



## Bhawaiyya Chatka Lore As A Folk Performing Art

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**Abstract:** Assam is an Indian state located in the north eastern part of the country, is home to a multitude of race and tribes. Assamese folk tradition gets its present mature status with contribution from these races and tribes. Assam is rich in Performing arts which is an integral part of folk tradition. Since ancient times various performing arts are widely practiced in Assam. Bhawaiyya Chatka songs are important part folk performing arts of Assam. This paper is an attempt to introduce Bhawaiyya Chatka to the world regarding its history, place of performance, style of presentation, costume of performer and different folk instrument used during performance. This paper is based on analytical a area based study of Bhawaiyya Chatka. The aim of this paper is to introduce Bhawaiyya Chatka which is an excellent folk performing arts of Assam.

**Key Word:** Bhawaiyya Chatka, Assam, folk performing arts, songs.

### I. INTRODUCTION :

Beyond the chicken's neck of the mainland India, to its north-easterly direction, there exists a land that a multitude of race and tribes have called their home from ancient times. Soaked in ethereal beauty and a prolific cultural heritage, this land has ensnared many a scholars and anthropologists for a long time. This fabled land-Assam has played host to a myriad hues of humanity, each etching their unique identity in the plaque of time.

These identities are encapsulated in the folk traditions of the land. Though folk traditions have a pre-historic origin, a systematic Endeavour to document them took flight only at the onset of nineteenth century. Folk traditions consist of dance, music, art and performing arts. The performing arts range from vocal and instrumental music, dance and theatre to pantomime, sung verse and beyond. They include numerous cultural expressions that reflect human creativity and that are also found, to some extent, in many other intangible cultural heritage domains." ([www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en)) More often than not, traditions, both oral and performing varieties are etymologically named after the folk form and the performance they typify. Notable mention are- *Putala Naach*, *Dhuliya*, *Ojapaali*, *Deodhani*, *Devadashi*, *Kushaan Gaan*, *Bhaari Gaan* etc.

#### **Area of the study:**

In ancient age Assam was known as Kamrupa and Pragjyotishpura. The sporadic epigraphs and stone inscriptions are considered as the evidences of these names. The state Assam consists of two valleys known as the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak valley which are full of exotic natural beauty and enrich in flora and fauna. The state Assam has an area of 78,400 sq. km. and a population of about 3.25 Corer according to 2011 Census Report. In the present study, all the areas of Assam where, Bhawaiya Chatka is performed have been covered and discussed.

#### **Objectives:**

The present study is an attempt to understand the role of Bhawaiya Chatka as a folk performing art. In this study, the importance of Bhawaiya Chatka as a folk performing art is projected. The main objectives of this study are- To study the origin and growth of Bhawaiya Chatka and to describe the folklore and folk-life of the community who performed this.

### II. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY:

This paper is basically prepared on analytical method based on secondary sources of data such as books, journals, magazine, newspaper and internet. The following tools and methods are used for the purpose of the study and data collection: Unstructured Interview, Personal Interview, Group Interview, Observations method, Conversation, discussion.

### III. DISCUSSION:

The sands of time bury within them the episodes of human history, their interaction with society and environment. Folk traditions seek to unearth these episodes in the quest to map a coherent picture. And in turn, the principal aim of the folk-performance arts is to serve as a memento to these bountiful folk traditions they trace their root from. One such folk tradition is the *Bhawaiyya Chatka*. Attributed to the *Koch-Rajbangsi* of erstwhile west Kamrupa of Assam *Bhawaiyya Chatka* chronicles their society, behavioral patterns, livelihood patterns, lingua-franca and vivid outlook toward life. The *Koch-Rajbangsi*'s were primarily agricultural. However other trades such as boat-men, transportation of goods on ox, buffaloes, tilling of land, taming of elephants were also practiced. In sync with these trades, songs such as *Moishaal*, *Maahut*, *Maawaiyya*, *Gaadiyaal* were in vogue amongst the *Koch-Rajbangsi*. Primarily sung by the male folk, these songs bore the themes of love, conjugal relationships and gave voice to the intimate impulses that drove both men and women. Since these songs exhibited similarity in tune and their message, these songs were clubbed under the umbrella of *Bhawaiyya* for easier recognition. However who coined the term *Bhawaiyya* is still a mystery due to the lack of conclusive evidence. Many critics have forwarded their own versions regarding its origin. The most accepted postulate is that it has come from the two words *bhaab* and *aaiyaa*. *Bhaab* meaning thought and *aaiyaa* meaning legend/lore. Hence *Bhawaiyya* roughly translates to "a paean lending a credible voice to a lore."

Content wise and music wise, *Bhawaiyya* is divided into *Bhawaiyya* and *Chatka*. *Chatka* is light-hearted in its content and tenor. The *Chatka*'s primary themes are love, the desire of physical intimacy. Sexual innuendos are replete in *Chatkas*, imparting in them a tinge of vulgarity. The *Chatkas*, however were well received by the populace, owing to its fast paced style, light hearted portrayal of life and associated activities.

The *Bhawaiyya* songs, on the other hand encompassed a broad slice of life. They were rooted in nature. They were most prevalent amongst the population in the areas that now is-lower Assam, North Bengal, Rangpur, Srihatta, Mymensingh etc. The prevailing geography directly impacted the population and hence they did not limit themselves to agriculture. They practised other professions as well. While traversing treacherous terrain to their workplace, these people would sing songs aloud, often to the point of becoming hoarse. These hoarseness inducing tunes with the passage of time became *Bhawaiyya*.

One principal element of these songs was rivers. Rivers like Champa, Gadadhar, Gangadhar, Dhalla, Teesta, Gauranga, Raaidak, Torkha, enjoyed pride of place in these songs. These songs succinctly portrayed the life by the river, the meeting and parting of couples in love by the banks. the long wait of the girl for her lover, the shrill of the *dutara* (musical instruments) shattering the evening calm etc. The rustic elements were vividly portrayed in the songs, as for example--

*Gadadharer jemon dhu dhu re baala*

*Pirit koirlong aamaar gaalar mala*

*Gadadharer jemon sitkaa re maati*

*Pirit hoilo mur gaalar kaati* (dutta-216)

The women and her psyche too were highlighted in *Bhawaiyya* songs. As for example:

*Phaagun maashe adhik jaala*

*Chaitre naarir baran kaala re*

*Biasaash maash gelo kainya r kandite kandite*

*Paashaan baaindhyas pati monote* (ahmed 269)

The entire gamut of Koch Rajbangsi society, folklore, traditions were vividly portrayed in the *Bhawaiya* tradition. The contemporary societal flux such as the prevailing superstitions, legends, myths too found representation in the *Bhawaiya* tradition. Not to be limited by the abstract, the *Bhawaiya* tradition also focused on real world issues such as extra marital affairs, joint family dynamics, orthodoxy in the society, zamindari system, struggles of the impoverished etc. The song:

*Oore aadhkaan bhaag aar zamidarar ohho*

*Aar aadhkhaanete mur chole naa rey*

*O moi kemon baasiya rou* (ahmed 311)

--has documented the zamindari system in its true exploitative self.

Individuals engaged as Mahout, Moishaal, Gaadiyaal, Naaiyaa often had to spend time away from his lady love. This pangs of separation weighed his heart. The *Bhawaiyya* songs carried within them rich accounts of the trials and tribulations and inherent risks of the trade chosen by such people. The *Bhawaiyya* songs put prime focus on the women folk. Themes such as a young lover's anguish on being unable to meet her mate, a lady's ignited passions to consummate her marriage, a widow's desire to meet her deceased husband once again were dominant in *Bhawaiyya* songs. Thus the dominant language in these songs was that of dialect spoken by the populace of western region of lower Assam.

The dominant theme of *Bhawaiyya* is of love while its tune is of pathos. The pathos arose from the prolonged spells of separation endured by both men and women owing to the perils of the trade the menfolk were engaged in the *Bhawaiyya* songs exhibited a melancholic tinge. *Bhawaiyya r suur karun tom, taai ta madhuratam gaan. Bhawaiyya gaaner anatyam aakorshon ei korun surere murchhana sruttar moner upar bedana r aastaran bichiye diye*" (ahmed 241) However episodes of celebration of valour , comical themes too found a pride of place in them. The critics of *Bhawaiyya* tradition hence opine that these songs progress from the physical realm to the metaphysical realm, encompassing within its ambit both the carnal and the cerebral. These songs were profound in nature, reflecting the pangs of life. The *Chatka* songs, on the other hand were satirical and hence mirthful in nature.

The *Bhawaiyya* songs were penned in metre with *Matrabritta metre* and *akkhharbritta metre* being extensively employed. Other metre used were *poyaar, dulori, chabi*. Below is an excerpt of a song penned in *dulori*---

*Kesh na paakil danta naa bhangil*

*Joiban haai gelo bhaati*

*Dinae dinae khasiya poribe*

*Rangila daalaner maati (bhakat 461)*

Usage of elements figures of speech such as alliteration along with rhetoric and prosody enhance the lyric beauty of *Bhawaiyya* songs. As for example--

*Ghultung ghultung ghultung baaje*

*Moisher galaar ghanta*

*Mur naarir poraan kaande*

*Gharat naaroi monta (dutt-233-234)*

These lyrics aptly convey snippets of country life, its inhabitants in its resplendent glory and youthful vigour.

Spontaneity was the hallmark of the *Bhawaiyya* tradition. Voiced by the men folk engaged in their trade, these songs were not meant for an audience, and were a private Endeavour of the singers. they sought to vent their melancholic disposition via these songs.

With time, these songs were inducted into the fold of performing arts and began to be performed in front of an audience. The lyrics dabble in question and their answers. A few of these songs are sung as a duet, but these songs are primarily a solo affair. They are also performed during marriages etc. The *Bhawaiya Chatka* mark can be seen in the *kushaan gaan*, a popular song and dance form in western Assam. That *Bhawaiya Chatka* was clubbed with *Kushaan gaan* enabled it to morph into a performing art. Decently attired, the performers act out the *Bhawaiyya Chatka* songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments and gained acceptance among the audience.

Though *Bhawaiyya* songs like the *Kushaan gaan* entail song and dance routine, yet there is no explicit reference regarding this norm. Mostly *Bhawaiyya music is based on work, that is why these songs are known as karma-sangeet(worked based music)*. *Chatka* not only gave a voice to the despair and the melancholic tones of separation, it also celebrated beauty. It sung praises of *kamala sundori* her exquisite dance and her ethereal beauty. Verses such as---

*Naach kaorhe rupohi sundari*

*Haate baa diya taali*

*Maagur machher thumathumi*

*Aadaa baa saka saki*

*Haate bhoriya parakh kor*

*Nayan bhariya dekhi*

*(bhakat 418)*

--Is a testament of *Bhawaiyya Chatka* tradition as an ode to beauty.

The once close knit society gradually decayed, effecting deep set divisions. These misfortunes shrunk the reach of *Bhawaiyya Chatka* and confined it to undivided Goalpara district. Societal upheavals triggered large scale religious conversions impacting the *Bhawaiyya Chatka*. Fresh set of occupations registered its impact on the *Bhawaiyya Chatka* tradition. These freshly converted folk heralded a new chapter in *Bhawaiyya Chatka* songs and began singing them with a new found zeal and gusto and added a new dimension to the old traditions.

As had been mentioned earlier in the essay, *Bhawaiyya Chatka* celebrated the *Koch-Rajbongshi*, and venerated every aspect of their lives. The *Bhawaiyya* tradition placed special emphasis on the *koch rajbongshi* women especially their dress. They attired themselves in a seven hand-length, hand woven attire called *patani*, and this very attire, at a later date, came to be adopted as the costume while performing the *Bhawaiyya*. The expansion of the *koch rajbongshi* empire and subsequent merger of KochBehar with West Bengal affected a radical transformation amongst the *Koch-Rajbongshi*. The

traditional *patani* yielded space to the saree. these flux are well-documented in *Bhawaiyya* songs as shown in the specimen below---

*Prothome pindhiya saree naame dhaakeswari*

*Gotaai saree rang bironger desh bidesher chhobi.*

During the performance of *Bhawaiyya Chatka* as a means of entertainment, the performers put on polka dotted *patanis*. At a later stage, *patanis* were replaced by yellow saree during performances. The performers embellished their buns with calendula flower, lined their eyes with kajal, wore bindi, drowsed their hair in mustard oil taking care to match its hue with that of the *patani*. They also coloured their lips red, earlier with betel nut juice, and currently with cosmetics. They also wore neckbands such as *chandrahaar*, *muthikharu*, *rudramala*, and other assorted ornaments such as *nolak* on their nostrils, *maakari* on their ears, *ring* on their fingers etc.

The working class men that *Bhawaiyya* mention had worn dhoti or other similar wrap around cloth that did not cover their knees. The well off men wore dhoti woven out of mulberry fed silkworm and cotton. These dhotis were longer than the ones worn by the less privileged men folk. The men also wore *gamusa* on their heads or draped it around the neck.

The prime essence of a song is in its music. According to Indian belief, the harmonious blend of lyric, and dance accompanied by musical instruments gave birth to music. *Bhawayya* is no exception. Instruments such as *kartaal*, *dhol*, *dhaak dholki*, *baashi*, *benaa*, *dotaara*, *saarenda* have elevated the stature of the *Bhawaiyya*. Amongst the galaxy of these accompaniments, *dholki* and *dhaak* and *dhol* were most prominent. These instruments were not season specific, rather served as universal accompaniment all year around.

One musical instrument worthy of note in *Bhawaiyya* is the *dotaara*. The *dotaara* pulls tugs at the heart of both men and women with its melody. The *Chatka* songs is replete with episodes wherein the *dotaara* served a more intimate purpose. The lovelorn men took the *dotaara* to their place of work and its strings belted out melancholic tunes about the ocean of distance that separated them from their loved ones. The women too, found their voice in the strings of the *dotaara*. Its strings logged the sadness that enveloped the women while awaiting their men stationed in distant lands.

The *dhol* has added a new dimension to the *Bhawaiyya Chatka*. Predominantly an integral part of assamese tradition, the *dhol* serves to accentuate the sadness enveloping the female psyche. The *dhaak* is a commercial instrument and has been used in similar capacity. Professional artistes, as a means of livelihood, sung the *Bhawaiyya* songs with the *dhaak* as accompaniment.

Another principal accompaniment in *Bhawaiyya Chatka* songs is the flute. Called the *bambaashi* or *muukhbaashi*, this flute was played by beloved of the women folk. The women folk's heart was set affluter by their beloved, whom they affectionately addressed as *kaanaai*, *krishna*, *kaalchanda*, with soulful renditions with the *mukhbaashi*. As for example---

*Aarey o bhai mur kaalsaan*

*Xadaai xunang tur dotaara baashir gaan (bhakat-187)*

In addition to the instruments described, *Chatka* songs also note the use of *bela* and *saarenda*. "*balder prishte tuliya nisung saarenda dotaara koinya he*" attests to the pride of place enjoyed by all the assortment of musical instruments in the *Bhawaiyya Chatka* songs. The galaxy of various instruments have raised the bar of *Bhawaiyya Chatka* and firmly cemented its place as a folk performance.

#### IV. CONCLUSION :

*Bhawaiyya Chatka* is a jewel in the crown of Assamese folk tradition. Vigilance must be exercised so as not to lose this rich heritage in the tumultuous wave of globalization. Also care must be taken so that *Bhawaiyya Chatka* do not lose its unique identity in the melee. This paper is a minuscule endeavour to skim the surface of *Bhawaiyya Chatka*. The scope for deeper probe is always available. The paper is an attempt to sensitize the people of Assam about this gem of a tradition, so as to shield *Bhawaiyya Chatka* from distortion. If we can preserve and protect and nourish, only then this folk form will continue to shine in resplendent glory for eons to come.

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