



LAUGHTER AS RESISTANCE: EXPLORING THE CARNIVALESQUE IN THE FOLK PERFORMANCE OF KAMRUPIA DHULIA TRADITION

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Abstract: Kamrupia Dhulia is a distinctive form of folk art or dance-drama encompassing a vibrant amalgamation of music, drama and acrobatics. As an indigenous performing art, the Kamrupia Dhulia once enjoyed widespread popularity in greater Kamrup region, now scattered across several districts of lower and middle Assam. Historically it served as a source of entertainment for rural communities during festivals, rituals and cultural events, captivating audiences with its portrayals of mythological narratives, social injustices and myriads of intriguing everyday subjects. This paper approaches the Kamrupia Dhulia in the light of “Carnavalesque” theory proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Through a comprehensive exploration of Kamrupia Dhulia this paper explores the carnivalesque characteristics of this folk art.

Keywords: Kamrupia Dhulia, Assam, Carnavalesque, Subversion, Performance.

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Introduction

Kamrupia Dhulia is a folk dance-drama of Assam. It is ancient performing art prevalent mainly in Kamrup, Nalbari, Darrang and Barpeta districts of Assam. The one who plays the drum is called the Dhulia. The art came to be known as ‘Kamrupia Dhulia’ because it was a distinctive and popular form of art which was spread throughout Undivided Kamrup (colonial era administrative region which include present day parts of Kamrup Rural, Kamrup Metropolitan, Barpeta, Nalbari, Bajali, and Baksa). It is a mix form of art which includes dance,

drama, music and acrobatic circus display. Among the instruments used in this performance, the *Dhol* (drum) is the most important. Made of wood and animal skin, the *Dhol* varies in size across different regions of Assam, with each variant known by distinct names. The performer who plays the *Dhol* is called a Dhulia, from which the term “Dhulia” is derived. Named after the region, it became popularly known as “Kamrupia Dhulia,” representing the cultural boundaries of Kamrup. Historically, most villages in Kamrup had their own Dhulia groups, though many have since disappeared due to various socio-cultural factors. The Dhulia art form is built upon three essential instruments: the *Dhol* (drum), *Tal* (cymbal), and *Kali* (clarion). According to traditional belief system, *Dhol* and *Tal* are indispensable in religious rituals of Durga, Kali and Shiva worships (Deka, 2020).

Typically, in Dhulia groups there could be 20 to 40 members and sometimes even more. Based to the occasion and requirement the number of performers could vary accordingly. Each member of the group is given specific roles. Their roles are generally categorised under the following-

- a) Ghai Dhulia (chief drummer),
- b) Dhulia (drummer),



Fig. 1: Kamrupia Dhulia artists with their instruments

- c) Bayan or Bayin (singer),
- d) Taluoi (player of cymbal),
- e) Bhaoria or Bhaworia (actor),
- g) Kusti (Acrobatic)
- h) Kaliya (player of clarion).



Fig. 2: Different types of *Dhol* (Drum) used by Kamrupia Dhulia.

Mainly, they present two kinds of dramas: (i) stories related to mythologies, and (ii) contemporary events and incidents in a comedic manner, known as '*Sang*'. Examples of *Sang* include '*Biyar Sang*' (wedding satire that mocks social expectations), '*Garbhvati Sang*' (pregnancy satire that highlights the ignorance on medical advice), '*Master r Sang*' (teacher satire that highlights corrupt practices of teachers and officials) and '*Pandit r Sang*' (priest satire that mocks the arbitrary superiority complex of religious leaders). They use classical mantras set to comedic tunes and present social disorders through the addition of improvised lines. Sometimes the *Bhaoria* (actor) composes songs and dialogues spontaneously during performances. Mohan Bhaira of Koihat, perhaps the most famous figure in Dhulia culture, was particularly renowned for his spontaneity and creativity (Deka, 2020).

Kamrupia Dhulia employs simple costumes and makeup for its theatrical performance. Performers generally avoid chemical cosmetics for the market, instead they rely on locally available materials such as rice powder, chalk powder, limestone, and vermilion for their makeup. The primary purpose of Kamrupia Dhulia is entertainment. Performers select costumes that enhance the comedic atmosphere and adapt their attire thematic scene of different performances. During circus sequences, performers don colorful, loose-fitting garments that are suitable for acrobatic stunts. Female characters are portrayed by men dressed in traditional Assamese women's attire. Masks constitute another distinctive feature of Kamrupia Dhulia performances, crafted from lightweight wood or clay, adding aesthetic depth to the presentation. The thematic content of Kamrupia Dhulia is predominantly rooted in folk life and rural experiences.



Fig. 3: Mask used during the Kamrupia Dhulia Performance

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to -

1. To analyse the performative practices of Kamrupia Dhulia, with particular emphasis on its capacity for subversion and resistance as it artfully mimic social norms and cross-dressing.

To explore the resonance between Kamrupia Dhulia and Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory by addressing the scholarly gap in understanding how this folk theatrical tradition employs carnival aesthetics to negotiate issues of power, gender, and marginalization in rural Assamese society.

There is strong resonance of the performative aspects and subversive qualities of Kamrupia Dhulia with Bakhtinian ideas of the carnivalesque, but this connection hardly has received any scholarly attention. While studies of South Asian folk traditional theatre have occasionally addressed themes of resistance and critique, Kamrupia Dhulia's specific engagement with carnival aesthetics not scholarly explored enough. A deeper investigation of its performative practices and socio-cultural context could offer valuable insights into its place within the carnivalesque tradition. Such analysis may illuminate how Kamrupia Dhulia through humor and satire, operates as a subtle yet potent vehicle for negotiating issues of power and marginalization in rural Assam. This paper explores how Kamrupi Dhuliya serves as an artistic medium for the expression of social critique and cultural resilience against dominance ideologies and power structure. The research delves into the ways it adapts to contemporary socio-economic and political contexts, how it continues to be a dynamic force of folk carnivalesque. It is a source of entertainment that is also a means to foster critical dialogue and societal transformation within rural communities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in ethnographic fieldwork. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Kamrupia Dhulia performers, Group discussions, quasi-participant observation during performances, and systematic documentation of performance practices were also employed for the data collection. Secondary data comprises scholarly books, journal articles, and existing interviews with cultural practitioners.

Fieldwork for the research was carried out in Gobaradal and Koihatli villages of Nalbari District, Assam. Members of the following groups were interviewed: Gobaradal Milan Kamrupia Dhulia Group, Shri Haridev Kamrupia Dhulia, and Bisnujyoti Kamrupia Dhulia.

The practitioners of the Kamrupia Dhulia tradition are predominantly from the socially and economically marginalized sections of Assamese society.

A large majority of them belonged to Scheduled Caste communities (Sarma, 2018). Historically, most of the performers came from the Kaibarta community, who were traditionally associated with fishing and riverine labour along the floodplains of lower Assam. Today, the performing community remains largely rural in character, concentrated in villages and semi-urban areas where access to formal education has historically been limited. Most practitioners are either illiterate or possess only a rudimentary level of literacy. Oral traditions, therefore, play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting performance knowledge across generations. Perhaps, this very condition of marginality has endowed the tradition with its distinct characteristics. The Dhulia performance has historically served as a rare arena among these marginalised communities to could articulate social critique, assert collective identity, and momentarily invert the hierarchies of everyday life.

Kamrupia Dhulia through the Lens of the Carnavalesque

Mikhail Bakhtin first developed the concept of 'Carnavalesque' in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), and expanded these ideas in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Bakhtin suggests that carnival is not just a historical phenomenon but also a utopian category. It is a form of ritualistic spectacle where traditional ideas and power structures are temporarily suspended and 'turned upside down'. Cultural theorists and literary critics have pondered the concept of carnival to analyse texts and events where there is a suspension of normalcy. It allows us to understand that set rules and beliefs are not immune to ridicule and re-conception. During a carnival, there is free and familiar interaction between people of different classes or sections of society who are normally separated, and people express themselves freely. Carnival also allows people to behave in ways that are otherwise not accepted. People often act upon the hidden side of their nature, bringing out their eccentric behaviour.

In "Carnival and Carnavalesque," Bakhtin makes a foundational distinction that separates the carnival from conventional performance. The carnival is not a spectacle to be watched but an event to be lived. It does not draw a boundary between the performer and the spectator, rather an event to be "live it" and participate in the carnival are absorbed into it. and become co-creators of its world. Crucially, however, this lived experience is not an extension of real or 'normal' world. Rather, as Bakhtin himself describes it, the carnival constitutes "the world standing on its head", a temporal suspension of normal

order of things. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque imagery is inherently dualistic and ambivalent in character (Bakhtin, 1965/2025). In his theorisation of the carnival, Bakhtin observes that medieval people effectively lived a double life. On one hand stood the official life, which is serious, regulated, and hierarchically ordered and governed by the norms of the church, the state, and feudal authority (Robinson, 2011). On the other hand, there existed the carnivalesque life where hierarchies were temporarily suspended, the boundaries between the high and the low dissolved, and the body was celebrated rather than suppressed. The carnival was thus not mere festivity but a structured inversion of the everyday social order. Scholars such as Stallybrass and White have extended Bakhtin's framework and examine how the carnivalesque operates within folk and popular traditions as a mode of critiquing authority and sustaining counter-hegemonic worldviews (Humphrey, 2000). In this expanded sense, the carnivalesque has proven a remarkably versatile critical lens. What unites its varied applications is a shared recognition that marginalised communities have consistently found in festive, performative, and parodic forms a means of asserting presence and contesting power. Yet carnival laughter is not a straightforward instrument of revolution, as Bakhtin cautions. Carnival laughter is progressive insofar as it dissolves constraints and dismantles fear, but it does not, of itself, build class solidarity or set a political agenda. The carnival liberates, but it does not legislate.

It is within this theoretical lens that this paper aims to analyse the folk performance tradition of Kamrupia Dhulia. While existing literature has engaged with the tradition from the perspectives of its historical origins, folk artistry and its influence on folk theatre in Assam, the carnivalesque dimensions of Kamrupia Dhulia have remained underexplored. The satirical provocations, body transgression, and symbolic inversion that characterise Dhulia performance resonate with Bakhtin's theorisation of carnivalesque. Yet it is precisely in these features that the tradition's subversive social commentary is most forcefully expressed. Beyond its aesthetic functions, the subversive potential of Kamrupia Dhulia functions as a site for resistance and counter-hegemonic expression.

Literature Review

Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory has been employed in academic discourse to analyse other forms of folk performance in India. Mathew and

Pandya (2021) examine the subversive social dimensions of Theyyam's ritualistic performance from Kerala through the framework of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. The authors contend that the transformative character of Theyyam is not merely aesthetic but carries profound socio-political significance, as it momentarily dismantles the caste hierarchies that otherwise govern everyday life. The very etymology of the term gestures toward this transformative power, *theyyam* meaning "God" and *aattam* meaning "dance." Thus, Theyyam signifies a dance of the divine, attributing sacred agency to the performer rather than to the performance itself. It is through this embodied divinity that the grotesque body, the dissolution of performer-audience boundaries, and the inversion of social hierarchy become defining features of Theyyam's ritual aesthetics.

Datta (2022) applies Bakhtin's theoretical framework of the carnivalesque to the performative folk tradition of the Bahurupis of West Bengal. In their everyday lives, Bahurupis are subjected to untouchability and social segregation, occupying one of the lowest places of the caste order. However, during performance the Bahurupis disguise themselves as gods and goddesses through elaborate costumes, masks, and makeup, thus, effectively camouflaging their stigmatised everyday identities beneath a sacred persona. This act of disguise constitutes a lived carnivalesque experience, profound suspension of the social hierarchies, however fleetingly, that otherwise define and confine their existence (Datta, 2022). The normal boundaries that separate the impure from the sacred dissolve entirely during performance, as spectators seek blessings from the Bahurupis and treat them as divine incarnations. The very bodies that are deemed untouchable in everyday life become, within the carnivalesque space of performance, vessels of the divine.

Hoque and Shaikh's (2024) draw directly on Bakhtin's identification of humor, parody, and inversion as the defining characteristics of the carnivalesque to argue that Alkap performances embody these elements in ways that actively challenge dominant social discourses. Particularly significant is their analysis of the Kap, a satirical dialogic form central to Alkap, wherein figures of authority, are subjected to exaggerated mimicry that reduces their power to farcical caricature. Hoque and Shaikh (2024), argue that this parodic demystification of authority transforms rural audiences from passive spectators into critically engaged participants, effectively democratising social critique through performance.

Sharma and Sharma (2025) argue that *Kantara's* depiction of the Daiva-Kola ritual replicates the carnivalesque atmosphere, as the ritual's participants and

observers become mutually implicated in a shared performative and spiritual experience. This reading aligns with broader scholarship on participatory ritual performance, including Mathew and Pandya's (2021) analysis of Theyyam, wherein similar dissolution of performer-audience boundaries is identified as central to the ritual's anti-structural potential. The study proposition that *Kantara* establishes a new paradigm of what may be termed "contemporary carnivalesque," extending Bakhtin's original conceptualisation into the domain of modern mass media. Sharma and Sharma argues that the film's cinematic mediation of ritual does not diminish but rather transforms its cultural significance. The authors contend that *Kantara* uses the carnivalesque and chronotopic dimensions of the Daiva-Kola ceremony to subvert dominant ideologies, challenge entrenched power structures, and articulate pressing contemporary concerns around ecology, land rights, and caste. This dual function of ritual performance, as both cultural preservation and social critique, resonates with Datta's (2022) analysis of the Bahurupi tradition and Hoque and Shaikh's (2024) examination of Alkap, wherein folk performances similarly encode resistance within entertainment.

Humour and Satire

Satire occupies a central and indispensable role in Kamrupia Dhulia's function as a vehicle of social critique, operating as both an artistic device and a mode of grassroots resistance. Performances frequently incorporated comedic skits and humorous interludes that exposed the absurdities embedded within prevailing social norms, questioned entrenched traditions, and laid bare the hypocrisies of those who upheld them. Subordinate groups often articulate resistance through disguised, indirect, and coded forms of expression (Scott, 1990). Deeply pressing social concerns such as corruption, bribery, blind superstition, and the entrenched practice of caste discrimination are openly ridiculed. The deployment of wit, irony, and comic exaggeration allowed Kamrupia Dhulia performers to navigate these sensitive and potentially dangerous subjects without resorting to direct confrontation or explicit political declaration. This deliberate indirectness rendered the critique simultaneously more palatable to a diverse audience and more subversive in its effect. The comic atmosphere served as a protective veil behind which serious social commentary could be articulated and received without immediate censure or reprisal. Laughter functions not merely as entertainment but as a mechanism of social critique and

ideological challenge (Billig, 2005). The license to openly mock and caricature powerful social figures like landlords, religious leaders, and corrupt officials, transformed the Dhulia performance space into a rare arena of popular resistance against social injustice. For communities with little access to formal political or legal recourse, this performative space represented a significant, if temporary, assertion of voice and agency. At the heart of this tradition lies a profound empathy for the ordinary people. Dhulia artists translated the pain, sorrow, and frustration of common people into rhymes and satirical verses, giving artistic form to experiences that were otherwise ignored by dominant social discourse.

Gender Subversion

Cross-dressing constitutes one of the most significant carnivalesque features of Kamrupia Dhulia. This reflects the temporary suspension of 'normative' identities of expected gender behaviour that Bakhtin identified as central to carnival culture. In the performance of Kamrupia Dhulia, male artist frequently portray female characters through exaggerated gestures, vocal modulations, costumes, and mannerisms. Such performances create a liminal theatrical space where established distinctions between masculine and feminine identities become fluid and negotiable. This performative inversion resonates with Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque body," which challenges official norms by emphasizing transformation, ambiguity, and the unfinished nature of social identities.

The humorous dimension of cross-dressing in Kamrupia Dhulia extends beyond mere entertainment. While audiences often respond with laughter to the exaggerated representation of femininity, the practice simultaneously exposes the constructed nature of gender roles. By allowing men to embody female characters, the performances inconspicuously reveal that gender is not a fixed biological essence but rather a social role that can be enacted, imitated, and transformed. The theatrical enactment of femininity by male performers in Kamrupia Dhulia underscores the performative dimension of gender.

Furthermore, the female characters portrayed in these performances are not always passive or subordinate figures. On many occasions, they are represented as witty, intelligent, outspoken, and capable of challenging male authority through satire and verbal deftness. Through humorous exchanges and clever wordplay, these characters often expose the hypocrisies and

arrogance of male counterparts. Such representations of women (although theatrical) provide a subtle critique of patriarchal social structures by creating a temporary space. This inversion of conventional gender hierarchies exemplifies what Bakhtin describes as the carnival's capacity to overturn official truths and social relations, replacing them with alternative possibilities and perspectives.

The carnivalesque nature of cross-dressing in Kamrupia Dhulia also facilitates social commentary on broader issues of identity and power. By blurring the boundaries between male and female, self and other, performer and character, these performances challenge rigid classifications and encourage a more flexible understanding of human identity. In Kamrupia Dhulia, cross-dressing becomes a performative strategy that enables the community to reflect critically upon prevailing assumptions regarding masculinity, femininity, authority, and social conduct.

Dhulia as a Social Commentary

Besides its vibrant festivity, Kamrupia Dhulia, also, served as a compelling medium for social commentary for rural communities. Rooted in local traditions and folklore, Dhulia performances provided an artistic space where pressing concerns such as poverty, superstition, gender inequality, and communal harmony are explored. Through humour, satire, and dramatic storytelling, Dhulia engaged audiences in discussions about societal flaws, encouraging reflection and change.

Kamrupia Dhulia is intimately tied to the socio-economic and agrarian scenes of Assam. It is rooted in the folk traditions of agrarian communities of Assam, corresponding to seasonal festivities, with performances usually held post-harvest during winter months. Many of the Dhulia artists work as part-time labourers, with some working in construction, paddy fields, factories, and so on. The Dhulia performance provide happiness and fun through mythological and fantastical performances in the mundane lives of people.

Another distinguishing feature of Dhulia was its interactive nature. Unlike conventional theatrical performances, in Dhulia performance the audience are an active part of the act. Based on their reaction, the performers often improvise during the act. This participatory aspect made the performances feel more immediate and relevant, fostering dialogue between performers and spectators. The audience's laughter, cheers, or disapproving murmurs are integral to the experience. Moreover, Dhulia's blend of entertainment made it

a powerful tool for social awareness. Unlike formal messaging handed out by government agencies, which could be rigid and imposing, Dhulia conveyed messages through engaging storytelling, music, and dance. They often try to keep the social fabric united regardless of religion and caste. This ensured that even complex or controversial ideas are absorbed effortlessly by audiences.

The communicative element of the Dhulia performance is often underestimated. On the surface, it appears to be nothing more than comic entertainment for its audience. However, beneath the laughter and playfulness lies a deeper, more subversive message. This subversive element is subtle and nuanced in its delivery. The performers belong to a lower caste community and must navigate the social hierarchies around them. They cannot afford to be too direct or too bold in their critique. A message that is too blunt or too revolutionary risks inviting repercussions from the higher caste sections of society. As a result, the performers wrap their social commentary in humour and absurdity by playing the unlearned fool who doesn't understand the ways of the society. They disguise their messaging by using comedy as a shield. This is where their true artistry lies. By disguising critique as entertainment, they manage to say what cannot be said openly. The humour disarms the audience, while the message quietly takes root. It is a delicate balancing act of wit, caution, and a sharp understanding of the social world they inhabit.

With the flux of time and increased availability of modern entertainment, Dhulia community have been forced into a life of hardship and pain. The changing tastes of people, accompanied by the advent of television and social media, have virtually sounded the death knell for them. According to Bhuben Roy (67), a Dhulia from Gobaradal Village, Nalbari district, one of the reasons for the decreasing numbers of Dhulias is their loss of respect among people. Family members and relatives often mock them for being Dhulias, as they perceive it as having no value. A senior Dhulia artist makes around 1,000 to 2,000 rupees per performance, usually once or twice a week during the festive season. Once the festive season is over, they have to once again rely on labour work to sustain themselves.

In essence, Kamrupia Dhulia is more than just a folk performance tradition. It is a reflection of the socio-political landscape of its time. Through its humour, satire, and reimagining of familiar narratives, it provided a space where the rural populace could engage with critical social issues in a meaningful and entertaining way. By blending art with advocacy, Dhulia remained an

influential force in shaping public consciousness and promoting reform within traditional communities.

Conclusion

As a folk tradition, Kamrupia Dhulia was more than just entertainment. The performance of the Dhulia is educative, informative and entertaining to the audience all at once. The performers have no formal training in their craft. Instead, they rely on instinct and a keen awareness of audience reactions. They captivate the attention of the audience through mockery, teasing, fake fights, and silly wordplay. Their unpredictable behaviour keeps the crowd engaged and amused. The audience appreciates their playfulness and seemingly pointless banter. At certain moments, the performers address the audience directly, and the crowd responds with visible enthusiasm. This exchange signals the absence of the invisible barrier (or the fourth wall) between the audience and the performers, which is often a mark of demarcation in many stage performances. Here, the performers become part of the audience, and the audience becomes part of the performance.

By merging with the performers, the audience also rejects the very idea of the societal stratification. It served as a powerful tool for social commentary. The performances addressed important issues that affected rural communities in a manner that is digestible to its audiences. These included poverty, superstition, gender inequality, and communal tensions. The art form was rooted in local traditions and folk beliefs. It provided a space where these pressing concerns could be explored. Performers used humour, satire, and storytelling to engage their audiences. Through these methods, they encouraged people to think critically about social problems. The performances inspired reflection and promoted the need for change. Its ability to blend critique with entertainment underscores its significance as both an art form and a medium for grassroots empowerment.

However, the decline of Dhulia highlights the profound impact of socio-cultural transformations, including urbanization, shifting entertainment preferences, and the dominance of social media. As rural populations migrated to urban centres, the traditional audience for Dhulia diminished, while the rise of other form of entertainment like cinema, television and social media offered more sophisticated and accessible alternatives. The commercialization of folk arts further marginalized indigenous traditions like Dhulia, which lacked

institutional support and patronage. Compounding these challenges was the absence of systematic documentation and archival efforts, leaving Dhulia to survive in fragmented forms, performed sporadically during local festivals and fairs.

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