PHAWAR AND THE POETICS OF PERFORMANCE: IMPROVISATION, SATIRE, AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN KHASI ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This article examines phawar*, the improvisational performance poetry tradition of the Khasi community of Meghalaya, India, situating it within global and Northeast Indian frameworks of poetry, song and oral performance. Although Khasi oral literature has attracted scholarly attention in relation to myth, folktale, and ritual chant,* phawar *remains under-theorised in contemporary performance studies. Drawing upon oral-formulaic theory associated with Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, performance theory articulated by Richard Bauman, and communication models proposed by Wilbur Schramm, the study conceptualises* phawar *as a structured yet improvisational genre rooted in communal interaction and symbolic negotiation. Through structural analysis and contextual observation, the paper demonstrates that* phawar *integrates strict syllabic metre, rhythmic chant (*ka kynhui*), satire (*ka kyoh*), and dialogic antiphony within diverse social settings, including festivals, political gatherings, rituals, and village councils. A comparative framework further positions* phawar *alongside African praise poetry, Japanese linked verse traditions, contemporary slam poetry, and Northeast Indian devotional and warrior song traditions. While sharing improvisational agility and audience participation with these global forms,* phawar *is distinguished by its ethical satire, ecological symbolism, and matrilineal social ethos. By foregrounding* phawar *as a sophisticated form of performance poetry rather than peripheral folklore, the article contributes to expanding global poetics beyond text-centric paradigms. It argues that recognising indigenous oral genres such as* phawar *enriches performance studies and affirms the continued vitality of embodied, communal, and dialogic literary expression in a rapidly transforming cultural landscape.*

Keywords: Phawar*; Performance Poetry; Oral Tradition; Khasi Indigenous Aesthetics; Improvisational Poetics*

Oral performance traditions across the world have sustained collective memory, social critique, and aesthetic expression long before the institutionalisation of written literature. Performance poetry situated at the intersection of music, chant, satire, and communal participation continues to function as a living archive of indigenous knowledge systems. Among the Khasi people of Meghalaya in Northeast India, *phawar* represents a distinctive form of improvised poetic performance that combines wit, rhythm, social commentary, and competitive exchange. Rooted in everyday life yet sharpened by public performance, *phawar* is not merely entertainment; it is a dialogic art that negotiates identity, morality, politics, and communal relationships.

Performed during festivals, market gatherings, community feasts, celebration for championing a sport or a war (in the olden days) and increasingly in public cultural

events, *phawar* is characterised by spontaneous composition, metaphorical density, and a heightened rhetorical style. It resonates with global traditions of oral poetic contest, ranging from African praise poetry to contemporary spoken word and rap battles, yet remains distinctly Khasi in its tonal cadence, cultural idiom, and social embeddedness. This article examines *phawar* as performance poetry, situating it within broader theoretical discussions on oral literature, performativity, and indigenous aesthetics, while foregrounding its cultural and communicative significance within Khasi society.

Literature Review

The study of oral performance poetry has been shaped significantly by theorists such as Milman Parry and Albert Lord, whose oral-formulaic theory emphasised improvisation and mnemonic devices in epic traditions. Their work demonstrated that oral composition is neither primitive nor derivative but governed by complex compositional strategies. Later, Walter J. Ong expanded the discussion by distinguishing between primary orality and literacy-based cultures, arguing that oral expression privileges sound, participation, and memory over textual fixity.

Performance-centred approaches, especially those of Richard Bauman, reconceptualised oral literature as an event rather than a static text. Bauman's framework foregrounds the interaction between performer and audience, highlighting how meaning emerges through context, gesture, tone, and communal response. Similarly, Dell Hymes emphasised ethnopoetics and the need to analyse oral forms within their cultural and linguistic environments.

Within Northeast Indian scholarship, studies on Khasi oral traditions have often focused on folktales, myths, and ritual chants, yet performance poetry like *phawar* has received comparatively limited academic attention. While references appear in ethnographic accounts of Khasi festivals and social gatherings, systematic analyses of *phawar* as a performative, improvisational poetic genre remain scarce. This lacuna underscores the need for focused scholarly engagement, particularly in understanding *phawar* as a dynamic form of poetic song and competitive verbal artistry embedded in matrilineal and community-centered social structures.

Problem Statement

Despite growing global interest in performance poetry and spoken-word traditions, the Khasi form of *phawar* remains critically underrepresented in scholarly discourse. Existing research on oral literature in Northeast India has largely privileged folktales, myths, ritual chants, and ethnographic descriptions, while improvisational poetic genres such as *phawar* have received minimal systematic analysis. This imbalance reflects a broader text-centric bias in literary studies, where written poetry is valorised over embodied, performative, and community-based forms of expression.

Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive documentation, transcription, and performance analysis has limited academic understanding of *Phawar*'s compositional strategies, linguistic features, and socio-political functions. As an

improvised and context-dependent art form, *phawar* risks marginalisation in the face of modernisation, digital entertainment cultures, and declining intergenerational transmission. Without rigorous scholarly engagement, its aesthetic complexity and cultural significance may remain inadequately theorised within global performance studies.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to conceptualise *phawar* not merely as folklore or entertainment, but as a sophisticated genre of performance poetry that contributes to broader debates on orality, improvisation, indigenous knowledge systems, and the politics of literary recognition.

Case Study: *Phawar* of the Khasis

Phawar constitutes one of the most vibrant and intellectually demanding forms of oral performance poetry among the Khasi community of Meghalaya, India. As an improvisational and dialogic genre, it is typically performed in rapid, antiphonal exchange between skilled orators who compose verses extempore in response to immediate stimuli, whether a rival's provocation, a social issue, or a ceremonial context. Far from being spontaneous in a chaotic sense, *phawar* reflects patterned improvisation, resonating with the oral-formulaic principles identified by Milman Parry and developed further by Albert B. Lord. Their foundational work demonstrated that oral composition relies on formulaic structures, thematic clusters, and mnemonic strategies that enable fluid yet disciplined creativity (Parry 1930; Lord 1960). Similarly, *phawar* performers draw upon inherited rhetorical frameworks, stock metaphors, and culturally encoded symbols while tailoring their delivery to the moment of performance.

Performance as Event and Communicative Action

Understanding *phawar* requires shifting attention from text to event. Richard Bauman conceptualises verbal art as performance, emphasising that meaning emerges through interaction, framing devices, audience participation, and contextual cues (Bauman 1977). In Khasi settings, *phawar* is inseparable from its performative environment, like village squares, festival grounds, community halls, or political gatherings. The audience does not function as passive spectators but as active co-creators. Applause, laughter, exclamations such as 'Hoooi kiw!' or 'kyn-o/kynhui,' and spontaneous interjections constitute feedback mechanisms that shape the trajectory of the performance.

This communicative cycle mirrors the sender–message–receiver–feedback model articulated by Wilbur Schramm (Schramm 1954). The lead performer encodes the message through metaphor, satire, rhythm, and gesture; the audience decodes it through shared cultural knowledge; feedback, whether approval, silence, or challenge, confirms or reshapes meaning. In this sense, *phawar* embodies symbolic interactionism, where meaning is negotiated rather than inherent. Language, gesture, tone, and collective memory converge to produce shared understanding. Moreover, Dell Hymes' ethnopoetic approach underscores the necessity of analysing oral genres within their sociolinguistic contexts (Hymes 1981). The communicative competence of a *phawar* performer includes mastery not only of

vocabulary and metre but also of social boundaries, knowing how far satire may extend without fracturing communal harmony.

Traditionally, *phawar* functioned as a public mode of disseminating information, articulating communal values, and expressing collective sentiment. Its rhetorical economy reflects what Richard Lanham terms clarity–brevity–sincerity (C-B-S), emphasising the necessity of saying 'exactly what you mean, neither more nor less' (Lanham 2003:137). The success of a *phawar* depends on concentrated expression, dense metaphors, compressed imagery, and rhythmic exactitude that capture attention instantly.

The leader of the performing group plays a pivotal role. Success hinges upon wit, intelligence, creativity, and an extensive command of cultural knowledge, mythology, clan histories, ecological patterns, and ritual practices. The lunar cycle, which structures agricultural rhythms, festivals, and ceremonial observances, often serves as a symbolic reference point. Delivery demands tonal modulation, controlled pacing, and sensitivity to the emotional climate of the occasion. Thus, performance is not merely linguistic but embodied; bodily expression reinforces symbolic meaning.

Structurally, *phawar* blends rhyme (*tara*) and rhythm (*khriang*) within strict syllabic metre. It is often composed in rhythmic couplets or quatrains delivered in a chanting tune known as *ka kynhui*. A typical stanza, termed *sur phawar*, comprises four lines: *Sai Khmat* (first two lines): Introduction of theme or situational reference; *Methah* (central thematic body): Development of imagery and context; *Sai Bud* (final lines): Conclusion or reinforcement of the message.

A crucial element is *ka kyoh*, the satirical third line that encapsulates and intensifies the stanza's impact. Performances commonly begin with elongated vocal openings, 'Ooo…!' or 'Aaa…!' to capture attention, and may conclude with participatory refrains such as 'Hoooi kiw!' These refrains are typically omitted during solemn rites, such as death ceremonies, demonstrating contextual sensitivity.

Group dynamics vary. At times, the leader delivers the opening line, followed by collective reinforcement from the group; in other instances, the first two lines are performed in unison, with the audience joining at the chorus. The interplay between soloist, ensemble, and crowd transforms poetry into communal enactment.

The thematic range of a *phawar* is expansive. Light-hearted compositions enliven dances, festivals, and archery competitions such as *ka siat khnam*. They are performed during weddings (*ka kyntiew kurim*), open village councils (*dorbar*), clan consecration rites (*ka tang jait*), election campaigns, and celebratory feasts. In these contexts, pun-intended humour targeting specific individuals or groups enhances engagement while remaining within culturally sanctioned boundaries.

Conversely, ritual-specific *phawar* accompany solemn events, including the ceremonial transfer of ancestral bones to clan ossuaries and reverential invocations to the paternal grandmother (*Meikha*). The omission of exuberant refrains in such contexts underscores the ethical dimension of performance.

Seng Khasi Phawar	**Translation:**
A… namar ka Seng Khasi, namar ka Seng Khasi	A . . . for the Seng Khasi, for the Seng Khasi,
Ba la tip halor u khet	Renowned in its rising strength,
Ban ioh ïa ka riti da la ka jong te kaba ieit	To reclaim and uphold our sacred customs—
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	This is what we cherish most.
Ban ïoh ïa ka baieit, Ban ïoh ïa ka baieit	Hoooi kiw . . .!
Ka shah teh ka bym lah long	To attain what we love,
Ban ïaid sha rum sha neng	We must not remain bound,
Ban ïa kynduh para riew seng	But walk freely across lands and skies,
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	To meet and unite with fellow believers.
A… ki ong ïa ngi ba wit, ki ong ïa ngi ba wit bad ïa kata ngim sngew eiei	Hoooi kiw . . .!
Ngi leh ïa kaba dei ha ka niam ka bor u Blei	They say we resist, they say we obstruct—
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	Yet we take no offence,
A… ko para Seng baieit, ko para Seng baieit	For we act in righteousness,
Ïa kane to da kynmaw	In the name of faith and divine शक्ति.
Wat ai ba Seng Khasi kan shah rahnoh ha ka um saw	Hoooi kiw . . .!
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	O beloved members of the Seng,
A… ma phi kiba peit kai	Let this be remembered well:
Na shabar sharud lynti	Do not let Seng Khasi be swept away
Sha la tynrai wan phai	By the rising flood of change.
Seng Khasi te kan pyni	Hoooi kiw . . .!
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	And to those who stand watching from afar,
	Lingering by the roadside,
	Return to your roots
	Seng Khasi shall guide your way.
	Hoooi kiw . . . !

This *phawar* exemplifies the use of performance poetry as ideological articulation and cultural assertion. It operates as a collective voice rather than an individual expression, foregrounding the institutional identity of Seng Khasi as a guardian of indigenous religion and cultural continuity. The repetitive invocation (*A . . . namar ka Seng Khasi*) functions as both an anaphoric device and a performative call, reinforcing communal solidarity and mnemonic retention.

Seng Khasi is a socio-religious and cultural organisation founded in 1899 in Shillong to preserve, protect, and promote the indigenous faith and traditions of the Khasi people. It emerged during a period of intense colonial influence and the spread of Christianity in the Khasi Hills, when concerns grew over the erosion of traditional beliefs, customs, and identity.

At its core, Seng Khasi seeks to uphold the Khasi indigenous religion, often referred to as *Niam Khasi*, which emphasises reverence for a supreme creator,

ancestral respect, moral living, and harmony with nature. The organisation also plays a crucial role in maintaining customary practices such as clan identity (*ka jait*), matrilineal inheritance, and ritual observances tied to life-cycle events.

Culturally, Seng Khasi is widely recognised for organising and institutionalising major festivals such as *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, a thanksgiving dance that celebrates purity, gratitude, and community cohesion. Through such events, it reinforces Khasi identity and provides a platform for the transmission of traditional knowledge, music, dance, and oral expressions like *phawar*.

Beyond ritual and festival, Seng Khasi functions as a moral and social body that advocates for the preservation of indigenous values in the face of modernisation and cultural change. It engages in educational, cultural, and community initiatives aimed at strengthening awareness among younger generations about their heritage. Seng Khasi represents a collective effort to sustain Khasi cultural identity, religious autonomy, and social continuity, serving as both a guardian of tradition and a dynamic institution adapting to contemporary challenges.

Structurally, the composition follows the *sur phawar* format, where the opening lines (*sai khmat*) establish thematic intent, cultural revival and identity, while subsequent lines (*sai bud*) expand into exhortation and warning. The refrain 'Hoooi kiw!' acts as a participatory marker, inviting audience engagement and reinforcing the rhythmic cadence.

Symbolically, the imagery of 'flood' signifies cultural erosion under modernity and external influence, while 'returning to roots' invokes indigenous epistemology and ancestral continuity. The *phawar* thus functions as both a persuasive and protective discourse, aligning with communication models such as those of Wilbur Schramm, where message and feedback co-create meaning.

Ka Phawar danda	**Translation:**
Ani ! Ana! i ei sha ma ita?	Oh! Ah! Oh! Ah!
Sit shi sit - ba kjit ing dong jong nga,	Who is this, who could it be
I thyllah ma? i jynreiñ ma?	Ticking, biting, clinging to me?
Ynda nga peit	Is it a flea, or a creeping lice?
Dei pynban i 'liem Sohra.	But when I looked more closely
	It was the infamous Sohra leech!

This humorous *phawar* illustrates the playful and satirical dimension of Khasi performance poetry. Rooted in everyday experience, it draws upon ecological familiarity, particularly the leech associated with the rain-soaked terrain of Sohra historically known as Cherrapunji, which is one of the most iconic climatic landscapes in the world, renowned for receiving some of the highest annual rainfall on Earth. Situated on the southern edge of the Khasi Hills, Sohra lies along the path of the moisture-laden monsoon winds from the Bay of Bengal. As these clouds rise abruptly against the plateau, they release intense and sustained rainfall, shaping the region's dramatic ecology of deep valleys, cascading waterfalls, and lush vegetation. Sohra gained global attention during the nineteenth century under British colonial administration, when it was recorded as

the wettest place on Earth. It briefly served as an administrative centre due to its cooler climate, but the relentless rainfall and challenging terrain made long-term settlement difficult, leading to the eventual shift of administrative focus to Shillong. Despite this, Sohra remained significant as a site of early missionary activity, education, and cultural exchange.

The gradual build-up of suspense (Is it a flea . . . a lice . . .) culminates in an unexpected yet locally resonant punchline. The rain in Sohra is not merely a climatic phenomenon but a defining force in Khasi life and imagination. It influences agriculture, architecture, oral traditions, and everyday practices. The landscape has given rise to unique adaptations such as living root bridges, water-harvesting practices, and ecological knowledge systems. In oral expressions like *phawar*, references to rain, leeches, mist, and fertile land are common, reflecting an intimate relationship between environment and cultural expression.

The humour emerges through exaggeration, rhythm, and delayed revelation, demonstrating the performer's ability to manipulate audience expectation. Such *phawar* align with Bauman's notion of performance as emergent, where meaning is shaped through timing, delivery, and audience reaction. The use of sound patterns (*tic tic tic*) enhances the auditory experience, reinforcing its performative nature.

Ka Phawar pharshi samla:	**Translation:**
A u khla ha Kolkata.....u khla ha Kolkata	Oh! a tiger in Kolkata, a tiger in Kolkata,
U panpoh da ka rajai	Wrapped in a quilt at his waist,
Ïa kynduh para samla	There he meets his beloved,
U ïa doh u ïa kutbai	They embrace, then part their ways.
Hoooi kiw...! Hoooi kiw...!	Hoooi kiw…!

This *phawar* reflects youthful playfulness and coded romantic expression. The metaphor of the 'tiger' introduces masculinity and bravado, while the setting in a distant urban space (Kolkata) suggests imagination, aspiration, and narrative exaggeration. The brevity of the encounter, meeting, intimacy, and departure captures fleeting romance, often expressed through metaphor rather than direct declaration due to cultural norms.

The symbolic layering aligns with what Dell Hymes describes as culturally embedded meaning-making, where context determines interpretation. The performative delivery, combined with communal laughter, transforms private emotion into shared experience.

Ka Phawar pharshi samla:	**Translation:**
A ngan nai i dur bhabriew	Oh! I seek not a pretty face,
Ngan nai i dur bhabriew	No, not beauty alone
Mynmiet khwïap khwïap kum i kha basa	Like a fish that dances at night,
Mynstep kum i 'tungtap.	But is gone by morning's light.
A lajong te i la i jong, la jong te la i jong	For my beloved is mine alone,
La lieh ne la i ïong, lyngkot ne la i jrong	Whether fair or dark, short or tall,
Lajong te i la jong, lajong te i la jong.	Mine she is, in truth and bond
	Mine she remains through all.
	Hoooi kiw…!

This *phawar* conveys moral philosophy within a romantic framework. It critiques superficial attraction and emphasises constancy, loyalty, and acceptance. The metaphor of the 'dancing fish' versus 'morning chutney' juxtaposes fleeting charm with enduring substance.

Such proverbial expressions demonstrate the didactic function of *phawar*, where entertainment merges with ethical instruction. The repetition (my one is my own) reinforces emotional commitment and communal values of relational stability. This aligns with Walter J. Ong's observation that oral cultures rely on repetition and formulaic phrasing to reinforce memory and social norms.

Warning Phawar:	**Translation:**
Jingieit mynta la pdang	Love today has grown shallow,
Ka pyrthei ba mangkarong	In this world of fleeting display,
Thylliej wat jler ho rang	Guard your tongue, O young man,
Ïoh I dei I kur lajong	Lest she belong to your own clan.

This *phawar* reflects the regulatory function of oral poetry within Khasi society, particularly in relation to clan exogamy. The caution against careless speech suggests the cultural taboo against intra-clan relationships, a cornerstone of Khasi matrilineal identity.

The tone is admonitory yet poetic, employing metaphor (love has grown shallow) to critique modern relational instability. The warning is delivered succinctly, reflecting the clarity - brevity - sincerity principle discussed by Richard Lanham.

Across the foregoing examples, *phawar* reveals a striking thematic versatility that ranges from assertions of institutional identity and cultural revival to humour, courtship, and moral instruction. Yet beneath this diversity lies a coherent set of aesthetic and communicative principles that define the genre's integrity. Central among these is the capacity for improvisation within structure**,** a disciplined spontaneity governed by strict syllabic metre, rhythmic cadence (*khriang*), and patterned composition. This balance between creativity and constraint resonates strongly with the oral-formulaic theory advanced by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, who argue that oral traditions rely on formulaic systems that enable performers to compose in real time while maintaining structural coherence (Parry 1930; Lord 1960).

Equally significant is the symbolic density and metaphorical compression characteristic of *phawar*. Performers employ layered imagery drawn from ecology, kinship, ritual life, and everyday experience, condensing complex meanings into brief, rhythmically charged utterances. Such symbolic articulation is not merely decorative but functional, enabling rapid communication of shared values and social commentary. In this sense, language operates as both an aesthetic medium and a social instrument, where meaning is collectively constructed rather than individually imposed. This aligns with the ethnopoetic insights of Dell Hymes, who emphasises that verbal art must be understood within its cultural and communicative context (Hymes 1981).

Another defining feature is the centrality of audience participation and performative feedback**.** *Phawar* is inherently dialogic: the performer's delivery is

continuously shaped by audience response, applause, laughter, vocal affirmations such as "Hoooi kiw!", or even silence. This interactive dynamic completes the communicative circuit described by Wilbur Schramm, wherein the effectiveness of a message is realised through feedback and interpretation (Schramm 1954). Meaning, therefore, is not fixed within the verbal text but emerges dynamically through performance, reception, and shared cultural codes.

At the same time, *phawar* performs a crucial role in ethical and social regulation**.** Through satire, humour, and proverbial expression, it critiques behaviour, reinforces norms, and transmits moral values. However, this critique operates within culturally sanctioned boundaries. The credibility of a *phawar* performer rests not solely on poetic skill but on ethical positioning; satire must correct without humiliating, provoke without destabilising communal harmony. This reflects the performance framework articulated by Richard Bauman, who conceptualises verbal art as socially framed action governed by communal expectations and norms (Bauman 1977). The performer's authority is thus negotiated through knowledge, rhetorical discipline, and moral restraint.

The participatory and situational nature of *phawar* exemplifies what Walter J. Ong describes as primary orality**,** in which expression is embedded in lived experience, communal memory, and immediate context rather than in detached textuality (Ong 1982). The use of repetition, formulaic openings, and rhythmic refrains enhances memorability while fostering collective engagement. Symbols within *phawar* carry learned and shared meanings; they resonate because they are rooted in collective consciousness. Through interaction, these symbols are continually reinterpreted, reaffirming that oral performance is not a static artifact but a living discourse.

Taken together, *phawar* emerges as a sophisticated indigenous form of performance poetry that integrates improvisation, rhetorical precision, symbolic richness, and communal participation. Its structural discipline parallels oral-formulaic theory (Parry; Lord), its event-centred vitality reflects performance theory (Bauman), its sociolinguistic embeddedness echoes ethnopoetics (Hymes), and its communicative dynamics align with mass communication models (Schramm).

As a living poetic ecology, where song, speech, gesture, and audience converge, *phawar* expands global understandings of performance poetry beyond text-centric paradigms. It challenges the privileging of written literature by foregrounding embodied knowledge systems, dialogic meaning-making, and community-based aesthetics. In doing so, it reaffirms the centrality of indigenous oral traditions in shaping literary theory, cultural identity, and the ongoing negotiation of meaning within society.

Discussion

A performance-centred analysis of *phawar* reveals its complex, multi-layered functions as a communicative, aesthetic, and socio-cultural practice. Rather than being reducible to entertainment or folklore, *phawar* operates as a dynamic site where language, performance, and community intersect to produce meaning in real time.

First, *phawar* functions as a mechanism of social regulation and moral discourse. Through satire, humour, and metaphorical indirection, performers articulate a

critique of behavioural patterns, the political scene, and social vibes. Importantly, such critique is embedded within culturally sanctioned limits, ensuring that correction does not escalate into confrontation. In the Khasi matrilineal system, where clan affiliation, kinship obligations, and social cohesion are foundational, this form of indirect critique reinforces communal accountability while preserving relational harmony. This regulatory function aligns with Richard Bauman's understanding of verbal art as socially situated action, which emphasises that performance is framed by shared norms and expectations that govern both expression and reception (Bauman 1977).

Second, *phawar* constitutes a highly sophisticated arena of linguistic and rhetorical artistry. Its improvisational nature challenges dominant literary paradigms that privilege solitary authorship and written composition. Instead, poetic creation in *phawar* is immediate, collaborative, and context-dependent. Performers draw upon a repertoire of formulaic expressions, symbolic references, and rhythmic patterns to compose extempore, demonstrating what Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord identify as the structured improvisation characteristic of oral traditions (Parry 1930; Lord 1960). Creativity here is not diminished by spontaneity; rather, it is intensified through the necessity of real-time composition, audience engagement, and rhetorical precision. As Bauman (1977) further argues, performance is emergent and co-constructed, with meaning shaped through the interaction between performer and audience.

Third, *phawar* serves as a crucial interface between tradition and modernity. While deeply rooted in Khasi cosmology, ecological symbolism, and social organisation, contemporary performances increasingly incorporate themes such as migration, environmental change, digital culture, and governance. This thematic expansion illustrates the adaptability of *phawar* as a living tradition capable of responding to shifting socio-political realities without relinquishing its formal and aesthetic integrity. Such adaptability reflects what Walter J. Ong describes as the situational and responsive nature of primary orality, where expression evolves in accordance with lived experience and communal needs (Ong 1982).

Finally, situating *phawar* within global discourses of performance poetry highlights both points of convergence and divergence. Parallels may be drawn with contemporary forms such as slam poetry and rap cyphers, particularly in their reliance on improvisation, rhythmic delivery, and audience interaction. However, *phawar* differs fundamentally in its communal ethos and ethical grounding. Unlike many commercialised spoken-word circuits that foreground individual expression and competitive spectacle, *phawar* remains embedded in ritual contexts, collective identity, and shared moral frameworks. Its purpose is not merely expressive but integrative, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity.

In this respect, *phawar* challenges text-centric literary hierarchies that privilege written over oral forms. By prioritising embodiment, sound, gesture, and improvisation as primary aesthetic values, it reorients critical attention toward performance as a mode of knowledge production. This perspective resonates with

the ethnopoetic framework of Dell Hymes, which calls for the analysis of verbal art within its cultural and performative context (Hymes 1981). Additionally, its communicative dynamics reflect the feedback-oriented model proposed by Wilbur Schramm, where meaning is co-created through interaction between sender and receiver (Schramm 1954).

Collectively, these aspects highlight the significance of *phawar* in the context of performance studies and indigenous literary theory, demonstrating its usefulness as an analytical tool. It exemplifies how oral traditions function as living systems of communication that integrate aesthetics, ethics, and social practice. By engaging with *phawar* as performance poetry, scholars can expand theoretical frameworks beyond Eurocentric models and recognise the intellectual and artistic sophistication inherent in indigenous oral forms.

Comparative Study: *Phawar* and Global Traditions of Performance Poetry

Performance poetry and poetry songs constitute a vibrant expressive mode across cultures, where voice, rhythm, embodiment, and audience interaction converge. The Khasi *phawar* is an improvisational, dialogic, and rhetorically disciplined form that shares structural and functional affinities with global traditions of oral performance, while retaining distinct indigenous features rooted in matrilineal ethos, ecological symbolism, and communal ethics. This comparative study situates *phawar* alongside selected traditions from the world and Northeast India to illuminate convergences and divergences in aesthetics, structure, and socio-cultural function.

Phawar and African Praise Poetry: African praise poetry, particularly among Zulu imbongi traditions, exemplifies improvised performance centred on public address, political commentary, and genealogical memory. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan have emphasised that African oral poetry is deeply contextual and event-oriented (Finnegan 1970). Like *phawar*, praise poetry employs heightened diction, metaphorical density, and performative gestures.

Both traditions rely on audience feedback and social immediacy. However, while African praise poetry often affirms heroic identity and lineage, *phawar* tends toward dialogic satire and communal regulation. The Khasi performer's role is less that of a court bard and more that of a socially embedded commentator whose critique must maintain harmony within the clan-based social order.

Phawar and Japanese *Renga* / Spoken Chant Traditions: Improvised collaborative poetry in Japan, particularly linked verse (*renga*), foregrounds collective composition and responsiveness. Though structurally distinct, *renga* shares with *phawar* the principle of antiphonal creativity and thematic continuity. In performance contexts, traditional chant-based arts emphasise tonal precision and embodied delivery.

From the perspective of orality, Walter J. Ong notes that oral cultures privilege additive structures and situational thinking (Ong 1982). *Phawar*, like Japanese chant traditions, integrates voice modulation and rhythmic cadence as integral to meaning production. Yet unlike the often meditative aesthetic of Japanese poetic collaboration, *phawar* thrives on satire, wit, and competitive immediacy.

Phawar and Contemporary Slam Poetry / Rap Battles: Modern spoken-word and rap battle traditions exhibit striking parallels with *phawar*. Slam poetry emphasises improvisation, social critique, audience interaction, and performative presence. Rap cyphers and battle formats involve verbal duelling, metaphorical prowess, and rhythmic precision. Performance theory as articulated by Richard Bauman, conceptualises such forms as emergent events shaped by performer–audience dynamics (Bauman 1977).

Similarly, *phawar* unfolds as a co-constructed act, where applause and vocal responses determine success. Both genres deploy satire, irony, and socio-political commentary. However, while slam poetry often foregrounds individual self-expression and identity politics within urban contexts, *phawar* is anchored in communal ethics. Its satire is regulated by cultural norms; humiliation or social fracture is avoided. The authority of the performer arises from communal trust rather than individual celebrity.

Performance Poetry in Northeast India: Within Northeast India, multiple oral-poetic traditions reveal affinities with *phawar*.

Borgeet of Assam: The Vaishnavite devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardev integrate lyric poetry with music and performance. *Borgeet* foregrounds melodic discipline and spiritual devotion. Unlike the improvisational and satirical tenor of *phawar*, *borgeet* adheres to devotional structure and scriptural themes. Yet both forms demonstrate how poetry song mediates collective identity and spiritual consciousness.

Ao Naga War Chants**:** Among the Ao Nagas, traditional war chants and festival songs combine rhythmic chanting with collective participation. Like *phawar*, these chants rely on repetition, call-and-response, and performative embodiment. However, Naga chants often emphasise communal valour and historical memory, whereas *phawar* incorporates satire as a mechanism of social commentary.

Mizo Folk Songs (Hlado): Mizo *hlado* songs historically celebrated hunting and heroic exploits. Similar to *phawar*, they employ symbolic imagery and structured metre. Yet *hlado* is typically narrative and commemorative, whereas *phawar* privileges improvisational exchange and rhetorical immediacy.

Across Northeast India, oral traditions reflect what Dell Hymes describes as communicative competence embedded in cultural context (Hymes 1981). The performer's authority derives from mastery of linguistic nuance and social codes. *Phawar* shares this embeddedness but stands out for its structured satire and competitive dialogism.

Structural and Functional Comparison: This comparison reveals that while global performance poetry traditions share improvisation, rhythm, and embodiment, *phawar* uniquely integrates satire with communal restraint. Its emphasis on clarity–brevity–sincerity parallels rhetorical principles discussed by Richard Lanham, while its communicative cycle reflects Wilbur Schramm's sender–receiver feedback model (Schramm 1954).

Distinctive Features of *Phawar*: Dialogic Antiphony: Unlike many monologic traditions, *phawar* thrives on rapid exchange; Ethical Satire: Social critique operates within culturally sanctioned limits; Ecological Symbolism: Frequent reference to lunar cycles, agriculture, and nature anchors it in Khasi cosmology; Ritual Versatility: It spans celebratory, political, and ritual contexts; Structured Metre with Improvisation: Balances formulaic discipline with creative spontaneity.

Comparatively situated, *Phawar* occupies a distinctive position within global performance poetry. It shares improvisational agility with rap battles, communal embeddedness with African praise poetry, collaborative spirit with Japanese linked verse, and ritual integration with Northeast Indian devotional traditions. Yet its synthesis of satire, rhetorical precision, symbolic ecology, and ethical moderation marks it as uniquely Khasi.

In expanding performance poetry studies beyond Euro-American frameworks, *phawar* challenges text-centric paradigms and foregrounds embodied, dialogic, and community-centred aesthetics. As oral traditions encounter rapid socio-cultural transformation, comparative scholarship affirms *phawar* not as peripheral folklore but as a sophisticated, theoretically rich genre within the global archive of performance poetry.

Way Forward

For *phawar* to attain sustained scholarly visibility and cultural vitality within global performance poetry studies, a multi-pronged and interdisciplinary approach is essential. Such an approach must move beyond mere documentation toward critical theorisation, community engagement, and institutional support, ensuring that *phawar* is recognised not only as a cultural artefact but as a dynamic epistemological system.

First, there is an urgent need for systematic audio-visual documentation and archiving of live performances. Given that *phawar* is fundamentally embodied, dependent on tone, gesture, rhythm, and audience interaction, textual transcription alone is insufficient. High-quality recordings, accompanied by detailed transcription, translation, and contextual annotation, would preserve their performative nuances and enable rigorous scholarly analysis. This aligns with Richard Bauman's performance-centred framework, which emphasises on the importance of capturing verbal art as an event rather than reducing it to text (Bauman 1977).

Second, interdisciplinary research collaborations are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of *phawar*. Integrating perspectives from linguistics, anthropology, performance studies, folklore, and musicology can illuminate its structural features, symbolic systems, and socio-cultural functions. Such an approach resonates with the ethnopoetic methodology advocated by Dell Hymes, which emphasises the need to situate verbal art within its cultural and communicative contexts (Hymes 1981).

Third, the development of digital repositories and community-driven platforms can play a transformative role in preservation and dissemination.

Digitisation not only ensures archival longevity but also facilitates accessibility for younger generations who increasingly engage with culture through digital media. Community participation in curating and interpreting these repositories is vital to maintaining authenticity and avoiding external misrepresentation. In this regard, digital humanities initiatives can bridge the gap between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary modes of cultural transmission.

Fourth, comparative and cross-cultural scholarship should be actively pursued to situate *phawar* within global traditions of improvisational performance poetry. By engaging with forms such as slam poetry, rap cyphers, stand-up comedy and other oral traditions, scholars can expand theoretical frameworks beyond Eurocentric paradigms and foreground indigenous contributions to global poetics. This comparative positioning not only enhances academic visibility but also challenges hierarchical distinctions between written and oral literary forms, echoing the critiques advanced by Walter J. Ong regarding the marginalisation of oral expression (Ong 1982).

Fifth, community-centred pedagogical initiatives are essential for sustaining the tradition. Workshops, school curricula, and cultural programs can encourage youth participation while transmitting the ethical frameworks that govern *phawar* performance. Such initiatives must prioritise not only technical skill but also cultural sensibility, ensuring that satire, humour, and critique remain aligned with communal values. The communicative model proposed by Wilbur Schramm underscores the importance of shared understanding and feedback in sustaining meaningful interaction (Schramm 1954), a principle that is equally relevant in pedagogical contexts.

Finally, there is a need for institutional recognition and scholarly integration of *phawar* within academic curricula and research agendas. Inclusion in university syllabi, research funding priorities, and cultural policy frameworks would legitimise *phawar* as a subject of serious academic inquiry. Such recognition would also contribute to the broader project of decolonising knowledge systems by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and aesthetic practices.

In recognising *phawar* as a sophisticated form of performance poetry, scholars not only contribute to the preservation of Khasi cultural heritage but also expand the conceptual boundaries of literary studies. As oral traditions navigate rapid socio-cultural transformations, sustained academic engagement, ethical documentation, and community participation are imperative. Through such efforts, *phawar* can continue to thrive as a living, improvised, and deeply communal form of poetic expression resonating across generations while enriching global understandings of performance, language, and culture.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *phawar* within the wider spectrum of global and Northeast Indian performance poetry underscores its significance as a structurally disciplined, rhetorically sophisticated, and socially embedded genre of oral expression. Far from being an isolated folkloric residue, *phawar* emerges as a

dynamic and adaptive form that participates in broader traditions of improvisational poetics while retaining a distinct cultural identity grounded in Khasi cosmology and matrilineal ethics. When examined alongside African praise poetry, Japanese collaborative verse practices, contemporary slam poetry, and Northeast Indian devotional and martial song traditions, *phawar* demonstrates shared features of improvisation, rhythmic structuring, performative embodiment, and audience participation, while simultaneously articulating a unique communal ethos that prioritises social cohesion and moral accountability.

From a theoretical perspective, *phawar* substantiates foundational insights from oral-formulaic theory as developed by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, particularly the notion that oral composition is governed by patterned flexibility rather than spontaneity devoid of structure (Parry 1930; Lord 1960). Its event-centred and dialogic nature further reflects the performance paradigm articulated by Richard Bauman, wherein meaning is not contained within the text but emerges through the interaction between performer and audience (Bauman 1977). Additionally, the communicative dynamics of *phawar* resonate with the feedback-oriented model proposed by Wilbur Schramm, highlighting how encoding, decoding, and audience response collectively shape the interpretive process (Schramm 1954).

At the same time, *phawar* complicates and extends dominant frameworks of performance poetry by foregrounding the interplay between satire, ethics, and communal regulation. Unlike many contemporary spoken-word traditions that emphasise individual expression or competitive confrontation, *phawar* operates within culturally sanctioned boundaries where critique is tempered by responsibility. Its satire functions as a corrective mechanism rather than a divisive force; humour is deployed to reinforce social norms without undermining communal harmony. In this regard, the authority of the performer is derived not from spectacle or individual prominence but from moral credibility, ecological knowledge, and rhetorical discipline, qualities that are deeply embedded within Khasi cultural practice.

By situating *phawar* within global performance traditions, this study contributes to the ongoing project of de-centering text-centric literary paradigms and expanding the scope of literary studies to include indigenous oral epistemologies. As Walter J. Ong has argued, oral traditions represent fundamentally different modes of knowledge production, characterised by participation, immediacy, and communal memory (Ong 1982). Similarly, the ethnopoetic insights of Dell Hymes reinforce the need to analyse such forms within their sociocultural and performative contexts (Hymes 1981).

In an era marked by rapid modernisation, digitisation, and shifting cultural practices, the continued vitality of *phawar* depends upon sustained scholarly engagement, critical documentation, and meaningful community participation. Beyond its artistic value, *phawar* endures as a living communicative system, an embodied discourse where song, speech, memory, and collective identity converge. Its study not only enriches our understanding of performance poetry but also reaffirms the centrality of indigenous knowledge systems in shaping global literary and cultural theory.

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