



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Social Science**

**BILWESWAR DEVALAYA AND OJA-PALI: A FOLKLORISTIC APPRAISAL**

**KEY WORDS:** Bilweswar, Devalaya, Sukananni Oja-Pali, Byash Oja-Pali, Ramayani Oja-Pali, Folkloristic Activity, Pykes

**Sri Rajesh Kakati**

Research Scholar Department of Folklore Research Gauhati University

**ABSTRACT**

Bilweswar Devalaya is a haven for the folkloristic activities which are involved with the various festivals celebrated in its vicinity. Despite the high literacy rate and aggression of technological inputs, the way of life of the local people is obsessed with the folkloristic activities which are being reared by the Devalaya. The most remarkable thing of the Devalaya is that it fosters the three cult of religion at the same time. These are: Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnaism. All the three cults get unique colours through the contextualization with the local fervour. The Devalaya nourishes the humanistic ideas to favour the people's aspiration in many ways. Primarily, the entire Devalaya complex is committed for the looking after the folk artisans, artists and their folkloristic activities acquired through inheritance. Modernization of everything is witnessed except than the pristine ways of worshipping the deities of which Lord Shiv is the principal deity. Durga Puja is celebrated in the most splendid way greeting a large number of devotees who believe in Shaktism from various places of the state wherein dozens of buffaloes are sacrificed including goats, ducks, pigeons and other inanimate objects before the Goddess Durga with a view to propitiating the wishes of Her and personal solace. Though the age old practices of sacrificing animals invite debate amongst the intellectual class; however, it is on rise day by day. The chief purpose of the paper is only to highlight the major folkloristic activity which is none other than Ojapali and how it becomes instrumental in narrating the significances of the religious events or festivals under the aegis of Bilweswar Devalaya. Because, Ojapali is a mandatory folk item accrued with the festivals that entertain villagers with crude taste but with most vehement effect.

**(I) OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY:**

To highlight the different festivals celebrated by the Bilweswar Devalaya which accompany various folk performances, particularly, the Oja-Pali. How the three types of Oja-Pali get priority amongst all the folk performances in the vicinity of the Devalaya; the paper intends to narrate. The methodology applied here is the sociological approach to understand the impact upon the society. The study is based on primary and secondary bibliographic sources which is supplanted by the field study and data collected through personal interviews.

**(II) INTRODUCTION:**

Bilweswar Devalaya is one of the most ancient Devalaya(s) i.e. Home for God or goddess which is of Sanskrit origin-temple in Assam located at Belsor-an adjoining village of Bilweswar in the district Nalbari which is being considered as sacred place for the Hindu devotees since its erection by the king Nagakhya who is referred to as King Nagsankara also. The Devalaya is said to have built in 1443 saka (1521 A.D.) Though there is no any authentic historical records about the regime of King Nagakhya or Nagsankara; however, it may be conjectured from the pages of history that he was one of the small kings who ruled Pratapgarh of Biswanath Chariali. Like other small kings, he was also subjugated by Biswa Simha, the founder of the Koch Kingdom. Aryanization process had fostered the erection of temples throughout the country which represent the Brahmanic pattern of worshipping. In almost all temples, the Brahman priests take the leading parts in establishments which is true in case of Bilweswar Devalaya also. The origin of the Bilweswar Devalaya is also associated with a Brahmin named Rup Narayan Dev who was the forefather of the Purohit family later on known as Deuri-although the word is linked with Kiratiya tradition. Like every religious site, Bilweswar Devalaya has also an original linkage with a legend. The said Brahmin tamed a Kapili Gai(yellowish-brown cow). One day, he had found that the cow ceased to give milk without any known reason. One day he followed the cow during grazing time and could see that she was giving milk from her breast over a bunch of Birina Ban (Reed Grass). Owing to the curiosity, the Brahmin dug out the bunch of Birina Ban. He found an image of Shiv Linga-Phallus of Lord Shiva. This is the legend of Bilweswar Devalaya by which it is linked with myth.<sup>2</sup>

Festivals are the outcome of human civilization. In forming of the society, people of a specific geographical locality assemble, interact, exchange ideas and instinctive aspirations but with commonness. As a result of these continuous activities by the mankind different festivals emerge according to the taste of the people of a particular society. Festivals mirror the folk-life and provide entertainment maintaining the cultural, religious and social legacy. In other words, thoughts of the past are transmitted to the new generation people and made a bridge between the

people of the bygone days and the new times. These have opened the doors for the socialization process for the new generation people. Along with these festivals, different types of cultural events, activities take place. Like other societies in the globe, Assamese society is also featured with various such events. Due to the unending efforts of the society to hold such events moral, social codes are instilled gradually in the minds of new generation people which are scattered by the elderly experienced people. The social set-up is grounded by the religiousness of any community. Because, when the humankind was nearest to the nature with a meagre scientific bases, they had to believe utterly only in the forces or outrages of the nature. So they had to submit all the time before the nature. Even the supernatural thoughts were the natural obsession of the people as a whole. This belief is not stoppable. It continues to flow through the folk people. The folk is understood as follows- ".....the folk as an unsophisticated, homogeneous group living in a politically bounded advanced culture but isolated from it by such factors as topography, geography, religion, dialect, economics and race." <sup>3</sup> The Bilweswar Devalaya is a monument of antiquity that rears the folk of the locality with beliefs, customs and folk practices.

Festivals are of two kinds: personal and public. Personal festivals are celebrated by the individual family patronage and the public festivals are by the collective patronages. In the Assamese Hindu society, public festivals are observed at the public venues like temple, devalaya, naam-ghar, satra etc. Bilweswar Devalaya is renowned for festivals. Durga Puja is celebrated by the Devalaya in a large scale. On the day of Navami, lakhs of devotees come to witness the 'buffalo sacrifice' and to have the blessings of Devi. More than fifty buffaloes are sacrificed and offered every year in front of the Devi by the people from various places wishing progress and peace in their lives. It has widespread publicity through various media. In every month, the vicinity of the Devalaya remains gorgeous, colourful and splendid. From the Shivratri to Jethua Naam, almost every kind of festivals observed in Lower Assam are celebrated. Moreover that personal festivals like-marriage, birthday, anna-praasan i.e.first meal ceremony for babies etc. are celebrated by the own family patronage. All the festivals are endowed with various folkloristic activities and performing arts basically of folk taste. These have related with the existence of the people in the society. Customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social groups; also the characteristic features of everyday existence. Every kind of worship is supported by Sukananni Oja-Pali and other occasions are supported by Byash and Ramayani Oja-Pali.<sup>4</sup>

**(III) HISTORICITY OF OJA-PALI:**

Assam is particularly rich in the field of folk drama. These are: bhaona, oja-pali, nagara naam,dhuliya,kushan-gan,pala-

gan, khuliya-bhaona, bhaira. The Oja-pali institution also incorporates within itself ingredients of folk theatre. It is customary for the principal singer-Oja, to enter into dramatic dialogues with his principal assistant, Dainapali. In some performances, particularly in Mare-Gowa and Ramayan-Gowa forms, more elaborate dramatic interpolations constitute a part of the Oja-Pali structure.<sup>5</sup>

The three books Smriti Ratnakar by Pandit Vedacharya of ancient Kamrupa (13<sup>th</sup> century), Kathaguru Charit edited by Upen Ch. Lekharu and Guru Lila by Ram Rai provide evidences about the prevalence of Oja-Pali even on the occasion of funeral ceremony of Mahapurush Sankardev and Mahapurush Madhavdev. The Copper Inscription of Banamali Dev of 9<sup>th</sup> Century is a testimony to the fact that there was a prevalence of Oja-Pali of that time.

On the basis of the subject matters, Oja-Pali can be classified into three types. These are: Byash Oja-Pali, Ramayani Oja-Pali and Sukananni Oja-Pali. Byash Ojapali is based on the stories of The Mahabharata, Ramayani Oja-Pali is based on the stories of The Ramayana. Sukananni Ojapali is based on the stories of Padmaa Purana composed by Sukabi Narayandev. Narayandev is believed to be a resident of Sualkuchi-the Silk City of Assam in ancient times though there are controversies amongst the scholars. Sukananni or Sukanarayani Oja-Pali is performed to propitiate exasperation of Manasha Debi-Snake Goddess in Hindu Mythology. Its tradition is set in Assamese society from the stories of Chanda Sadagar-a merchant king of Champak Nagar in Chai Gaon of Kamrup(Rural) district in present times whose seventh son-Lakhindar or Lakhai was killed by the biting of Manasha on the first day of his marriage with Sati Beula as result of his non compliance to worship Manasha as he was a stern devotee of Chandi-the other name of Durga Debi. This story is being orally transmitted through ages.

**(IV) DEVALAYA UTILITY OF OJA-PALI AND ITS STRUCTURE:**

Despite the aggression of technology and other items of entertainment, still, there is great prevalence of Oja-Pali primarily in the districts of Darrang, Nalbari, Barpeta, Baksa, Goalpara etc. All the forms of Oja-Pali are equally popular amongst the folk people. Oja-Pali from Muslim community in Darrang district and Oja-Pali consisting women members in Barpeta district are in practice even today. The group of Oja-Pali consisting of one Oja and four-five Pali(s) out of which one is Daina Pali. Oja sings and acts the Geet-Pad-hymns and the Daina Pali explains these in his own way in the simplified forms and in crude language to suit the psyche of the folk people. The other Pali(s) sing the hymns supporting the Oja together by playing the hand cymbals in a special rhythm. The contextualised forms of the epic and Puranic stories attract the people very easily. The features of the Oja-Pali make them very popular amongst the people. Though the Oja-Pali is assessed to be a crude form of performing arts combining songs and drama; however, some classical features are also noticed in the Oja-Pali. Use of Mudra-classical gestures and Raag-classical notes are noticed by the scholars of that domain.<sup>7</sup>

Bilweswar Devalaya is a localized hub for the folkloristic activities. So the traditionally acquired artistic forms are still in existence under its patronage. The troupes of such performance belonging to the adjoining area are still potent to resist the rapid extinction of many forms of performing arts. The entire west part of the Nalbari district and the east part of the Barpeta district are said to be the main operational areas of all functions of the Bilweswar Devalaya till date. All the folkloristic troupes have a fine network amongst them and they get privilege to perform their show as the Devalaya holds series of religious and family events round the year. So the enrichment of the folk performing groups is noticeable.

**(V) SOCIAL LEGACY OF OJA-PALI AND THE DEVALAYA'S NURTURING:**

To understand the social legacy- examples of some eminent personalities in the field of Ojapali are to be presented. They are: Naro Barman(Naro Oja) from Kaihati, Dhaniram Daina Pali popularly known as Dhaina Daina Pali from Jagara, Dhatu Ohja from Kaihati, Bisturam Daina Pali from Kaihati. The tradition of Ohjapali of Kaihati is still maintained by Madan Ohja who is rightly

considered to be the successor of the legacy. Belsor-one of the home villages of Bilweswar Devalaya is boast of having Naro Ohja who propagated Gandhism and Marxism through the medium of Ohjapali and he was accompanied by Rango Dainapali whose acting and speech delivery attracted the spectators greatly. In present times, Ramohan Ohja of Bilweswar leads two groups of Ohjapali. The other Oja-Pali artists of the past and the present accordingly of the Bilweswar Devalaya are: Lt. Lalit Haloi(Ohja), Lt. Harkanta Haloi(Oja), Lt. Chakradhar Mena(Ohja), Lt. Nibharsha Barman(Pali), Lt. Guda Barman(Pali), Lt. Debi Barman(Pali), Lt. Jaltiram Barman(Pali), Lt. Purna Barman(Pali), Sri Harmohan Rajbongshi(Ohja), Sri Prabhat Haloi(Dainapali), Sri Bichitra Rajbongshi(Ohja), Sri Dilip Rajbongshi(Dainapali), Sri Shaniram Rajbongshi(Pali), Sri Kailash Rajbongshi(Pali), Sri Biren Rajbongshi(Pali) etc.<sup>8</sup> There is a unique type of Oja-Pali in Nalbari district which is called Bhaira wherein 'bhao(s)-gestures are emphasised during performance. The birth place of Bhaira is Jagara which is a village near to Bilweswar Devalaya. Late Baga Bhot Oja was the pioneer of this kind whose descendents continued to perform. They were: Lt. Gandharam Oja, Lt. Kinchit Oja, Satya Oja, Pratap Dainapali. In present times, Jagadish Baruah popularly known as Hukuku Bhaira-a disciple of Pratap Dainapali is performing Bhaira and entertaining the people a lot. The performers of all the forms of Oja-Pali wear different types of attire and play bell metal cymbals attracting the spectators.

**(VI) SUSTENANCE OF OJA-PALI AND ITS CAUSES:**

Bilweswar Devalaya, is emerging as a place for religious tourism by the governmental support in a rapid pace having newly constructed tourist lodge and other essential infrastructure in recent years. Its religiousness, myths, legends, tales are being propagated across the state due to the visits of influential persons from all fraternities with great momentum. In other words, the Devalaya converts itself to religious congregation during Durga Puja. Fairs held during it add extra dimension to the festivals giving opportunities to the local people for purchasing their essential items and domestic utensils including fancy items. People from different walks of life entertain themselves engrossing with the folk and modern performances along with Mobile Theatre groups. But the economic reality and the crudity of taste, still, compel a huge bulk of people belonging to all neighbouring villages to entertain only with the folk performances arranged by the Devalaya authority as well as the ad-hoc committee formed to manage the festivals. Pykes (a Pyke is a group of four people who are assigned with specific duty) are always ready to serve the functions of the Devalaya and daily 'bhog-meal for the devotees' is served to the assembled devotees including the folk performers. Folk performers are paid honorarium from the accumulated currency as offerings by the visitors. Amongst all the folk performing groups, Oja-Pali occupies a prominent place during all festivals. They are from all places of the district; sometimes, from outside of the districts. The rhythmic playing of Khuti Taal (small bell metal cymbals by single hand) by Sukananni(a derived word from Sukabi Narayandev); Baati Taal(slightly big bell metal cymbals by both hands)by the Byash Oja-Pali(s) reverberate the day and night of the Devalaya amusing folk people to a great extent.

**(VII)POTENTIALITY OF THE DEVALAYA IN PROMOTING OJA-PALI:**

In modern day times, though people are materially developing in a rapid pace; however, sociological survey is indicative of people's fatigue which is born out of the collapse of the relation with the nature. There are other reasons also among which the distortion of joint family structure is a major one. The entertainment imported from the electronic media e.g. Internet, TV etc. which are based on the westernized model is found to be cannibal in case of indigenous types of entertainment. The indigenouness is perpetually intact only in the folklore. Bilweswar Devalaya is the epitome of folkloristic performance wherein a huge number of people belonging to the locality get solace for ages. The sacredness which is possessed by the Devalaya is a potential factor to entice the people by its activities. The demography says that majority people of the locality are Hindu by religion. Though the Devalaya is of original Shaivite legacy; however, it became the altar for all deities in later days. Both the Puranic and Vedic traditions are observed in every aspect of the Devalaya.

In short, all the worships prescribed by both the traditions whether Puranic and Vedic are performed with continuity due to which people of all faiths of Hinduism are attracted by the Devalaya. Besides it, Vaishnavite traditions are also maintained on many occasions which started since the time of affiliation of Koch Kings. The atmosphere may be exploited by the rampant performance of Oja-Pali as it is a popular form of folk art. "For centuries India remained largely an 'oral society'. The oral mode of communication played a major role in its freedom movement, the incidence of illiteracy being very high. This even today remains at the level of about 40 per cent."<sup>10</sup> Of course, the situation is being changed. But Oja-Pali, still, is relevant in propagating the religious story amongst the folk people which has a widespread acceptability due to its theatrical mode and attractive attire worn by the performers. Devalaya vicinity is a vital place in enticing the people of different walks of life through its sacredness having the legendary, mythical stories and long standing beliefs including supernatural elements. The Devalaya epitomizes all these things which are affiliated with people with folk ways detaching themselves from the current scientific and so-called thoughts. Owing to this aged beliefs, the Devalaya can work in promoting happiness, peace, integrity which are the timeless demands of the society, though, our society is seen to be overwhelmed with the impacts of globalization. Oja- Pali may be used as a great folk instrument for the social sake making more productive by the addition of current subjects.

#### VIII) CONCLUSION:

There are no double opinions that Bilweswar Devalaya is practicing place for all Hindu religious cults inviting pan-Indian elements also at present times with a vehement resistance to the extinction of pristine ways of worshipping and maintaining everything in concord with folkways. Oja-Pali and the Devalaya have been keeping an everlasting bond in promoting the overall magnanimity of folk life of the people of greater locality. The attachment and the interest have not been exhausted despite of imported elements changing cultural scenario of the Devalaya. The appraisal essentially does not demand the completeness but a benign effort has been made to apprise the features of the Devalaya and its relation with the major folkloristic item-Oja-Pali.

1. Dandiram Datta, Sri Sri Bilweswarar Itibitya, p-2
2. John Greenway: Literature Among the Primitives, Hatboro, 1964, p.xii
3. Personal interview with Madhab Nath at his residence at Barakhat, Niz Dahmadhana, Baksa on 11/02/19
4. Birendranath Datta, NC Sarma and PC Das, A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India, p-205
5. Bipin Ch. Deka, Loka Jibanat Ojapali aru Belsor Anchalat Iyar Prashar, Bilvashree-Souvenir of 4th Annual Special Conference of Sahitya Sabha, p-88
6. ibid p-89
7. Prabhat Haloi, Bilweswar, p-25
8. Ranjit Mishra, Daloi, Bilweswar Devalaya, personal interview on 7.01.2019 at his Official Chamber
9. Yogendra Singh, Culture Change in India-Identity and Globalization, p-56

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