiyattam in Kerala; Bhagavatmel Drama and Terkuttu in Tamil Nadu; Pala, Tamacha, Das Kathia, Dandanat, Leela of Orissa; Bithinatakam and Vidhibhagavat of Andhra Pradesh are particularly noteworthy. Assam is a state rich in folk drama tradition. There are many different types of folk dramas traditionally performed in Assam, such as Ojapali, Putlanach, Dhulia Bhauria, Khulia Bhauria.

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Bharigan, Kushan Gaan, Dotra Gaan, Banshi Puran Gaan, Marai Pujar Gaan, Padda Puranor Gaan, Khara Purana, Maynamati, Kati Pujar geet etc. These programs have enriched the field of Assamese folk culture and enriched the repository of folk culture of Assam. The folklore of the undivided Goalpara district occupies a special place in Assam. There is a distinct art form that is still alive today through popular folk drama performances among different ethnic groups. Therefore, the undivided Goalpaba district can be called the land of folk drama. There are many different types of folk dramas in Goalpara district. Distinguished folklorist of Assam Dr. Birendra Nth Dutta while commenting on the folk drama of Goalpara district said that there are many different types of folk dramas in different parts of Goalpara. Some are fully dramatic and others are semidramatic. Full-scale folk dramas include Kushan Gaan, Pala Gaan or Dotra Gaan, Bhari Gaan etc. The semidramatic folk drama performances include Padda Purana Gan, Mare Gan, Bhasan Yatra, Banshi Purana Gan, Hudum Puja, Charak Puja, Kati Puja, Mainamati Gan, Sonarai Geet, Farkanti etc. All these folk dances are scattered in different parts of Goalpara district. Some of these are endangered, some are extinct and some are still alive but in neglected condition. Bharigan and Kushan Gan are ancient folk dramas of undivided Goalpara district. Although both types of folk dramas are full of their own characteristics, the possibility of comparative studies revealing some new facts and important aspects cannot be ruled out. In this context, our paper attempts to make a comparative discussion of the two types of folk drama.

### **Objectives of the study:**

There are many folk drama traditions in Goalpara district of Assam. There are many different types of songs in Goalpara district. There have been insufficient scientific and research comparative studies of such invaluable resources like Bharigan and Kushan Gan. The main objective of this research is to preserve and recover the resources of both folk dramas which are becoming extinct due to the mechanical civilization of modern era and to promote and disseminate them among the younger generation.

### **Methods of the study:**

Data have been collected from primary and secondary sources in preparing the paper. Field studies were conducted for primary data collection. For secondary informations various books, magazines, memoirs, etc were consulted using comparative, descriptive and analytical methods.

### **Topic Analysis:**

#### **Bharigan:**

There are many different types of folk dramas in Assam. Bharigan is a popular ritual mainly among the Rabhas of the south-western region of Goalpara district in southern Assam as well as the Rabhas of South Kamrup and the Assam-Meghalaya border, especially the Pati Rabhas. The source of the origin of Bharigan is an all-Indian narrative, although no ancient written records are found in the areas where Bharigan is prevalent. There are various theories about the etymological meaning of the word Bharigan. In Bharigan plays, the characters usually wear masks and costumes according to their characters. There is no transportation or communication facilities and people have to carry their costumes, equipment and masks to perform the plays elsewhere. A specific person is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying the load. The designated person washes his head and body with devotion and carries the load from one place to another with a sense of devoutness. The person who carries the load in this way is called a 'Bhari'. According to folklore, this tradition is called Bhari Gan because of the carrying of loads. Some believe that masks are essential in the performance of 'Bhari Gan'. These masks are made of wood collected from trees like mango, jackfruit, gamari etc. Therefore, the weight of these masks are very heavy, hence the name of this type of performing art is also called 'Bharigan'. The main basis of performing Bharigaan is 'bhao' (to act) or 'bhaoria' (the actor) and therefore, it is believed that the words 'Bhaira' and then 'Bhari' is derived from the word 'Bhaoria'.

The Bharigan group consists of an oja or mul, a dohari, two khol players, two jhali players and five or seven pali or pailas. There are also several bhaorias for performing dramatic stories. The duties and responsibilities of the Oja or the main singer are the greatest. The Oja wears 'nupur' in his feet and a 'chowar' in his right hand while

performing the stories, songs and dances in bharigan and the Palis accompany him. The Bhaorias also act out the dramatic story in conjunction with the songs. The character of 'Ketua' plays an important role in the acting context of Bharigan. This character is assembled to make the audience laugh through humorous stories. In Bharigan theatre, the face is the most important and the main element of attraction to the audience. The use of dialogue is limited. There is more song and dance than dialogue. One of the notable features of Bharigan is that the maskless characters use dialogue and the masked characters perform songs. Overall, Bharigan, emerged as a composition of songs, dances, dialogue and acting is an important folk dramas in Goalpara and Kamrup districts.

### **Kushan Gan:**

Kushan Gan is another notable category of traditional folk dramas of Assam. It is a popular folk drama performed in the Koch-Rajbongshi areas of Bangagaon and Dhubri districts on the north bank of undivided Goalpara district. The folk drama, which is rich in dance, song, instruments and acting, is comparable in

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popularity to Krishna Leela, Ram Leela, Ras Leela and Bhagat or Nautanki of Brajdham as well as with Yakshagana in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The word 'Kushan' is believed to have originated from the songs sung by the Kochas or from the songs preached by Kush, the son of Sita. Some people believe that Kushan gan is prevalent prior to the Koch dynasty but, as a rule only the stories of Ramayana should be sung in Kushan Gan. However, depending on the region, many Kushan groups also perform songs based on Mahabhavat and other Puranas. The story of Kushan song is derived from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas, but the main theme of Kushan song is Ram Vandana. Kushan is believed to have a special relationship with the Lava-Kush of the Ramayana. The word Kushan is derived from the Kush word of Rama's son LoboKush and it is believed that the word Kushan gan is originated as a result of its abbreviation from Lobo-Kush Gan. Each group of Kushan songs consists of fifteen to twenty people. The group has a lead singer called 'Gidal'. Gidal plays a major role in Kushan songs. Another notable character in Kushan songs is the Dohari or Dowari. The role of the Sukuri is essential in Kushan songs. There are about four to eight Sukuri. In the past, men dressed as women and became Sukuri, but now girls perform this act. There are a couple of Bains (Khol player) and four or five piles. Paila and Sukuri participate in the role of Bhaoria. In Kushan songs, the Gidal is the lead singer and the pail or pali assist him. The bains, who play instruments such as khol, tal, bahi, charinda, etc., play to the rhythm of the songs and the dancers, mostly the shukuris, perform to the beat of the music. In Kushan songs, the gidal holds an indigenous stringed instrument called 'bena' and the chukuris hold a handkerchief. The role of the dowari is the most important in Kushan songs. The role played by the dowari in Kushan songs is similar to that played by the 'diana-pali' in the Ojapali songs.

Just as Sanskrit drama begins with two Nandi, Kushan songs begin with two 'Vandana' songs. One is Saraswati Vandana and the other is a Vandana song addressed to the assembled people. During the break period of the pala or geeti drama, the main dowari and the sukuris perform other Bahiranga songs unrelated to the main story to entertain the audience. One category of these songs is called 'payar' and the other category is called 'khemta' or 'chatka'. The songs are filled with Bhaktirasa, Adirasa and Karunrasa.

The costumes of the Kushan choir are zero fancy. The Mul or gidal wears a dhoti and a chola and a takes a shawl hanging around his neck. The dowari wears a short dhoti, a vest and a gamocha on his waist. During his funny performances, he wears torn clothes and wears hat of various colours on his head. The Bains also wear Dhoti, Chola etc. The sukuris wear long Ghuri and blouses and a thin cloth veil on their heads. They also wear artificial coil of hair and ornaments on their ears, neck, hands, nose and feet. The bena, khol, tal etc are essential musical instruments of Kushangan. The use of bena is the main feature of Kushangan. Therefore, Kushangan is also called Bena gan. Nowadays, modern instruments such as harmonium, violin, cornet, clarinet etc. are used in Kushangan. Kushan Gan being developed as a combination of dance, song, instruments and acting in Goalpara folk culture occupies a special position in the the field of Assamese folk culture.

### **Comparative discussion of Bharigan and Kushan songs:**

#### **Theme:**

In Bharigan, plays based on stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas are usually seen to be performed. The story of Bharigan is based on the fall or defeat of a powerful hero. The most popular plays performed in Bharigan based mainly on Ramayana are Ravanbadha, Mahi Ravanabadha, Lakshmanar Shaktishel, Taranisen Badh, Sita haran, Patalkanda, Balibadh etc.

The themes of Kushan songs are mainly taken from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, but are mainly performed based on the stories of the Ramayana. They perform plays like Dani Raja Harishchandra, Lakshmanar Shaktishel, Meghnath Badh, Taranisen Badh, Sitar Patal Gaman, Ashwamedha Yagya etc. based on the stories of Ramayana. 'Harishchandrar Dan' and 'Lakshmanar Shaktikhel' are the most popular plays of Kushangan.

Both Bharigan and Kushan Gan are aimed at providing folk education and spiritual education through entertainment.

### **Stage:**

There was no permanent stage for folk drama performances since the Middle Ages. Bharigan is performed in the open air. This type of theater is usually performed at the opening of Pujas, meetings, fairs etc. However, in the case of Bharigan, a high altar is built in the open and the stage is prepared. The audience is seated on three sides of the open stage.

In Kushangan a high altar is not prepared for the stage. For performing Kushangan, the stage is prepared in the centre of the pandals of public festival ceremonies. In the centre of the pandals, the gidals, bains, pali and sukuris of Kushangans sit with their musical instruments. This place is called 'Axhor' or Ashor. The audience sits and enjoys the program leaving some space around the axhor. Kushan songs are performed in the empty space between the audience and the Axhor. In the past, Aaria, Jur, Bhutsaki etc. were used for lighting on stage. Currently, electric lighting is used for lighting. Where there is no electricity, they use various batterypowered lights.

### **Costumes and make-up:**

The use of traditional dress and ornaments is unavoidable in Bharigan. In Bharigan, different types of costumes and ornaments are worn depending on the character. The mul oja wears a home-woven bhuni or churiya on the waist with wide border below the knees, a long or short white sleeved chola, and a colourful flower inscribed gomocha around the neck which hangs below the knees and wears a turban with gamocha on the head. They both wear nepur on their feet and carry sowor in their hands. They wear tilak of sandalwood, sindur, fakuguri etc. on their foreheads. The Palis wear bhunis, cholas and take white gomochas around their necks. The actors playing the female character wear the popular costumes and ornaments worn by Rabha women. The Ketua try to create laughter among the audience by wearing different costumes and masks. They use traditional colours instead of the artificial colours available in the market to colour the masks according to the nature of the character. They mainly use rice flour, turmeric, charcoal, chalk, lime, indigo, sindur, ash and purai seeds for colouration.

The dress of the Kushan singers is zero fancy. The artists wear ordinary clothes used in everyday life. The Mul wears a white bhuni, a chola and a shawl around his neck. The dowari wears a knee-length bhuni around his waist and a vest over his body. He carries a gamocha or shawl on his shoulder. During his funny acting, he takes the form of a joker wearing torn clothes and tries to make the audience laugh. The Pali or Piles wear kneelength bhunis and vests. The Bayan or Bains also wear bhuni and chola. The sukuris also wear long ghuris and blouses and a veil of thin cloth on their heads. In the past, male characters wore artificial khopas and ornaments on their ears, noses, hands, neck, etc., and ghuguras or nepurs on their feet to perform dances. Nowadays, in Kushan songs the sukuris wear 'Patani', a traditional dress of the Rajbongshi community. They wear silver ornaments on their ears, nose, neck and feet. The female characters wear saris and the male characters wear plain dhoti and panjabi cholas during the performances of the main dramas.

### **Group organization:**

There are upto fifteen to twenty-five performers in the Bharigan and Kushangan groups. The main person in Bharigan is called Oja or Mul, similarly the chief of Kushan songs is called Mul or Gidal. Dohari is the main associate of the Mul in a Bharigan group. The dohari is skilled in singing and gestures and plays a major role in entertaining the audience. Similarly, the role of the dowari is most important in Kushan songs. The dowari participates in the song and dance and explains the situation through conversation with the Mul or Pali between the narrative songs and also quote funny things to entertain the audience.

There are also many similarities between the Palis of Bharigan and the Palis of Kushangan. The palis of Kushangan will sing in tune with the gidal, just like the palis of Bharigan sings the dhubapads and dhuba bandanas in tune with the oja.. Both the folk drama programs have actors for performing the art.

### **Use of the mask:**

The use of Masks is one of the unique characteristics of bharigan. Wooden masks are essential for Bharigan acting. Usually, gods and goddesses such as Ram, Lakshman, Sita etc or human characters do not wear masks. Characters representing Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Bhima, Daityas, Danav, Rakshas and mythological characters representing Sugriva, Hanuman, Bali, Neel, Angad, Jambuban, Monkey soldiers etc. act using masks. Some of the humorous characters also use disordered masks. The masks are made from the wood of trees like mango, jackfruit, gamari, chaugosh etc. by the local artisans as per the traditional methods. In Kushan songs, masks

were originally used by characters such as gods, animals and birds, but presently are no longer used during this type of performance.

### **Musical Instruments:**

Musical instruments are of great importance in folk drama. The instruments mentioned in the Indian dramatic scriptures such as Tatabaidya, Avandha Baidya, Ghana Baidya and Sushir are used to a greater or lesser extent in folk drama. Both Bharigan and Kushangan use the Avandha instrument Khol. The rhythm of the Ghana Baidya instruments is an integral part of both folk dramas. The use of instruments like bena, ditora, sarinda etc. is seen in Kushan songs and these instruments belong to the Tata baidya instruments. In addition, sushir instruments such as mukh bansi, aar bansi and bam bansi are used in Kushan songs. Nowadays, instruments such as the violin, harmonium, chlorionette and cornet are used.

### **Performance of Bharigan and Kushangan:**

Bharigan and Kushangan are performed in the context of various worships, religious rituals, social festivals, reform rituals etc. Bharigan is held in almost every village of South Goalpara region during the month of Bohag (April-May). Bharigan is also performed at the annual Aithaan Mela. In addition to Doul festivals, Durga Pujas, etc., Bharigan is performed at public meetings and fairs. This type of performing art is also held on a commercial basis. Moreover, 'Bharigan' is performed at the request or demand of the people even if there is no special religious occasion.

Kushangan programs are also held in conjunction with various religious occasions. Kushan songs are performed at fairs held in conjunction with Basanti Puja and Ashokashtami. This type of performing art is also performed in the religious festivals like Durga Puja, Basanti Puja, Shyama Puja, Manasa Puja etc. In

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addition, Kushan songs are performed during ceremonies such as Surakoron (Tonsure), weddings and other ceremonies.

### **Songs and dances:**

The folk dramas of Assam has formed by the unique combination of songs-dances and instruments. The main dramatic plot of Bharigan begins with the accompaniment of songs and dances. In Bharigan, songs of praise (Bandana), character expressive songs, war songs, songs of lamentations and narrative songs are mainly performed.

Kushan songs include songs of praise, theatrical themes, lamentations and traditional songs with light feelings and fast rhythms which include bhawaiya, chatka, khemta, wedding songs, nindali songs, etc are noteworthy. These include. The songs of Bharigan and Kushangan are not upper class songs. The melodic style of these songs is folk based.

Dance is one of the components of folk dramas. In the dance of Bharigan, the khol and taal players play instruments in dancing mode. After playing the khol, the Gidal (Mul) enters the stage with a chowar in his right hand and performs various dances with the Mul khol player and a taal player. There is no special style of this dance and is limited to the movements of the legs. However, there is a tradition of performing some dance forms that are not related to the dramatic story such as Kali dance, Shiv dance, Chandi dance and Ranachandi dance.

In Kushan songs also, the gidals, dowaris, chukuris, etc. sing and dance in a circular motion around the stage. This dance performed by the gidals, dowaris and chukuris is called Lashya Nritya. The Laylash dance of Chukuri is also said to have been influenced by Chali dance and puppet dance.

### **Acting:**

According to Sanskrit Natashastra, there are four types of acting: physical acting, verbal acting, Ahariya acting and sattvic acting. These four types of performances are seen to a greater or lesser extent in both Bharigan and Kushangan. Physical acting is acting through physical gestures or dance moves. The physical gestures or dance moves used in folk drama are derived from folk life. In both Bharigan and Kushangan, the characters perform their acts through gestures.

Verbal acting is the acting performed by the characters through dialogue or conversation. In both Bharigan and Kushangan, the characters continue the dramatic story by acting through conversation or dialogue. In Bharigan, however, the masked characters cannot act through conversation or dialogue with each other. Since the masks worn on the head are heavy and are without holes in the face and eyes, therefore only the limbs are moved in accordance with the songs performed by the gidal (Mul). So the verbal acting is hampered in Bharigan. However, the maskless characters perform the verbal acting.

Aharya acting is the form of acting in which costumes, ornaments, various weapons, tilak and various colors are used on the body of the performer. The use of masks is one of the characteristics of Aharya acting in Bharigan. Most of the characters use masks in Bharigan. The narrative of the Ramayana is usually performed



in Bharigan. Therefore, the performers of Bharigan wear masks of Hanuman, Sugriva, Jambuvan, Ravana, Goddess Durga, Goddess Kali, Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu etc. according to their characters. They use wooden maces, bows and arrows, khaja guns, rolmaris, long knives and tridents as weapons for their performances. The characters wear different types of costumes and ornaments. They wear tilaks of vermilion, sandalwood etc. They apply turmeric, rice flour, ash, lime and natural colour of Purai seeds on the body. In Kushan songs, characters like Ravana and Hanuman also use masks. The gidai, dohari and palis wear traditional costumes. Chukuris also wear traditional costumes and ornaments. During the performance of the drama story, the female characters wear saris and the characters like Ravana wear royal attire. Sattvic acting is the form of acting which is closely related to the mind and body of the performer (Bhaoria). Sattvic acting is performed in most of the folk dramas of Assam. Bharigan and Kushangan also perform sattvic acts related to the mind and body. The characters perform Sattvic sari acts in different situations in the dramatic story section through various states of happiness, sorrow, laughter, tears, shivering, murcha, discoloration, etc.

### Conclusion:

Bharigan and Kushangan are the popular folk art forms of Lower Assam. Our paper attempts to present a comparative study of Bharigan prevalent among the Patibabhas of Goalpara and Kamrup districts in western Assam and Kushangan prevalent in the Koch-Rajbongshi dominated areas of Bongaigaon and Dhubri districts of undivided Goalpara. Both types of folk drama have distinct characteristics but there are many similarities also. The similarities in themes, group organization, gestures, linguistics, etc. indicate that there is an interaction between Bharigan and Kushangan. Since, both types of folk art originated in Goalpara district, it is natural that they influence each other. Therefore, it is expected that Bharigan and Kushangan will continue to be a significant component of Assamese folk culture in the future. There is ample scope for extensive research on this topic.

### Footnotes:

1. Sharma, Nabin Chandra: *Asomor Lokanatyia*, Pg. 18.
2. Bharali, Shailen: *Asomiya Lokanatyia Parampara*, Pg. 14.
3. Dutta, Birendra Nath: *Goalparia Loka Sanskriti aru Asomiya Sanskritiloi eyar Obodan*. Pg. 68.
4. Singha, M. Gopal: *Asomor Paribeshya Kala Bharigan*, Pg. 23-24.
5. Sharma, Nabin Chandra: *Asomor Sanskritik Itihash*, Pg. 533
6. Nath, Dwijen: *Goalpara Lok Sanskriti*, Pg. 161.
7. Bharali, Shailen: *Asomiya Loknatya Parampara*, Pg. 50.
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