

Blueprint for “Preservation of *Māre-gān*” (An epic singing performance of Assam) under the Scheme for “Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”, sanctioned under Sanction Letter **No: 28-6/ICH-Scheme/ 10 /2013-14, Dated: 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2014.**

*Māre-gān*

(An epic singing performance of Assam)

### **Introduction**

The intangible Art is without a physical entity; it cannot be touched and communicates either verbally or non-verbally. They are the enriched treasures of human expression in the form of Dance, Music, Ritual, Festivals etc. that passes through decades of creativeness or recreation of culture. These practises and their representation, expression and knowledge are always associated with a group of people or individual transmitted from generation after generation with a sense of identity and continuity.

As a multicultural country, India is home to people belonging to numerous cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Folklore, as a distinct part of culture, simply refers to the lore of the people, which in turn basically refers to the body of informal and unwritten information, wisdom, knowledge, skill, customs, traditions, and practises of group of people transmitted from person to person or generation after generation by oral tradition. That is how the oral tradition continues to transmit a knowledge system and bind people socially. Most of the oral forms incorporate performances so that they reach to people. *Ojā-pāli* tradition of Assam is such an example of performance to reach the public. *Ojā-pāli*, a traditional form of epic singing performed in a group is widely found in Assam with its numerous folds and sub folds. *Māre-gān* is the most distinct one that is found as an orally transmitted performing form since an unknown date. *Māre-gān* an epic singing performance on *Bisahari*, a snake deity marks and carries an account of beliefs and rites. The Pati Rabhas of South-East Goalpara and South-West of Kāmṛūp of Assam institute ‘*Māre pujā* or *Mārāi Pujā*’ to propitiate Bishahari regarded as the most important festive occasion of much socio-cultural importance. The heaviest concentration of the Rabhas is in the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the present Goalpara district where both the Assamese speaking semi Hinduised groups and those retaining their old tribal ways live together.

One of the dominant micro or local epic in the Western part of Assam is *Manasā*. It is a long narrative about the legendary power of a snake deity widespread among various groups and sub groups of Assamese community. The spirit possession and religious integration of tribal belief system perceives

*Manasā* worship in the villages of West Assam. It has been debated if *Manasā*, which is closely connected with the worship of the snake goddess *Manasā* or *Bisahari*, can be considered as an epic or a cycle of epic songs. The epic narration of *Manasā* among the tribal group focus on different performing event including the dramatic scenes.

*Māre-Gān* is an epic singing associated with *Māre pujā* to propitiate *Bisahari*, a snake deity believed among the **Pāti Rabha** tribal group of Assam. The verses of the songs use further manifestations in terms of visual artefact and divine possession (*Deodhani*) to bring light on the ritual significance. The ritual endures interesting folk art of image making and painting on pith known as *Maju*. The paintings are the various episodes of *Manasā* songs mostly the story of *Beula*. The songs are basically the narratives that talk about significance of the serpent worship, the heroic deeds as well as the legendary discord of the deity. The songs have also socio-cultural importance while talking about the familiar livelihood of a village people. A number of oral narratives are sung by the group among which *Chando Sadāgar* (A story of a Merchant) is more popular because of its dramatic routine. The basis of the ritual is the fear that comes from snake bites found abundant in this region specially in rainy season. The songs are, therefore, sung in praise of the deity whom the villagers afraid of very much. The songs contain *lila* of the goddess encompassing into different periods. The songs compiled by a local scholar titled as *Māyāwanti Bisahari* in the year 1987 to preserve the oral tradition.

The *pujā* ceremonially begins and lasts for four days and nights is called as *Bhar-māre* where the main focus is the possession that continues for eight to nine hours. The context of the songs which is found as religious performed at the village temple premises. The songs create and recreate the ritual objects, mood and space during the ceremony. The songs give vision to the artefacts known as *Saku dān* (gift of eye) on 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the worship with the help of artisan and the possessed lady. On last day it floats over river to declare the end of the ceremony. The other most important features of ceremonial worship are *māju kāmāni* (ability to acquire the artefact), *dāk* (unconsciousness-a state of trance) and *rangilā* (amusement) where the *Ojā-pāli* takes an indispensable role. Sacrifices are the important criterion of the ceremonial worship. Besides the temple premise, the songs also perform at bank of the river or lake and the house of the *Deuri* (priest) as a part of the ritual. The ritual ensues the Assamese calendric month *Chot-Bhāda* (April-August) which is mostly the rainy season in Assam.

The performing group is known as *Māre-guā-Ojā-pāli* contains 4 to 8 persons. The leading singer is called *Ojā* while the *pālis* assist him. The songs contain verses (*pada*) and repetition (*dihā*). They are not simply songs but a performance with cymbals at hand, rhythmic footsteps, distinct costumes and ornament. It has a definite beginning with *guruvandana* (invocatory piece) and

ending with *jhunāgeet* folk songs. The songs of *Māre-Gān* are tune based (*surdharmi*) instead of any particular *raga* based.

These narrative songs are the key to the knowledge which exists among the Pati Rabhas till date. *Māre-gān* may reveal the originality, old faith, believes and social structure of the province. This project will carry *Manasā* as an epic singing performance, narrated by the epic singers and performed in an embodied form by female dancers or ritual specialists who get possessed and whose performance forms an essential part. The work is going to be embedded with an elderly folk artist named Pradip Rabha who lives in Dhupdhara area of Goalpara district of Assam.

### **Objectives of the research, data creation or Documentation of the project**

- To preserve the songs by creating a contextual performance.
- To integrate the education and culture of the province in general.
- To disseminate and to encourage the form.
- To look at the performance genre of this region.
- To encourage the artists in their effort to continue the traditional form.

### **Implementation**

There will be a workshop cum training programme of *Māre-gān* for 15 days where the adjoined features such as artefacts and possession will also be included. There will be total 25-30 people among whom two persons will be teaching the **basics** of *Māre-gān* including steps and rhythms. The participants will be beginners as well as the new practitioners. Learning module will be one episode of the elongated epic singing. The teaching folks will be the traditional bearer of the *Māre-gān*. The learners will be selected by the teachers themselves according to the language ability of the form. In other words, preference will be given to the youth of the Pati Rabha tribal community. The culture, practises and folklore will be shared and discussed with invited traditional bearer and the learners during workshop. The scholars of the region will also be invited to participate in the workshop. The significance and importance of the lore as a part of the greater India will also be introduced. The final presentation or outcome of the workshop will be realised in an induced space of the locality. This might help the bearers as well as the trainees to think over and continue the form in a different context for future.

Data will be created in the workshop keeping the view of folklore and the musical aspects of *Māre-gān*. I am trying to keep the entire work away from temple yard.

### **Time**

The workshop will commence in September (Date has not fixed yet).

### **Areas**

Goalpara, Assam (Dhupdhara/Dudhnoi/Rangjuli/Mandalgram). The workshop will be held at the centre point of Goalpara-at any one of the above mentioned areas. The exact venue will be updated soon.

### **Conclusion**

There will be a final presentation at the end of the workshop where the trainees/participators will perform. The audience will be a mixed crowd inhabiting in local areas. This rhetoric presentation will introduce the next generation performers in an induced context with respect and dignity. The form will be encouraged in terms of the orally transmitting knowledge system adhere to it. The basic requirements of its learning, significant kinesics, language and folklore will be archived. The time and space will definitely allow the form in a provoked context by recognising its socio-cultural importance.

Purabi Baruah

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Scheme for “Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”

Form for National Inventory Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India

A. Name of the State  
Assam, India

B. Name of the Element/Cultural Tradition (in English)  
*Māre-Gān* : An epic singing Performance

B.1. Name of the element in the language and script of the community  
Concerned, if applicable:

Assamese script: মাৰে-গান

C. Name of the communities, groups or, if applicable, individuals concerned  
(Identify clearly either of these concerned with the practice of the said element/cultural tradition)

*Māre-Gān*, the epic singing performance is prominent among the Assamese indigenous people of southern Brahmaputra valley. This performance is adjacent to annual *Māre* religious festival of **Pati Rabha** tribal group of Assam. The Pati Rabhas of South-East Goalpara and South-West of Kāmrup of Assam institute '*Māre pujā* or *Mārāi Pujā*' to propitiate the snake deity *Bishahari* regarded as the most important festive occasion of much socio-cultural importance. They are the followers of Hinduism along with the traditional faith in animism. As per 1971 census, they constitute 8.63% of the total plains tribal population of Assam and 0.63% of the State population. However the Rabhas has certain groups and subgroups amongst which Pati-Rabhas are the most advanced section of the tribe had adopted Hindu customs for all intents and purpose and due to loss of their mother tongue had taken to speak a patois of the Assamese language. According to 1971 census, 98.19% of Rabha follows Hinduism. *Māre-Gān* performance is practised among the hinduised tribal population of western Assam.

D. Geographical location and range of the element/cultural tradition (Please write about the other states in which the said element/tradition is present)

The pati Rabha population are also found in Meghalaya, Bangladesh, West Bengal, Nepal and Manipur.

E. Identification and definition of the element/cultural tradition of the India

(Write “Yes” in one or more boxes to identify the domain(s) of intangible cultural heritage manifested by the element. If you tick ‘others’, specify the domain(s) in brackets.)

- i. ( Yes ) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- ii. (Yes) performing arts
- iii. (Yes) social practices, rituals and festive events
- iv. (Yes) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- v. ( Yes) traditional craftsmanship
- vi. other(s) (Yes)

F. Provide a brief summary description of the element that can introduce it to readers who have never seen or experienced it.

*Māre-Gān* is the traditional *Manasā* songs performed in a form of group singing called *Mare gua Oja-pali* contains 4 to 8 persons where *Ojā* is the leading singer and *Pālis* are the assistants. The songs contain creation, origin of gods-goddesses, rituals, the story of ‘Beula’ and ‘*Jhuna geeḷ*’. These are expressed in a form of folk ritual theatre, customs and rites, sacrifices, artifacts and an embodied performance *Deodhani*. The dramatic performance featuring verse songs, dance and acting has socio-cultural importance. The ritual ensues the Assamese calendric month *Chot-Bhāda* (April-August) which is mostly the rainy season in Assam. It has been performed a series of events can be divided as *adhivās* (pre phase of worshipping), *ghaṭ burani* (plummeting of pottery and settle), *saku dān* (vision of the divine), *deo hākura* (welcome/calling of deities), *dak* (a state of trance), *bali* (Sacrifies), *prasada* (remnant of blessings or grace), *rangilā* (amusement). The ritual endures interesting folk art of image making and painting on pith based on narrative. The paintings are the various episodes of *Manasā* songs mostly the story of *Beula*.

A no. of oral narratives have been performed by the group among which *Chando Sadāgar* (A story of a Merchant) is more popular because of its dramatic routine. According to the story, Beula’s husband Lakhindhar, the youngest son of Chando sadagar is bitten by snakes and she promises Chando to bring her husband’s life back for no reason. Manasa wishes to be worshipped by Chando, who declines her wishes. Chando finally admits to do so as Beula able to keep her promise. Beula brings her husband lakhindhar’s life back after she has overcome the tricks and mishap created by Manasa. This narrative is ritually performed. The actor is mainly the female who possesses spirit. The co-actor (one actor at a time) whom is taken part in the drama is among the *palis*. He changes the appearance by means of applying make-up on face or wearing symbolic coloured dress during ritual interlude. The group has extra *pali* performer so that the co-actor can be replaced during the dramatic sequence. There is also outdoor performance at the river side as well as at the house of *Maleyā*, the local artisan who

paints and makes *Maju* for the ritual. This performance brings the vigourity of the form that has close connection to *Śakti* worship.

- G. Who are the bearers and practitioners of the element/Cultural Traditions? Are there any specific roles or categories of persons with special responsibilities for the practice and transmission of it? If yes, who are they and what are their responsibilities?

The performance is an amalgamation of songs, possession, rituals and drama are engaged a no. of individuals viz.,

- I. The songs are mainly practised by the Pati Rabha tribal group, a sub tribe of Rabha tribal population of Assam.
- II. The rituals are accomplished with the help of possession and priestly helps practised by Deodhani (female) and Deuri-Deusi (male) of Pati Rabha tribe.
- III. An Artifact making (*Maju*) is an indispensable part of *Māre* worship is practiced by the traditional local artisans known as Mali or Maleya.

- H. How are the knowledge and skills related to the element transmitted today?

The *Māre-gān* performance is limited to indigenous faith of tribal people of Goalpara region. The folklore and the legendary power of the deity is transmitted through the singing of the traditional verses from an unknown past. The performers are the believers of snake deity and her folklore. The deity who is called upon on this earth is believed to be possessed by the spirit of the *Deodhani*. The spirituality and skills necessary for the practise is transmitted through the generation after generation by means of performance. The songs are in local dialect but poetic in nature.

- I. What social functions and cultural meanings do the element/cultural tradition have today for its community?

The entire performance is connected with the welfare of the community. The Pati Rabhas obtained the status of scheduled tribe but they are the followers of Hinduism. In *Māre-gān* they present their version of puranic Hinduism. The epic does not declare their identity but it presents the worldview of the community. It is observed that in the songs there is a conflict between *Siva* worship and *Bisahari* worship. *Bisahari* with her struggle and patron of higher class women enters into the fold of established religion. This helps the community to construct the society with fluidity and without biasness. *Bisahari* is now a common household deity and occupies an important position in the physical and mental layout of the people.

The epic performance also helps the community to carry beliefs in the daily life. The main room of their house has always contains a small hole on the

south side of the wall that brings presence and luck to the family. The narrative contains the description about this.

Also, the construction of kingship has taken a major role in the epic performance and so in the community. The relationships mother, father, husband and wife, in-laws are constructed.

- J. Is there any part of the element that is not compatible with existing international human rights instruments or with the requirement of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, or with sustainable development? I.e. describe any aspect of the element/cultural tradition that may be unacceptable to Law of the country or may be in opposition to practicing community's harmony with others.

The prevention of cruelty to animals act, 1960 is an act of the parliament of India enacted to prevent the infliction of unnecessary pain or sufferings of animals and to amend the laws relating to the prevention of cruelty to animals.

The sacrifices of innumerable animals including goat, pigeon and buffalo as an indispensable part of the ritual during worship (*Mārāi pujā*) may consider the remnant of primitive animistic faith. Indigenous people had assimilated the tribal belt with the Hinduism. However, the performance does not have any connection to this rite and also there has not mentioned any sacrificial rites in anywhere of the epic singing.

- K. Your Project's contribution to ensuring visibility, awareness and encouraging dialogue related to the element/cultural tradition.

The project will create the awareness and encouragement of the performance of the form.

- L. Information about the safeguarding measures that may protect or promote the element/cultural tradition

a. (Write "Yes" in one or more boxes to identify the safeguarding measures that have been and are currently being taken by the communities, groups or individuals concerned)

- i. (yes) transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education
- ii. (yes) identification, documentation, research
- iii. ( yes) preservation, protection
- iv. (yes) promotion, enhancement
- v. (...) revitalization



b. Write about the measures taken at local, state and national level by the Authorities to safeguard the element/cultural tradition?

It has hardly been found any measures except few at a local level. The practitioners highly depend on local organisers.

M. Write about the threats, if any, to the element/cultural tradition related to its practice, visibility and future longevity. Give facts and relevant reasons based on the current scenario.

Not known.

N. Safeguarding measures proposed

(This section should identify and describe safeguarding measures to protect and promote the element/cultural tradition. Such measures should be concrete and can be implemented to formulate future cultural policy for safeguarding and promoting the element/cultural tradition in the state)

-The ritual *Māre-gān* has been visualised to be in the domain of Performing Art by means of Preservation. The mapping of the performance in context (or contextual performance) will be the focus too. The tasks will be envisaged to create a centre, undertake studies which may contribute to the enrichment of the form; co-ordinate various activities such as training programme, application, research, documentation, archiving etc.

The followings are the measures undertaken to safeguard the traditional form.

- To organise workshop cum training programme. The training activities will be related to dance, music and traditional maju (craft) making. (The tentative date of the workshop is 15<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> October, 2014 at Goalpara region. The transmission of learning will be ensured from older to younger generation.
- To organise presentation/lecture at academia and cultural guild to disseminate the significance of the performance-its style and popularity.
- To create performance opportunities and encouragements for the trained artists.
- To formulate cultural policy so that the artists will get support in the region.
- To initiate preservation of the grammar, language, accompanying musical instruments, repertoire, technique, training methodology, costumes, artefacts (maju).
- To identify artist who may capable of providing artistic leadership as teachers as well as performers.

- To propose the financial assistance to senior artists.

Local level *Māre-gān* festival or regional level 'community singing' may be organised in different locations of the area. The requirement of *Māre-gān* museum/archive is required that will help to study the oral history of the form. It has been proposed to provide grant to voluntary organisation in training, performance and application.

O. Community Participation

(Write about the participation of communities, groups and individuals related to the element/cultural tradition in formulation of your project):

The community artist troupe (Pradip Rabha and group) will formulate the songs for three separate performing events. Individual (scholars and other artist, artisan) will help to monitor and evaluate the form from distortion of original context. Local organiser 's involvement will be expected unto a mark.

P. Concerned community organization(s) or representative(s)

(Provide detailed contact information for each community organization or representative or other non-governmental organization that is concerned with the element such as associations, organizations, clubs, guilds, steering committees, etc.)

- i. Name of the entity: Ojā-pāli.
- ii. Name and title of the contact person: Pradip Rabha
- iii. Address: Saraibaha village, Dhupdhara, Goalpara, Assam
- iv. Telephone number: 09864245662
- v. E-mail:....
- vi. Other relevant information:...

Q. Give information of any Inventory, database or data creation centre (local/state/national) that you may be aware of or of any office, agency, organisation or body involved in the maintenance of the said inventory etc.

No.

R. Principal published references or documentation available on the element/cultural tradition

(Books, articles, audio-visual materials, names and addresses of reference libraries, museums, private endeavours of artistes/individuals for preservation of the said element, publications or websites):

	Primary	Supplementary
Audio-visual Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentary on Mare-gan ritual &amp; Maju collection</li> </ul> <p><u>Archival Address:</u> Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Assam-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentary on Mare-Gan ritual</li> </ul> <p><u>Archival Address:</u> Achieve of NFSC (National Folklore Support Centre), Chennai-</p>	
Visual Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sola pith/Maju</li> </ul> <p>Conserved at Shankardev Kalakshetra</p> <p><u>Address:</u> SK Museum (ground floor), Guwahati, Assam-</p>	
Photographs	<p>15 No. ( Individual Research documentation)</p> <p><u>Address:</u> Purabi Baruah Tezpur, Assam- 784001, Ph. No- 09864245662</p>	
Book/Article/Essay		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An essay by Kishore Bhattacharjee in 2006 titled 'Constructing</li> </ul>

		<p>Community, Gender and Kinship through Epic Singing' published in <i>Indian Folklore Research Journal</i> vol.3 (6):1-12 .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A vernacular compilation by Praneswar Rabha, Praneswar (ed.). in 1987 titled <i>Mayavanti Bisahāri or Dakhin Goalpara Mare Geet Sangraha</i>. Published by editor with the financial assistance of The Tribal Research Institute, Assam.</li> </ul> <p><u>Address:</u></p> <p>Tribal Research Institute Library, Guwahati, Assam-</p>
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Signature: .....

Name & Designation: .....

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Name of Institution (If applicable): .....

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Address: .....

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## First Report

(Preservation of *Māre-gān*)

*Māre-gān* is an epic singing performance of Assam. The performance is adhered to the worshipping tradition *Bisahari pujā* in Western Assam propitiated during the Assamese calendric month Chot-Bhada (April-August). The project has been embedded with an elderly folk performer named Pradip Rabha who belongs to the Pati Rabha tribe of South-East Goalpara region.

The measures of preservations are taken on the basis of usage of body and space. The dissemination, on the other hand, is central to promote and encourage the form and practices. The modern era dissemination, however, is influenced by digital medium.

The ideas to preserve the form may be as follows:

- The form can be encouraged to preserve in the bodily practices by means of traditional ritual or other. There will be conducted a training cum workshop to implement the idea of bodily preservation. This will be worked out in the practicing area of Goalpara (Dhupdhara/Dudhnoi) with the help of the collaborator, local cultural centre (Govt. of Assam) and the local enthusiasts (A blueprint has been already submitted).
- The singing can be recorded to bring it into the mass and digital medium.
- A new context can be created to redefine the space of the form.

## **The progress**

The progress of the project is given below:

1. A review based on secondary sources and archival information.
2. An overview of the contextual performance visited on last April, 2014.
3. A visit to Collaborator's locality and residence.
4. A workshop has been finalized with local enthusiasts and cultural centre, Govt. of Assam.

## **Review**

A review has been completed visiting library and with archival information.

- There is a no. of vernacular books on *Māre-gān* which contain information and lore about the various believe narratives attach to the social life of Rabha people. The compilation titled *Mayayanti Bixahari* (1987) by Praneswar Rabha is a manual book to understand the complete narration. He textualised the songs such as *Tal-sristi* (Creation myth of Cymbal), *Kumar janam* (Creation myth of Potter), *Ghat –Nirmaan* (Making of ritual Pottery), *Gua janam* (Birth song of betel nut), *Tati-janam* (Birth song of Pandel), *Pata-janam* (Birth song of Jute) etc from oral to print. The dances central to the *Māre-gān* performances are *kachari nritya*, *garo nritya*, *chandi nritya*, *ghateswari nritya*, *moinapakhi nritya*, *digh nāch*, *tengal macharā nach* etc. These are performed by both the troupe singers as well as the shaman *Deodhani*.

Another book titled *Maroi geet aru Rabha Samaj* (1996) by Biren Rabha is a handbook on the impact of *Māre* songs on Rabha society. This entails the description of the narratives that are still believed and popular among their social life.

**Nabin Chandra Sharma**, a noted Scholar of Assam has done extensive and elaborative study on *Ojā-pāli* as well as *Manasā* Ritual. Among them the most vital are *Axamar Ojā-pāli* (1991), *Asamar parivesya kala Ojā-pāli* (1996), *Padmā-Purān* (1993) & *Manasā Kāvya* or *Manasā geet* (2012). According to him, the music of *Ojā-pāli* has its origin from the *Margi* tradition of Indian music (1991: 11). Sharma has divided the *Ojā-pāli* into two categories viz., epic and non epic based where he puts the *Māre-Gān* under the division of non-epic based. He said the *Ojā-pāli* is belongs to *Kathakata* storytelling tradition similar to other parts of India. He noticed that, ‘*Ojā-pāli* tradition of Assam has similarity to the *Māre-Gān* in terms of form, composition, subject-matter, context etc...Also, the rhythm, tempo, performing genre/style, content and composition has similarity to the *Suknanni* form of Darrang area (1991: 46-47). He further said, ‘*Ojā-pāli* music and dance has semi-dramatic influence and can be resembled with the Oudramagadhi style of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. So, it can be said that *Ojā-pāli* is in this region with its semi dramatic performance is on or before 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.’ (*ibid*: 9).

**K. Bhattacharjee** in his essay ‘*Constructing Community, Gender and Kingship through epic singing*’ (2006) throws light on narrated performances of the story of *Manasā* in two cultural geographies existing in Dhubri and Kamrup districts on South Western Assam. The essay is very much informative while elaborately discussing the epic narration through folk ritual theatre performance of the Rajbongshis<sup>1</sup> in Dhuburi district. He concluded, ‘the epical performance becomes interlinked with the tribal cult...Entire performance is connected with welfare of the community’ (2006:11). Scholars like Sukumar Sen (1978) and Dimmock confirm that *Manasā* songs are associated with rituals and they are the part of both oral and written traditions. Dimmock states that various myths and legends of different historical periods have been incorporated in *Manasā* songs (cited by K. Bhattacharjee, *ibid*: 2).

- **Documentation** on *Māre-gān* has been initiated by National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai in the year 2003. The dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University has collaborated in the documentation. There has been achieved 42 No. of C.D.(video) of the *Māre-gān* in ritual context (induced) documented in the few locations in Western Assam (Dhuburi and Bamunigaon).
- **Indispensible ritual object** *Maju*, image of *Manasā* etc. made up of sola pith/white paper used in *Māre-pujā* are preserved in the museum of Shankardev Kalakhetra, Guwahati, Assam.

### Visit to the field

Rabhas are the one of the nine scheduled Tribes in the plains districts of Assam mostly scattered in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal and Manipur. Previous scholars found them as animists in their religious outlook although influenced by Hindu culture and used to celebrate pan Indian festival such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Puja etc. They are the followers of both śaktism and śaivism along with the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> A community of Assam popularly known as Koch Rajbangshi



faith in animism. The Rabhas and its different groups celebrate their ritualistic festivals which relate more or less to their own religious concepts and beliefs.

The Pati Rabhas of South-East Goalpara and South-West of Kāmrūp institute *Māre puja* or *Mārāi Pujā* to propitiate *Bishahari* regarded as the most important festive occasion of much socio-cultural importance. The empirical meet with the villagers of Mandalgram, a small village in Dudhnoi area of Eastern Goalpara of Assam was taken as a remarkable field area to observe the Performance as a ritual. Mandalgram is a small village comprises of 5000 inhabitants of mixed ethnic population (caste and tribe) such as Rabha, Bodo, Rajbangshi, Kalita, Koch etc. The village is situated at a distance of 20 km away from the East of the Dudhnoi Railway station. Normally the deity *Bisahari* invoked throughout the rainy season in between *Chot-Bhāda* (April-August) in Western Assam. The temple is famous for the celebration of *Bisahari puja*<sup>2</sup> from a much unknown early period. The basis of this ritual and its continuity in the village is the fear comes from snakes and the legendary power of the deity. She is the benevolent deity who protects the villagers from snake bites and poisons.

The contextual performance of *Māre-gān* has been observed and documented during the annual *Marai puja* organized by *Mandalgram Mauja Puja* committee at Mandalgram Paddyā Mandir temple premises. It had been solemnised from 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April, 2014. Pradip Rabha, the leader (*Ojā*) of the troupe of *Māre-gān* singers performed in the occasion. His troupe is one of the leading team performs *Māre-Gān* in Goalpara as well as Kāmrūp region of Assam.

#### The sung version of the epic:

It is important to mention here that the epic singing comprises creation songs, origin of gods-goddesses, rituals, the story of 'Beula' and '*Jhuna geet*'.

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<sup>2</sup> 'When the puja is performed by women themselves it is generally called Bisahori puja. It is a homely function where offerings are made to the goddess Bisahori in a bamboo tray (dala dewa) wishing the wellbeing of the family. No priest is generally employed. Again as Kani Bisahori the goddess receives puja at the time of the Naya Khuwa ceremony and when a child gets scared by a snake' observed by B. Dutta, 1995. P.72

*Māre-gān* begins with the **invocation** as the initial phase of *Māre puja*. The invocations are termed as *Bahani sirasti* which invite the gods and goddesses to take seat at the altar. *Bahani* indicates the style of performance i.e., to invoke in sitting position while *sirasti* indicates the creating. The singers invite them to take seat at the space of performance. This phase is known as *gusāni jaguā* or *gusāi jagani* begins in the evening time of the previous day. It might be resembled with the concept of *Adhivās* of Sanskrit vocabulary and understood as the preliminary ceremony to solemn a rite which is propitiated generally the previous day. The purpose is to awaken the deity concerned in the temple. There are two kinds of *Maroi puja-Phool marai* and *Bhar marai*. The *Bhar marai* last for 4 days and 4 nights whereas the *Phool marai* for 3 days and 2 nights.

The initial invocation is the ‘seat of singing’ inviting the goddess of music or learning. This is the prayer songs of Saraswati (*saraswati vandana*). She is described as the daughter of *rishi* Brahma and wife of Bishnu. She is invited to situate at the throat of the singers so that the presence of Saraswati enables them to sing.

*Aaine bule mao saraswati āmi nā balang āi*  
*Amar kanthat mao saraswati basiyā loiba thāi*  
*Amar kantha chari mao saraswati aainar kanthat jābi*  
*Duhāi lāge dharmā ānadi māthā khābi*  
*Madhye gitālar mastake charhi mao saraswati lāhari khelāba*  
*Karna nāle xumābi mao saraswatimukhnāle bāir hoi jābi*  
*Duhāi lāge mao saraswati ānandir māthā khābi*  
*Dinat furibi mao saraswati sweta nā kauwa hoiyā*  
*Gadhulā āhibi mao saraswati gital xungariyā*  
*Hāte najānang moi e tāl mandirā mukhe najānang moi geet*  
*Saragate sirajile biyālākhi tārā munisate xirajile geet’*

Next invocation is the ‘installation of seats’. The form consists of invitation of *Barmani* to the temporary altar, creation of ritual objects, cymbals cast in the same pattern of lines

which makes the prayer sounds repetitive. The link to the Manasa epic is inserted between the list of the owner (mareya) of the ritual and the group performers (*gital-pāli-dedhani*).

The most important accompanying musical instruments i.e., the cymbals as well as the ornament of the *Ojā* (anklet) are all washed and placed over a banana leaf together beforehand in front of their sitting arrangement. After the second invocatory piece the ‘creation of cymbals’ are sung and the pālis take cymbals in their hands to proceed the next songs. This is a ceremonial way to a rhythmic begin of the ritual playing the cymbals by the pālis. This part describes how the cymbal makers (*kahar*) dreamt by the goddess Barmani after her installation in the space to make cymbals and anklets and give them to the *Ojā-pāli*.

The next invocation is performed in the standing stance known as *utha sirasti*. This is the prayer to goddess (*devi iswar*), main gods (Brahma, Bishnu, Maheswar) and various other gods of *Indrapuri* (heavenly court of various omnipotent under the king Indra). They all are awakened towards the seat of installation. An outline in praise of the deity Manasa is also added to the prayers.

Thus, in invocations, the choir *Mare gua Ojāpāli* pray the homage to various gods and goddess. All the other gods that are deemed important are then invited to the altar one after another such as Saraswati, Brahma, Bishnu, Maheswar, Indrapuri gods and goddesses, Krishna, Narayan, lakshmi, Gohain, Basumati, Nag-nagini, Risi ajagar etc. Later, when other gods are invited, the formula addressing Barmani is regularly repeated with different other epithets of her such as *padma, mainar bisahari, bengkhaowa kani, kani beti, padmamala* etc.

The gist of performance on invocatory piece is to awaken various gods and goddess at the point of ritual by means of possession. This is significant during the next phase of singing i.e., during the songs of creation (*sirasti patan*). The singers are dressed informal while in sitting point and the standing part is performed with proper costume of significant uniform colours.

The songs of creation (*sirasti pātan*) actually start with the creation songs of cymbals (*tal sirasti*) at the sitting position immediately after first invocation. The *sirasti* indicates here is the world/universe and *pātan* indicates the beginning. The third invocation leads to the songs of creating the universe and the stories on Creator of the universe or *aanandi gohai* as well as a couple of birds (*pakhu-pakhiyani*). *Pujā* begins informally with the mix up sounds of the beating of the traditional drums *nāgārā* and *dhol*<sup>3</sup> in the late evening. The *nāgārā* is already a permanent ritual object of the temple placed up at the right side of the goddess idol. *Dhols* are carried by the *Ojā-pāli* performers during this puja.

**Songs of origin of gods and goddesses** begin with the narrative of Durga (*Durga Janam*) and continue until the epic proper i.e., the birth of snake deity (*padmā janam geet*). The story of Beula is yet another important narrative of the *Māre* songs. According to the story, Beula is victimized and become a widow on her wedding night because of the discord between the snake deity Manasa and Chando sadagar. Beula's husband Lakhindhar, the youngest son of Chando sadagar is bitten by snakes and she promises Chando to bring her husband's life back for no reason. Manasa wishes to be worshipped by Chando, who declines her wishes. Chando finally admits to do so as Beula able to keep her promise. Beula brings her husband lakhindhar's life back after she has overcome the tricks and mishap created by Manasa. This narrative is ritually performed.

The **rituals** adhere to the *Māre-gān* are Deodhani and settlement of *Maju* performance. The ritual objects such as banana leaves (*kalpāt*), brass pot (*ghati*), the fan (*bisan*), the stick (*don-dāli*), the lighting arrangement (*sāki-bāti*), iron sword (*dā*), rice (*sāul*) etc. are used by the *Deodhani* performer. *Deodhani* is the shamanistic performer (female) who possesses supernatural power.

**Jhuna geet** are the inclusion to the *Māre-gān* as a part of the folk life. These songs have no direct connection to the faith or the context of the performance. In fact, these are

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<sup>3</sup> Traditinal drums found in Assam.

mostly composed in satirical way to represent a contemporary social livelihood. These are mainly the colloquial speech performed on request from the audience.

### **A visit to the locality of Pradip Rabha, the collaborator**

Pradip Rabha, a serious and promising performer of *Māre-gān*, of age 42-43 years, has been practicing the form from his early age. Besides a seasonal performer of *Māre* songs, Pradip Rabha is a farmer and his livelihood depends mainly on agriculture. The members of his troupe live nearby and they practice almost every evening at *Ojā*'s place of residence. His locality Saraibaha is 6-7 km away from the centre Dhupdhara of Goalpara region. This village has a mixed population of Rabha clan.

Pradip Rabha started his singing career as *Pāli* and later got promotion to *Ojā*. He has been practicing since last 28 years. There are altogether 16 persons in his group who practice the *Māre-gān*. Among them two are *Ojā*, one *deodhani* and rests are *pālis*. There is a good harmony among the *Ojas*, *pālis* and *deodhani* performers. The entire sung version and practice is orally transmitted till date with the presence and guidance of the *gor*<sup>4</sup> *Ojā*. The active performers' in the group are-

- i. Pradip Rabha (*gor Ojā*).
- ii. Haricharan Rabha (*gor Ojā*).
- iii. Thanesar Rabha (*aag*<sup>5</sup> *pāli*).
- iv. Kanu Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- v. Octob Rabha (*pās*<sup>6</sup> *pāli*).
- vi. John Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- vii. Brajen Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- viii. Bhubneswar Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- ix. Yadav Rabha (*pās pāli*).
- x. Anima Rabha (*deodhani*)

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<sup>4</sup> *Gor* means initial. Hence *gor ojā* means the main leader.

<sup>5</sup> *Aag* means front. Hence the *aag pāli* means the *pālis* in the first row.

<sup>6</sup> *Pās* means backside. Hence the *pās pāli* means the *pāli* singers in the second row.

A rapport has been tried to make with the singing troupe. An informal discussion on rhythm (*tāl*) has been carried out. There has been collected three rhythmic variety of *Māre-gān* viz., *khar tāl*, *ekk tāl*, *dui tāl*.

The transmissions of the songs are orally handed by the previous singers and this is experienced as really a harsh by P.Rabha. In his words,

*“My guru was Jugeswar Boro. It was very difficult to recollect the lines in the beginning. I used to see the book <sup>7</sup>and try to remember. I could not gather the courage to sing and performed many years as pāli. I had no confidence to sing but later I could do it due to the support of my seniors and my own dedication and faith on the goddess Manasa. I practiced 35 lines of one paragraph in the paddy field where nobody was present and nobody could see me singing the lines. Because it is very difficult to perform in public. I believe that if I could sing at least 35 lines that help the other singer to take little relax/rest. This thought helps me to get into the practice more deep and finally the leadership. It took a long time to acquire the practical knowledge of Māre geet...I guess there are about 300 paragraphs in the Māre-gān and there are also some innumerable additional songs. We sing the songs on the occasion of Durga puja, Kali puja, Kamakhya puja, Thakurani puja, Padda puja, Banabasi Puja”.*

### **Findings and plan**

*Māre-gān* can be said as the variable of the *Ojā-pāli* performance. It is the song which portrays a belief system among the Pati-Rabha tribe of Assam. It also carries a set of rituals among the different localities of Western Assam. The songs are found in vernacular Rabha language performs with vernacular tune/ words and style. The songs contain creation, origin of gods-goddesses, rituals, the story of ‘Beula’ and ‘*Jhuna geet*’. The songs are practiced among the Pati-Rabhas while the worshipping tradition is found among the different communities, tribes of western Assam.

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Purabi Baruah

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<sup>7</sup> He might have indicated some personal notes or records by himself or the other learners.

Assam

## Final Report

### Preservation of *Māre-gān*

(An epic singing performance of Assam)

#### Introduction

The tradition of epic singing in Assam based on written manuscripts as well as oral traditions. Besides the Ramayana & Mahabharata, a no. of local epics and their performances are also very much present in various areas and sub areas of Assam. One of the dominant micro or local epic in the western part of Assam is *Manasā*. This is a long narrative about the legendry power of snake deity widespread among various groups and sub groups of Assamese community.

*Māre-gān* or *Māre-gua Ojā-pali* is an epic singing performance widely practiced and popular among the Pati Rabhas, a sub group of Rabha tribe located mostly in West Assam. lasts for three elongated days and nights. Although Ojā-pali is seen in entire Assam as an Art form performs at public events including ceremonies and rituals, *Māre-gān* is limited to a ritual Bisahari puja in praise of serpent goddess Bisahari<sup>1</sup> during the rainy (monsoon) season. *Māre-gān* is orally transmitted epic singing in praise of serpent goddess Bisahari handed down traditionally among indigenous Rabha people of Assam. They believe and worship the snake deity to get protected from the poisonous snake bites. In other words, the basis of the worship is the fear comes from snakes and the legendry power of the deity.

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<sup>1</sup> Bisahari, a serpent goddess is similar to the Hindu goddess *Manasā*. The goddess of serpent is worshipped across India including Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and some other parts of Central and South India. She is uplifted as a Hindu deity because of her popularity among the masses by means of legendary beliefs. *Manasā*, the Hindu serpent goddess is told as the wife of *Anadi Guhai* (godhead) in the oral epic among the Pati-Rabhas. Instead, more appropriately, Bisahari is the term used by them for the serpent goddess which means inhalator of poison.



*Manasā* songs have been found composed by three poets, viz., Mankar, Durgabar and Narayanadev. Sukabi Narayandev was the most prominent among the three who lived in between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Suknnani Ojā-pali* follows Narayandeva's version of *Manasā* songs in Sipajhar of Darrang district. On the other hand, orally practiced *Māre-gān* among the Pati-Rabhas has been contended distinctive rhythms, tunes, beats with a mixed dialect or language.<sup>2</sup>The narrative of *Manasā* is a combination of different stories added to it in different periods of time from long back.

There have also been observed different forms of performing *Manasā* singing in other parts of Assam which has almost similar version of narratives in relation to goddess power and superiority. Different manifestations of this epic singing at various performance level are-

- *Suknānni Ojā-pāli* , follows the composition by the poet Sukabi Narayandev
- *Bixahari gān* follows the composition by Durgabar and Mankar,
- *Paddā-puranar gān* follows Sukabi Narayandev
- *Māre gān* follows the traditional songs of *Manasā*
- *Tukuriā Ojā-pāli* follows traditional *tukuriā* song
- *Gitālu geet* follows traditional songs of *Manasā*
- *Manasā* geet follows traditional songs of *Manasā*.

(Sharma, 1996: 68-86)

The proposed project on preservation titled 'preservation of *Māre-gān*' based on traditional epic songs of *Manasā* has been observed at the villages of Goalpara area on last April, 2014 as well as 2015.

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<sup>2</sup> The orally transmitted ritual *Manasā* is not recorded yet except a collection of songs in local dialect called '*Māre gān*' by Praneswar Rabha. *Māre* is the deity and *gān* means songs. *Māre gān* are performed ritually by a group known as *Māre gua Ojā-pali* where *Ojā* is the leader and *palis* are his assistants. B. K Baruah observes (Baruah, 1941: 90), 'The songs of *Manasā* are still sung at the *Ojha Pali* when *Manasā* is worshipped as *Marai* (as cited by P.K.Maity, 295)' (emphasis added by the scholar).

The location:

Goalpara is the westernmost district of Assam in the Brahmaputra Valley, spread over both the banks of the mighty river Brahmaputra.<sup>3</sup> The people are *Rājbandi, Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Hazong, Jugi, Kalita, Doms, Bhuiṃālis, Hirās & Kumārs, Nāpits, Phulmālis*. The heaviest concentration of the Rabhas is in the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the present Goalpara district, among whom there are both the Assamese speaking semi Hinduised groups and those retaining their old tribal ways.

The community of *Māre-gān*:

*Māre-gān* is widely practised and popular among the Pati Rabhas, a sub group of Rabha tribe. Pati Rabhas are disseminated mostly in West Assam specially Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang region. Rabhas are the one of the nine scheduled Tribes in the plains districts of Assam mostly scattered in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal and Manipur. As per 1971 census, they constitute 8.63% of the total plains tribal population of Assam and 0.63% of the State population. Dr. Grierson held the view that the Rabha was a Hindu name of the Kacharis<sup>4</sup> (cited by Bordoloi *et al*, 1987: 128). However the Rabhas has certain groups and subgroups amongst which Pati- Rabhas are the most advanced section of the tribe had adopted Hindu customs for all intents and purpose and due to loss of their mother tongue had taken to speak a patois of the Assamese language. The Pati-Rabhas are quite numerous in the southern bank in the belt stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi. Previous scholars found them as animists in their religious outlook although influenced by Hindu culture and used to celebrate pan Indian festival such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Puja etc. They are the followers of both śāktism and śāivism along with the traditional faith on animism. The Rabhas and its different groups celebrate their

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<sup>3</sup> 'Goalpara, however, never formed part of the Ahom Kingdom and though it is one of the districts of Assam valley, it belongs more to Northern Bengal than to Assam proper' (cited by B. Dutta, pg 2).

<sup>4</sup> The Bodo-Kacharis of Assam are the original autochthones of Assam as has been pointed out by Rev. S. Endle in his renowned work the 'Kacharis'. In Upper Assam they are identified as Sonowal and Thengal Kachari, while in the western Assam they are popularly Boro or Boro-kachari. They are belong to the great Boro group of the Indo-Mongoloid family within the Assam-Burmese linguistic section.

ritualistic festivals which relate more or less to their own religious concepts and beliefs. The Pati Rabhas of South-East Goalpara and South-West of Kām̄rūp institute ‘*Māre puḷā* or *Mārāi Puḷā*’ to propitiate *Bishahari* regarded as the most important festive occasion of much socio-cultural importance.

Preservation:

The case of Mandalgram village

Although there are more or less villages organise Bisahari puja and hire the singers for the ritual, the singing version followed by Pradip Rabha of Dhupdhara area has been collected. He has been invited for last 5 years at Mandalgram village to propitiate the ritual by singing *Māre-gān* for a spontaneous three nights interval. My empirical meeting with the villagers of Mandalgram, a small village in Dudhnoi area of Goalpara, Assam becomes very remarkable for me. The villagers propitiate the deity as a name of *Padda* or *Bisahari*. The believers of the deity invite her in a particular season and are blessed. The villagers are of mainly *Rabha* and *Bodo* tribe, *Koch Rajbangsi* and *Kalita* caste. *Śhaktism* is more dominated in the village by goddess *Manasā* and *kāli*. Mandalgram is a small village of Goalpara district of Assam. It is situated in 20 km away from the east side of the Dudhnoi railway (metre gauge) station. There is a temple in this village named ‘*Mandalgram Padmā Mandir*’ where once in a year of summer/spring season of looner calendar, the worship *Māre/ Mārōi puḷā* is carried out for three days and three nights. This religious ceremony is celebrated in the village every year from a much unknown early period. I was told how prosperity bloomed into this village thereafter. Now-a-days, they can effort 2 buffalos as their sacrificial animal offerings which was not possible just three years before. Gatherings of many viewers and devotees have turned the location into a trading centre too. Moreover, they have a proper strategy to organise the worship as a celebration. The ritual follows the Assamese calendric month-*Chot* (March-April).

**Preservation method undertaken and encounter of transmitting problem:**

The project has been completed with the help of

1. A review based on secondary sources and archival information.
2. An overview of the contextual performance visited on last April, 2014 and 2015.

3. A visit to Collaborator's locality and residence.
4. A workshop that has been organised with the help of local enthusiasts and AESTHETIC, a Guwahati based socio-eco-cultural society.

The measures of preservations are taken on the basis of usage of body and space. The dissemination, on the other hand, is central to promote and encourage the form and practices. The modern era dissemination, however, is influenced by digital medium.

First three points mentioned above however have described in previous report.

The ideas to preserve the form are as follows:

- The form has been encouraged to preserve in the bodily practices by means of traditional ritual or dance. The singing may be recorded to bring it into the mass and digital medium.
- A new context has been created to redefine the space of the form.

**The collaborator:** Being a serious and promising performer of *Māre-gān*, Pradip Rabha, of age 42-43 years, has been practicing the form since his early age. Besides a performer of *Māre* songs, Pradip Rabha is a farmer and his livelihood depends mainly on agriculture. The members of his troupe live nearby and they practice almost every evening at *Ojā*'s place of residence. His locality Saraibaha is 6-7 km away from the centre Dhupdhara of Goalpara region. This village has a mixed population of Rabha clan.

Pradip Rabha started his singing career as *Pāli* and later got promotion to *Ojā*. He has been practicing since last 28 years. There are altogether 16 persons in his group who practice the *Māre-gān*. Among them two are *Ojā*, one *deodhani* and rests are *pālis*. There is a good harmony among the *Ojās*, *pālis* and *deodhani* performers. The entire sung version and practice is orally transmitted till date with the presence and guidance of the *gor*<sup>5</sup> *Ojā*. The active performers' in the group are-

- i. Pradip Rabha (*gor Ojā*).
- ii. Haricharan Rabha (*gor Ojā*).

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<sup>5</sup> *Gor* means initial. Hence *gor ojā* means the main leader.

- iii. Thaneswar Rabha (*aag*<sup>6</sup> *pāli*).
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- v. Octob Rabha (*pās*<sup>7</sup> *pāli*).
- vi. John Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- vii. Brajen Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- viii. Bhubneswar Rabha (*aag pāli*).
- ix. Yadav Rabha (*pās pāli*).
- x. Anima Rabha (*deodhani*)

The transmissions of the songs are orally handed by the previous singers and this is experienced as really a harsh by P.Rabha. In his words,

*“My guru was Jugeswar Boro. It was very difficult to recollect the lines in the beginning. I used to see the book<sup>8</sup> and try to remember. I could not gather the courage to sing and performed many years as pāli. I had no confidence to sing but later I could do it due to the support of my seniors and my own dedication and faith on the goddess Manasa. I practiced 35 lines of one paragraph in the paddy field where nobody was present and nobody could see me singing the lines. Because it is very difficult to perform in public. I believe that if I could sing at least 35 lines, it might help the other singer to take little relax/rest. This thought helps me to get into the practice more deep and finally the leadership. It took a long time to acquire the practical knowledge of Māre geet...I guess there are about 300 paragraphs in the Māre-gān and there are also some innumerable additional songs. We sing the songs on the occasion of Durga puja, Kali puja, Kamakhya puja, Thakurani puja, Padda puja, Banabasi Puja...*

He shared his circumstances of this traditional singing in a very pessimistic way. In his words,

*‘If these songs are so important till today, why are we not properly hosted at the pujas? To recover this, we need to change their (Villagers) mentality and this is a distance hope. I am intended to go outside or to towns to attain income and secure my livelihood. Ojā-pali given me*

<sup>6</sup> Aag means front. Hence the aag pāli means the pālis in the first row.

<sup>7</sup> Pās means backside. Hence the pās pāli means the pāli singers in the second row.

<sup>8</sup> He might have indicated some personal notes or records by himself or the other learners.

*depression in my daily livelihood and I can see deterioration of my health because of spontaneous elongated performance. I am willing to give up this profession’.*

In this circumstances, where the artist is tired of economic security and proper respect of his dedication towards this art and has no longer hope to continue it neither transmitting the profession, then who will continue the form! This is the threat for the tradition. Because, he is deprived of this situation and not interested to transmit it to the next generation.

### **Data collection and Cataloguing**

The workshop was organized to preserve the singing and also to encourage the performers to change their space and context of performance. A new frame has been created to introduce the form at public gathering.

#### The sung version of the epic:

It is important to mention here that the epic singing comprises creation songs, origin of gods-goddesses, rituals, the story of ‘Beula or Chando sadagar’ and ‘*Jhuna geet*’.

*Māre-gān* begins with the **invocation** as the initial phase of *Māre pujā*. The invocations are termed as *Bahani sirasti* which invite the gods and goddesses to take seat at the altar. *Bahani* indicates the style of performance i.e., to invoke in sitting position while *sirasti* indicates the creating. The singers invite them to take seat at the space of performance. This phase is known as *gusāni jaguā* or *gusāi jagani* begins in the evening time of the previous day. It might be resembled with the concept of *Adhivās* of Sanskrit vocabulary and understood as the preliminary ceremony to solemn a rite which is propitiated generally the previous day. The purpose is to awaken the deity concerned in the temple. There are two kinds of *Maroi puja-Phool marai* and *Bhar marai*. The *Bhar marai* last for 4 days and 4 nights whereas the *Phool marai* for 3 days and 2 nights. The initial invocation is the ‘seat of singing’ inviting the goddess of music or learning. This is the prayer songs of Saraswati (*saraswati vandana*). She is described as the daughter of *rishi* Brahma and wife of Bishnu. She is invited to situate at the throat of the singers so that the presence of Saraswati enables them to sing.

***Pada/verse & translation***

*Aaine bule mao saraswati āmi nā balang āi*

(Others say ‘ma’ to you Saraswati, we don’t say ‘ai’)

*Amar kanthat mao saraswati basiyā loiba thāi*

(O mother Saraswati take seat at our voice)

*Amar kantha chari mao saraswati aainar kanthat jābi*

(O mother Saraswati, if you go from our voice to another)

*Duhāi lāge dharma ānadi māthā khābi*

(kindly think at least Dharma Anandi)

*Madhye gitālar mastak charhi mao saraswati lāhari khelāba*

(You play *lāhari* and depart from the Gital who sits in the middle)

*Karna nāle xumābi mao saraswatimukh nāle bāir hoi jābi*

(O Saraswati, you enter through the hole of ears and goes out through the mouth)

*Duhāi lāge mao saraswati ānandir māthā khābi*

(Kindly think at least Dharma Anandi)

*Dinat furibi mao saraswati sweta nā kauwa hoiyā*

(O Saraswati, you travel as a white or black bird in the morning)

*Gadhulā āhibi mao saraswati gital xungariyā*

(In the evening, mother Saraswati, you come back to the Gital players)

*Hāte najānang moi e tāl mandirā mukhe najānang moi geet*

(I don’t know how to play *mandirā* by hand and sing songs by mouth)

*Saragate sirajile biyālākhi tārā munisate xirajile geet*

(The sky creates stars, and human creates *geet*...)

(Summary: Goddess Saraswati, please come and take rest at our voice and our hands, so that we can sing and play cymbals and blessed by you. Like the sky creates stars, we create songs, if you go somewhere in the morning as a bird kindly come back to us in the evening and so blessed by Anandi Gohai)

Next invocation is the ‘installation of seats’. The form consists of invitation of *Barmani* to the temporary altar, creation of ritual objects, cymbals cast in the same pattern of lines which makes the prayer sounds repetitive. The link to the Manasa epic is inserted between the list of the owner (mareya) of the ritual and the group performers (*gital-pāli-dedhani*).

The most important accompanying musical instruments i.e., the cymbals as well as the ornament of the *Ojā* (anklet) are all washed and placed over a banana leaf together beforehand in front of their sitting arrangement. After the second invocatory piece the ‘creation of cymbals’ are sung and the *pālis* take cymbals in their hands to proceed the next songs. This is a ceremonial way to a rhythmic begin of the ritual playing the cymbals by the *pālis*. This part describes how the cymbal makers (*kahar*) dreamt by the goddess Barmani after her installation in the space to make cymbals and anklets and give them to the *Ojā-pāli*.

The next invocation is performed in the standing stance known as *utha sirasti*. This is the prayer to goddess (*devi iswar*), main gods (Brahma, Bishnu, Maheswar) and various other gods of *Indrapuri* (heavenly court of various omnipotent under the king Indra). They all are awakened towards the seat of installation. An outline in praise of the deity Manasa is also added to the prayers.

Thus, in invocations, the choir *Mare gua Ojāpāli* pray the homage to various gods and goddess. All the other gods that are deemed important are then invited to the altar one after another such as Saraswati, Brahma, Bishnu, Maheswar, Indrapuri gods and goddesses, Krishna, Narayan, lakshmi, Gohain, Basumati, Nag-nagini, Risi ajagar etc. Later, when other gods are invited, the formula addressing Barmani is regularly repeated with different other epithets of her such as *padma, mainar bisahari, bengkhaowa kani, kani beti, padmamala* etc.



The gist of performance on invocatory piece is to awaken various gods and goddess at the point of ritual by means of possession. This is significant during the next phase of singing i.e., during the songs of creation (*sirasti patan*). The singers are dressed informal while in sitting point and the standing part is performed with proper costume of significant uniform colours.

The songs of creation (*sirasti pātan*) actually start with the creation songs of cymbals (*tal sirasti*) at the sitting position immediately after first invocation. The *sirasti* indicates here is the world/universe and *pātan* indicates the beginning. The third invocation leads to the songs of creating the universe and the stories on Creator of the universe or *aanandi gohai* as well as a couple of birds (*pakhu-pakhiyani*). *Pujā* begins informally with the mix up sounds of the beating of the traditional drums *nāgārā* and *dhol*<sup>9</sup> in the late evening. The *nāgārā* is already a permanent ritual object of the temple placed up at the right side of the goddess idol. *Dhols* are carried by the *Ojā-pāli* performers during this puja.

**Songs of origin of gods and goddesses** begin with the narrative of Durga (*Durga Janam*) and continue until the epic proper i.e., the birth of snake deity (*padmā janam geet*).

The story of Beula is yet another important narrative of the *Māre* songs. According to the story, Beula is victimized and become a widow on her wedding night because of the discord between the snake deity Manasa and Chando sadagar. Beula's husband Lakhindhar, the youngest son of Chando sadagar is bitten by snakes and she promises Chando to bring her husband's life back for no reason. Manasa wishes to be worshipped by Chando, who declines her wishes. Chando finally admits to do so as Beula able to keep her promise. Beula brings her husband lakhindhar's life back after she has overcome the tricks and mishap created by Manasa. This narrative is ritually performed.

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<sup>9</sup> Traditional drums found in Assam.

The **rituals** adhere to the *Māre-gān* are Deodhani and settlement of *Maju* performance. The ritual objects such as banana leaves (*kalpāt*), brass pot (*ghati*), the fan (*bisan*), the stick (*don-dāli*), the lighting arrangement (*sāki-bāti*), iron sword (*dā*), rice (*sāul*) etc. are used by the *Deodhani* performer. *Deodhani* is the shamanistic performer (female) who possesses supernatural power.

***Jhuna geet*** are the inclusion to the *Māre-gān* as a part of the folk life. These songs have no direct connection to the faith or the context of the performance. In fact, these are mostly composed in satirical way to represent a contemporary social livelihood. These are mainly the colloquial speech performed on request from the audience.

The ritual ensues the Assamese calendric month *Chot* (March-April) during when rainfall is started. The ritual is performed a series of events can be divided as *adhivās* (pre phase of worshipping), *ghaṭ burani* (plummeting of pottery and settle), *saku dān* (vision of the divine), *deo hākura* (welcome/calling of deities), *dak* (a state of trance), *bali* (Sacrifices), *prasada* (remnant of blessings or grace), *rangilā* (amusement). The ritual endures interesting folk art of image making and painting on pith. The paintings are the various episodes of *Manasā* songs mostly the story of *Beula*.

*Māre-gān* is a rhythmic and musical traditional verse performs at community ritual and ceremony. Thus, from the above we can say that the songs of *Māre-gān* comprises syllables, dance, music, lyrical composition. These give the total aesthetical beauty to the songs. Besides, *Deodhani* dance works as an adding factor or communicating medium of the entire performance. The entire ritual works as a background of the traditional singing of *Māre-gān*.

Furthermore, a brief description about the data and its classification is given below:

- Dance: The dance traditionally incorporates in *Māre-gān* has foot works, few specific body movements, style, gati, positional singing etc. There is no name of these bodily arts however the variation has been memorized through practice from past generation. Ojā stands in front while the palis stand facing the Ojā. They move their body either in quick full circle(rotate 180 degree) or half circle towards left direction. They dance in a circle around the Deodhani in many sequences and Ojā is out of the circle facing towards the circle and continuing his verse of singing. The costumes are traditional *dhoti*, *chapkan*, *jama* and *jersi*. The main singer Ojā wears anklet *nepur* at his feet, traditional garment *dhoti-chola(chapkan)* and scarf *fali* with a white cotton wrap-up turban. The pālis also wear traditional garment known as *jāmā* (long scart with no. of plates) of white colour and *fāli* of red colour. They term their shirts as *jersi*.
- Lyrical composition: The lyrical compositions are poetic in nature. The content has been taken various sources of human lore and Puran including myth and stories. The lyrics have refrain and verse. Ojā, the leading singer initiates every verse while the palis follow the verse and repeat them. Few words such as *bapea*, *hai hai* etc. have been used by the Ojā in the pace of the singing.
- Music: The music is the accompanied by cymbals and traditional drum *gohai dhol*. There has been collected three rhythmic variety of *Māre-gān* viz., *khar tāl*, *ekk tāl*, *dui tāl*.

The ritual context: The ritual context is the Manasa puja where Deodhani (spirit medium) an embodied shamanistic dance is performed by a female. The deodhani performs in all important situations of the ritual including the dramatic routine. She is also an oracle teller. The scenario of the drama can be considered as ritual theatre. A no. oral narrative has been performed by the group among which *Chando Sadāgar* (A story of a Merchant) is more popular because of its dramatic routine. The actors are the Deodhani and palis. The concerned pali changes his appearance either by applying make-up on face or wearing symbolic coloured dress during ritual interlude. The group has extra *pali* performer so that the co-actor can be replaced during the dramatic sequence. The audiences experience a great joy from this part of performance. The

sketch of the various episodes of Manasa are also taken as one of the important ritual where the vision of the divine is ritually accomplished.

The form, thus, incorporates ritual, singing, drama and caricature.

Data Creation:

Data are the essential building block that helps to reach informed decisions/result. The project has been covered in two village viz., Mandalgram and Bornamjuli. The first village is taken to witness the ritual part whether the second one is to conduct a training workshop.

This is very depressing that the regional centre of Ministry of culture at Goalpara could not come forward to help despite of their interest because of the religious sentiments of indigenous faith. They do not want the form taken out of the ritual context.

Data has been created by organizing a training workshop of *Māre-gān* taking the rhythmic movements as a focus. It has been tried to preserve and work out on the dance and movements. The workshop was held at Barnamjuli, Goalpara from 12<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2015. The venue of the workshop is at the residence of the collaborator while a presentation had occurred at the yard of the temple of their village. In this temple, the villagers also organize the ritual for one day and perform *Māre-gān*. The workshop has been organized in collaboration with AESTHETIC, a society for socio-eco-cultural development based in Guwahati and the local association of Ojā-pali performing troupe.

The workshop has been given by Pradip Rabha who is also a collaborator of the project. There were two participants of new generation of the respected tribe joined the workshop to begin their basic steps of the dance.

The workshop, however, could not cover the songs related to Maju, Jhuna geet and Deodhani dance. It is believed that once they start their singing about a particular verse, they by hook or crook have to complete the story within it. The workshop was successful as it has been tried to encourage and uplift the traditional singers along with two new comers into the tradition.

## Output:

Data has been created and collected on invocation part and few circular movements frequently use in between the performance. A new space has been created to present the form. This transportation will help to transform and minimize a desired area within the limitation of performance. Besides, a VCD has been made on contextual performance of the ritual (April 2014) and transporting performance (December 2014).

In many places of the singing, the singers are unwilling to come out the periphery of the ritual. The *Māre-gān* gua Ojā-pali has been decontextualised from religious moorings in the workshop and a final presentation was organized at the premise of village temple.

The preservation will be continued among the different group of performers in different places in upcoming years.

From the above findings it can be said that *Māre-gān* is the variable of the *Ojā-pāli* performance of Assam. It is the song which portrays a belief system among the Pati-Rabha tribe of Assam. There are no mudras or gesturological postures as found in Suknnani Ojā-pali. The performance is based on rhythm and tune. There is a scope to theorise the variety of rhythmic patterns and documentation. It also carries a set of rituals among the different localities of Western Assam. The songs are found in vernacular Rabha language performs with vernacular tune/ words and style. The songs contain creation, origin of gods-goddesses, rituals, the story of 'Beula' and 'Jhuna geet'. The songs are practiced among the Pati-Rabhas while the worshipping tradition is found among the different communities, tribes of western Assam. In many cases, they do not aware of the importance of the Mare-gan.

Entire performance is meant for the welfare of the community. The dramatic routine of the performance also has significance. Noted Folklorist Prof. K. Bhattecerjee analysed the story saying, 'The emphasis of the story in this area (Bamungaon, Boko, Assam) is an creation, and supernatural power of Manasa. The tragedy of Chando is placed humorously. It is a parody in which fate is laughed at by the poor community who struggle against destiny. The deodhani smears white powder in Chando's face and attaches artificial beard on his fate. Chando begs alms at the end part of his performance'.

It can be summarized that Māre-gān can be best preserved by popularizing more about the form by creating new space to showcase its different stories. Although it has no much dancing variation in its style it can be established for its spontaneous tone of rhythmic melody.

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