

Constructing Community, Gender and Kinship through Epic Singing

KISHORE BHATTACHARJEE

Abstract: This research article throws light on the gender perspectives prevalent in two cultural geographies existing in Dhubri and Kamrup districts on southwestern Assam. The study of the narrated performances of the story of Manasa reveals the feminine worldview of life in the western districts of Assam. This paper elaborately discusses the epic narration through folk ritual theatre performance of the Rajbongshis in Dhubri district focusing on construction, reinforcement, and contestation of kinship, caste and gender identities. In Kamrup district, the spirit possession and religious integration of tribal belief system perceives Manasa worship also as an occasion for propitiation of animistic gods and goddesses.

There exists a voluminous literature addressing the definition, traits, textualisation and socio-political dimension of epics. Lauri Honko, after reviewing literature, defines epics as “Epics are great narratives about exemplars, originally performed by specialized singers as super stories which excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over the narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic(1998:28)”. Honko’s following observation in the context of Tulu epic is substantial with respect to most of the Indian epics, “The epic does not exist as an isolated mental text but is deeply integrated in religious and social thinking” (1998:275). He also examines the spirit possession associated with Siri epic with the aid of ethnographic data focusing intellectual experience of the Kumaras or mediums. Komal Kothari’s observation about the correlation of an epic to its geographical, social and historical context is illuminating. Further, he debates that epic

performance eventuates to intercede the problems of a family, appease gods to restore normalcy and for construction of a shrine or other auspicious purposes. He highlights the role of the epics in arbitrating human problems (Bharucha 2003: 86-117). Thus, epic performance is also a social performance.

There is a tradition of epic singing in Assam which is based on written manuscripts and oral traditions and these songs should be distinguished from traditional balladry. This tradition is connected with the worship of snake goddess Manasa, a deity worshipped in Assam, Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and some parts of central India. According to Manasa songs, she is the daughter of Siva and sister of Naga (serpent) Basuki. She was born in a lotus (Padma) leaf where Siva ejaculated, therefore, she is also known as Padma. Ramanujan and Dimmock argued that Manasa is the combination of the characteristics of fierce and calm deities. They wrote, "...She is at once Sarasvati and Jaguli, goddess of healing, and one eyed Kadru, mother of snakes with poison in her empty eye; she is at once the mythic Visakanya, whose touch is death, and the personification of the ancient idea of homeopathy: With poison do I slay thy poison." (1964: 300-1). They also termed the goddess as the composite female goddess, an accredited form of Chandi (Durga) and other female and male gods. Manasa narrative is a combination of different stories added to it in different periods. It is stated that, "... Different Folktales and myths, become episodes in a single story of the triumph of the goddess Manasa" (1964:322). This observation helps us to argue that Manasa songs and performance are part of an epic performance in Assam and some other parts. However, most of the traditional scholars have not acknowledged this and no attempt has been made to study the performance of Manasa epic.

Scholars like Sukumar Sen (1978) and Dimmock confirm that Manasa songs are associated with rituals and they are part of both oral and written traditions. Dimmock states that various myths and legends of different historical periods have been incorporated in Manasa songs (Dimmock1962:308). In Bengal, D.C.Sen listed more than 58 versions of Manasa songs/poems but still believes that though they cannot be considered folk literature in the strict sense, there is conspicuous flavour of folk literature in the poems (1962:310).

Manasa Songs in Assam

In Assam, Manasa poems composed by three poets, namely, Mankar, Durgabar and Narayandev have been found. Mankar was a poet who lived between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Durgabar was a poet of the sixteenth century who gave importance to the Behula's story which shows that there is an influence of raga. Sukabi Naryandev was most prominent among the three who lived between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. His compositions are popular in Kamrup, Darrang and Dhubri districts of Assam (Sarma1991:121- 1310). Though, in most of the places the

performance is based on written texts, it has been observed that, "The texts of the bulk of these songs are narrative in nature (which together constitute some kind of a folk epic). Although most of these narratives belong to a literary tradition, they acquire unmistakable folk characteristics at the performance level" (Datta *et al* 1994:57). Nevertheless, there are traditional forms belonging to the socially and politically marginalised section that lacks adequate attention.

In Assam, Manasa cult is observed in lower or western region where the folk performances related to this snake Goddess has different forms. Manasa is identified by different names by four groups of traditional castes and tribes who worship her. These groups are the Rajbongshis, Rabhas, Bodos of south Kamrup and Assamese castes of Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup districts.

Field Area and the Study

This paper elaborately discusses the performance of the Rajbongshis of Dhubri district focusing construction, reinforcement and contestation of kinship and gender identities in performance. The performance in Dhubri can be contrasted with the performance of the Bodos and Rabhas of South Kamrup.¹

In Dhubri, cultural communication addresses the issues like hierarchy, family bonds, gender roles and values. In south Kamrup, the spirit possession and religious integration of the cult with tribal religion perceives Manasa worship also as an occasion for propitiation of tribal gods and goddesses. The two systems of worship exist alongside and the traditional one has dramatic allusion to tribal rituals and presents the tribal component of intercultural tradition.

The performances in Dhubri and South Kamrup region are studied since they based on oral compositions. In Dhubri district, the performers, to some extent write down the songs in paper but dialogues are impromptu whereas the tribal performers of south Kamrup are mostly illiterate as a result of which they perform from memory. The collection of the text of the south Kamrup performances' by a Rabha scholar named Praneswar Rabha who was encouraged and guided by the folklorist Birendranath Datta, was published in 1987. The text was edited by the author himself and to a certain extent it deviated away from the oral text. He compares the oral texts published by him with the tradition of Manasa poems and observed similarity with the texts found in Goalpara and North-Bengal. However, during our fieldwork we observed great difference between our two areas of fieldwork in terms of the performance style.

There are four forms of snake goddess worship in Dhubri and they are Ajankar, Bisahari, Marai and Mandus. It has been observed that the lonest collected version of Marai songs contain 7683 lines (Roy 2006). It is stated that the pronouncement Marai has come from the name of the Tamil goddess

Mariamamma, a composite deity naturally and not only a deity of disease like her Tamil counterpart. The performance of Marai requires almost three to seven days. The epic covers heaven, earth and the underworld presenting Gods, spirits, animals and humans in the story. The main performer of the Marai is called *gidal*, and others being *doyari* (the clown, singer, actor and the chief assistant of the main performer), *pails* (assistants), drummers and musicians. There are male dancers masquerading as female. The performance comprises of song, dance and drama with impromptu dialogue deliverance. The dramatic narration is resonated in songs where music and dance accentuate an event or scene. They perform in a devotional mood and audiences are considered as a section of the devotees. The performers, whether they act in the role of a divine character or not, bow down to god at the beginning of every day's performance and get into the skin of the characters.

The narrative of the Marai includes creation, origin of Gods and rituals and then comes the story of Behula and Lakhindar. According to the story, Manasa wishes to be worshipped by the father-in-law of Behula who was a merchant. However, he declines her desire for which his sons get killed and he gets reprimanded by the goddess during his corporate voyage. Behula, being a brave lady takes vow to revive her snake bitten husband and starts her journey to heaven where she overcomes dangerous tricks of Manasa. She pleases gods by dancing which leads to the revival of her husband and his brothers.

The performance is acted upon in the standing position as the mode during night but the story of creation is carried on in sitting position during daytime as a matter of appropriateness. The dramatic events which begin with the story of creation taken from different *purans* and later converted into folk mythology take place in the standing position. The sequences of the epic performance are called parts which constitutes of the creation, the story of the world, Behula's journey into the river, and journey of heaven. Marai songs contain songs of three other forms like Ajankar, Bisahari and Mandus. Songs of Bisahari is performed in sitting position and presents the story of creation and birth of Manasa. The performance is completed within three or four hours. Two other forms are also presented in the same position, which are concluded within a single day and night. Mandus covers from awakening song to Behula's journey. The word Mandus has come from *mandir* which is worshiped in the rainy season. It is an abridged version of the Marai. Ajankar is also worshiped in the rainy season. The main difference with Mandus is that the latter is worshiped in the form of a painted pith temple with a painted idol of Bishori, while a **snake hood** is worshipped in Ajankar and an abridged version of the entire Marai story is sung. While Marai is a composite form others are only ritual and sung without acting.

The content of creation part explains the origin of the universe and

gods. We observe incestuous relationship, magical events and the differentiation of gender and gender ambiguity. It is a rendering of puranic story in the folk way. There are invocations of the deities in this part. The part of the story of the world deals with conflict between Manasa and the merchant Chando whose sons become casualties of this conflict. There are descriptions of various life cycle ceremonies in this part. In the part of Behula's journey, she faces trouble from male gaze and bravely overcomes them. Thus, this section contests the patrilineal construction of gender. In the part which deals with the incidents in heaven, Behula danced and charmed gods and she was rewarded with the life of her husband. In her return journey, her rewards multiply and she also recovers her father-in-law's lost wealth.

In this epic Behula's role is polyphonic. She is regarded as an epitome of ideal wife and like a *sati* she takes a vow to go with her husband's dead body to revive him. She defeats all male attempts of molestation and saves a ruined family and like Sita, she denies to pass the tests of chastity. This is an intertextual technique which almost deifies her. In the epic feminist and patrilineal values run together. Unlike Sita, she earns her position independently but the same discourse of denying patrilineal authority is observed. The test of chastity is an expression of possessiveness of the male. She goes back to heaven from where she came as a result of a curse.² The love and duty towards husband and denial of the patrilineal authority of the father-in-law are intertwined in the epic. The construction of women as a gender, which is home-bound, has been contested in the epic. The goddess Manasa is also not a consort goddess and her efforts to establish her worship in that of her father Siva is also notable.

The sociological concept of community is a closed concept and cannot accommodate the fluidity that may exist in ethnographic situations. The Rajbongshis are a claimant of scheduled tribe status but they are followers of Hinduism. In Maraigan they present their version of *puranic* Hinduism. The epic does not assert their identity but it presents the worldview of the community. The issue of caste is also not directly present. It is observed that there is conflict between Siva worship and Manasa worship and Manasa as lower caste deity who through the patronage of higher caste/class women enter into the fold of established religion. This is a subtlety of Hindu society where there is correlation between the dominant gender and dominant gods. The weaker gender contests the diktat of the patrilineal authority. They gradually change the order of the society and introduce fluidity in construction.

The construction of kinship is a major role of the epic performance. The relationships among mother, father, husband and wife, in-laws are constructed and interrogated. Enactment of mythological stories articulates various tensions. The authority of the father-in-law and patrilineal ideology is also contested. On the advice of Behula's mother we find a glimpse of

womanhood in the normative plane, where Behula challenges the patrilineal bias of the normative order.

In Dhubri district fieldwork was carried out among the Rajbongshi community. Rajbongshis are of tribal origin. In the process of state formation in west Assam and north Bengal a lineage of their forefathers rose to royal status. They claim that they are the descendants of those kings. Numerically, they are the dominant caste in the region. Most of the performers of *Marai Gan* are Rajbongshis. Fieldwork was carried out in three villages of Agomoni-Gosaigaon area for observing night-long performance in Bishandai, Ajankar performance in the village Biskhowa and Bishohari performance in the village Bhangaduli. Agomani town is situated in Dhubri district, 35 kms from Gauripur Town, Western Assam and Golakganj is 25 kms away from the same town. Bangladesh is located at 10 kms away from south-west of Agomani, and West Bengal is located at 15 kms north of Agomani. In Agomani area every home has a elevated sacred place (2ft by 2ft, square) at the entrance of their home and is consecrated by a Basil plant at the center and two long bamboo poles on its both sides and earthen lamps are lighted at night in front of the Basil plant. The Basil plant symbolizes Radha, there is a common belief here that only when one prays to Radha, Lord Krishna will grant boons. Shiva and Bishahari (Manasa) are also common household deities. Bishahari (Manasa) is worshipped in every house during the Assamese month of *Bhada* (Aug-Sep). Thus Bisohori occupies an important position in the physical and mental layout of the people.

In Dhubri district, land-owning agriculturalists are more than 50% of the total population. Nevertheless, most farmers own in average not more than 15 to 20 *baghas* of land, some farmers even have land holding of only 3 to 5 *bighas* of agricultural land. The main cash crops of this area are rice, mustard and areca nut and jute. There are three types of rice.

A variety known in Assamese as *Shalidhan* is most important and widely used in this area. There are eight sub-varieties of this rice which is planted in monsoon (May-June) and harvested in winter (Nov-Dec). At an average, four months is needed for harvesting the crop. *Britridhan* – this crop has 3 to 4 varieties. *Britridhan* is planted during February- March and harvested during June-July while others being *Baro* and other additional varieties.

Sali and *Britridhan* are traditional varieties, whereas others are hybrid varieties. All these varieties are grown in the plains only. Some vegetable crops are grown in the highlands during the Assamese month of *Kaiti* (Oct-Nov). These crops are mainly Potato, Onion and *aborigine*. Mustard is an important cash crop economically. The people of Assam prefer to use the mustard oil from Dhubri district during Bhogali Bihu (January, same time as Pongal in Tamil Nadu).

In the village Bishandai where Marai performance was held, there are

350 Rajbongshi households and other 59 households of Napit, Karmakar (Goldsmith), Brahmin and Muslims. They are agriculturalists, schoolteachers and a few service holders. The performance of Ajankar was held in the village Biskhowa and Bishari performance was observed in the village Bhangaduli. Biskhowa is large village where there are many school teachers, few persons in Government service and many cultivators whereas Bhangaduli has few salaried persons, peasants and a few traders. In this area the kinship and village solidarity of the peasant society is being maintained.

The Performance in Dhubri

In Bishandai village we organized Marai performance with the help of Susil Roy, a local higher secondary school teacher and research scholar of the Folklore Research Department, Gauhati University. It was an organized event for the research team but it took the character of usual performance with the participation of the villagers. From the perspective of performance it was noteworthy that the performers wore silk dress specially made for performing before the research team. They always performed wearing cotton dress. They wanted publicity of the form and also did for promoting the Rajbongshi identity.

The organizers took much care so that the audience does not talk much lest the quality of the recording becomes inferior. The performers partially trying to do their best and thus was interacting with the research team. But their devotion and involvement was also taking them simultaneously to their own audience.

The performance of Marai started in the evening. The worship was organized by a household as it is usually done for the research team. Before the performance a worship was held a *ghat* (earthen pitcher) was placed and unripe bananas were placed in erect position looking like snakes. A *chowar* (sacred whisker) was worshipped and there is a belief that if a worship is held successfully the *chowar* swells. The performance started with invocation songs in sitting position (*basina tal*). After some songs dancers known as *chokris* entered in the performance arena. The songs preceded dramatic narration or acting. As usually like other Hindu performances it starts with invocations, ritual and ritualistic song, followed by stories of creation. After an episode the performers assemble in the performance arena or go outside the space to the green room like enclosure built in one side through a narrow corridor. They can take a longer break in the middle of the performance mostly determined by the end of a dramatic climax.

The performance proceeds with creation, marriage of Siva and birth of Manasa. There are certain discrepancies with *puranic* traditions. We observe, for instance, that during Siva's marriage Parvati comes riding on a tiger and not on lion. There were comic relief given by the *dohari*, the second important man in the troupe and also a jester. The process of change of puranic tradition

can be said as 'folklorization', exactly in the sense Bascom used the term long back.

In the performance various musical instruments like *Bombasi* (special type of flute that requires more skill to play it), drums and *dotara* are used.

Dotara is a stringed instrument made out of jack fruit tree, commonly used in Goalpara and Dhubri districts, used as an accompaniment for folk songs. The instrument is usually 80 cms long, made of an elongated wooden body hollowed at the bottom with a finger-board having an elliptical peg box of 4 tuning pegs. The belly is round which is covered by a thin parchment having a single hole. A bridge is placed on it, over which the four strings run from the top-peg to the bottom. It is played with a plectrum at the bottom and strummed on the extended flat by the left finger-tips. The quivering tonic note along with stroke 3rd, 4th and 5th notes are produced along with rhythmic patterns. In many instances tunes are neglected because the common folks are more interested in the zest of rhythm. There are 4 strings out of which the 2 central strings are important and the name *Dotara* is in this context, i.e. *Do* is two and *Tara* means strings.

In the second night, the musicians started playing their instruments and warmed up the performers and audience after which the *gidal* started singing invocations. The *dohari* acted in the role of several characters. His humorous way of acting is known to the audience where even his appearance evokes laughter. The *dohari* also makes socially important and political statements. I also remember that he also commented on women's freedom. The form of *Maraigan* is such that it incorporates ritual, singing, drama, caricature and acrobatics.

One of the characteristics of the performance is that certain lyrical songs unrelated with the story is sung and they are called *Payar*, *Bhaowia* and *Chatka*. These songs are very popular and give entertainment and relief.

On the third day, during day time the last part of the performance was held³. Behula went to revive her husband and came back successfully from the heaven. Usually, Chand's worship of Manasa is shown but since actual worship was not held in our case, that scene was dropped from the performance. It ended with the return journey of Behula. After that the performers and their audience bowed down to the goddess.

During three days of performance a number of temporary shops were opened for selling food, cigarette and pan. The actors wept in tragic scenes and so a part of audience which showed their devotion to the goddess. It is seen that in the performance female characters play predominant role. Behula's extraordinary courage, her mother and mother-in-law's roles are very important in the epic. Except Chand, no other male character is visibly present. It is observed that for the people the epic performance is a package of religious

feeling and devotion, contestation of gender relationship and, hierarchy and model of kinship. Behula comes out in the public space, which is the site of male domination and overcomes the danger of male lust and gaze. She overcomes the hierarchy between god and man when all gods press Manasa to revive her husband. Similarly, Manasa did not accept the authority of her step mother Parvati. The relationship between Siva and Parvati is not in accordance with the higher caste morality. At the same time, the relationship of husband and wife, in-laws, brothers and sisters and castes are constructed in performance. Sometimes, *dohari* makes critical comments on the social order. There are both construction, contestation, and assemblage of voices interacting among themselves. Epic develops with internal logic of cause and effect legal arguments. For instance, Manasa cannot punish Behula blatantly but she has to create a situation to curse her.

The Performance of the Tribes

On the other bank of the Brahmaputra, there are populations of the Rabha tribe and in some pockets there are Boros also. Many of them have forgotten their language and speak a creolized form of Assamese. They have adopted the Manasa songs and epic which they call Mare Gan. We toured a village called Bamuni Gaon about 65 Kilometers away from Guwahati for carrying out fieldwork. The village is populated by both the groups. There are approximately 150 to 200 families in Bamunigaon village. The story of origin of the village is as follows:

Once there was a Rabha king who was very sincere and rigid about his worship to tribal gods and goddesses. One Brahmin and his wife Brahmani (in local language bamuni) of this village wanted to initiate this Rabha king into Hindu religion. The Rabha king got very angry at this very thought of the Brahmin, in a fit of rage the Rabha king killed this Brahmin and made a *Dhol* (Assamese drum) out of the Brahmin's skin. Hearing the death of the Brahmin, his wife the Brahmani was shocked and fell very ill. Hearing the plight of the widowed Brahmani the Rabha king realized and repented his grave mistake. So the king decided to give the tax of the whole village to the widowed Brahmani. After this incident, this village is called Bamunigaon.

This story is laden with meaning in the context of partial or incomplete adoption of Hinduism. The story is an allegory of the social conflict between the local Hindus and the tribes. At this backdrop, the Manasa performance has to be understood.

We observed the performance in the village. The villagers have not abandoned their tribal identity but they have adopted Hinduism partially. The priest and his assistant who worship Manasa are Boros and Rabhas. They do not chant Hindu mantra. Their form of the performance is different

from Dhubri. First, there are four lead singers (*Oja*) (number may increase) who perform by rotation continuously for three consecutive days and nights together. Secondly, the role of Cando⁴ as an actor is very unique because he does not play in other roles and wears make-up like a clown at the same time where his presence is necessary through out the performance. He observes certain restrictions before the performance to ensure perfection. He pastes white beard and smears white powder in his face. His make-up is done by the *deodhani* (spirit medium). Thirdly, the female oracle teller (*deohani*) who experiences spirit possession occupies very important role in the performances and rituals. She not only makes predictions but enters in climax situation and dances. She even takes part in acting, for example, becomes dead Lakhinder. Fourthly, this version of Manasa song is based on tribal music not on *raga* or popular music. Finally, at the end of a performance *Oja*, *deodhani pails* and the priest go to a nearby shrine where tribal gods are propitiated. Rice beer is offered and drunk and some traditional tribal dances are performed.

The stage of spirit possession of the *deodhani* is known as *dak*, it is said the word has been derived from the Sanskrit word *dangshan* (snake bite) by scholars. There are different stages of spirit possession. Firstly, Durga who enters in the garden of Siva becomes tired and unconscious which is known as Phool Dak, enacted by the *deodhani*. The *deodhani* for the second time falls in a trance when Durga is bitten by Manasa in the form of a snake. After that when Siva becomes unconscious after consuming poison found in the churning of the ocean, the *deodhani* becomes Mahadeva and dies. This third trance is known as Gohain Dak. At the time of Behula's marriage, Manasa creates an illusion of snake bite and makes Lakhindar unconscious and this spirit possession is called Chaya Dak. Finally, when Lakhindar dies in the night time on the marriage day, the *deodhani* is possessed for long duration for hours together standstill and it needs special skill on the part of the *deodhani* to learn to remain in such a position. At the time of possession the *Deodhani* jerks her body and in climax jerking reaches a frenzied state and she comes to normal stage gradually reducing her trembling. At the time of last possession the priest' sprinkling of water on her head brings her back in normal state. But she continues in the state of trance. Goat sacrifice is held after that when she dances with the sword and follows the priests and performers to the shrine of tribal gods.

At the time of dancing, the *oja* stands in the front and *pails* stand facing him. They rotate the body in a semi-circle in the left hand direction. They rotate 180°. *Deodhani* enters and dances in all important situations, for instance, at the time of Durga's birth, Padma's birth and Lakhinder's death. Musicians play their music in sitting position and the Kali (folk version of Senyai) player is prominent among the musicians. The performance starts with Kali drumming. In different stages of performance animal sacrifice is

held. The priest and his assistant have a role to play in the performance. The performance was held for us during daytime where as usually it is day and night performance. The performance starts in sitting position and they stand up after some mythological songs. Performers wear their dress and the *deodhani* wears the Rabha dress. There is no narration and songs and dance are performed together. Assistants of the *Oja* hold small cymbals in their hands.

The emphasis of the story in this area is on 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 face. Chando begs alms at the end part of his performance.

At the end of the performance they go to the nearby shrine which is still being maintained where the performers go and perform songs and dances related to Rabha and Kachari gods. In the interview they initially said that it is the shrine of Siva and we also observed a clay idol of Siva but the priests said it is the Shrine of Khatira Jara. According to them Khatira means pure and Jara signifies one who drinks alcohol or have other kind of addiction. Bottles of rice beer are offered to him. There is a clear identification with Mahadeva. However, the priests cannot explain many things even they failed to explain why fowls are sacrificed in the shrine but not in the Manasa temple. They also perform a dance called 'Hana Ghora'⁵⁷ which the Rabhas have adopted from the Garos.

Thus the epical performance becomes interlinked with the tribal cult. The authority of Chando is not presented here. He is a serio-comic character. Entire performance is connected with welfare of the community. The supernatural tilt of this performance is more than Dhubri. Hindu gods and goddess' suffer from humiliation very often. The scope for impromptu composition is less in Bamunigaon because there is no narration and dialogue only singing unfolds the story. Two tribal groups recount Hindu *puranas* with modifications and interpretations. Like Dhubri the role of gender is not highlighted. Intercultural character of the performance evokes certain important questions about the construction of community. Is community a blurred genre, at least in some cases?

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Notes

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- ² Film maker Ritwik Ghatak in his film 'Titas Akti Nadir Nam' showed that mother archetype in women is like the goddess Kali and can rise to an occasion out of fury. Contestation of social discourse is articulated by leading female characters.
- ³ On the third day because of the convenience of the performers they decided in consultation with us to perform during day time .Usually the part of the story is performed at night.
- ⁴ The name of Chandsadagar is pronounced in Bamunigaon as Chando and he is a very prominent character.
- ⁵ The Rabhas nowadays have elevated Hanaghora to an identity marker. The dance is part of a ritualistic performance and alludes to myth of Siva and Sati myth. It was also performed by the Garos and both the groups observed it jointly.

KISHORE BHATTACHARJEE
 Professor and Head
 Folklore Research Department
 Guwahati University
 Assam, India