

The Musicological literature of Assam

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If the human being is the greatest creation of God, then music is the greatest creation of human being. Music breaks all divisions of race, religion, cast and creed. Mythology refers to music being brought to the people of Assam from a place of celestial beings. Assamese music is as ancient as the *Purana*, *Mahabharata* etc. It started its maiden journey in the days of Baan Raja, when princess *Usha* and her friend *Chitrlekha* sang and danced together at *Agnigarh (of Sunitpur)*. *Chitrlekha* is said to be the first artist of *Matyaloka* (earth). So the music of Assamese people, which is so grand and special in its origin, thus dates back to the time which history can hardly reach. The music of Assam is said to have been inspired by the beauty and magical touch by nature of its land and from its highly cultured and resourceful people. The present form of music of this state can be said to have acquired as a result of the historical development. Along its journey through the sands of time, music of Assam adopted and assimilated the cultural sentiment and aspiration of different small and large ethnic societies that inhabited Assam from time to time. The entire class of songs, possesses many kinds of melodic variations. The vibrant festivals of the state are the prime occasions of singing these songs. This write up is just a humble endeavor to explore some variety of songs which are found in different forms of Assamese language. Here some of the varieties are verbal and run from mouth to mouth by common people and renders day to day life chores a strain of folk feeling. On the other hand, some of the varieties are preserved in manuscripts and some of them have the classical characteristic.

The domain of Assamese music is as vast and deep as an ocean. This article has been delving only an inch of it and has presented just a few elements of it. The famous songs from our different tribes are not included here.

Assamese songs can be divided into three categories:

- 1.Folk
- 2.Classical
- 3.Modern

Folk: “The folk song has been well defined as a lyric poem with melody originating anonymously in times past among unlettered folk and remaining in currency for a considerable time, usually centuries.”(By Cassel’s Encyclopedia of literature, Vol.1.p.225). The Assamese folk song is very rich in the sense of literature, varieties and an esthetic value. The seasonal festivals are the most vibrant occasions for singing these songs. According to prof. Hemanta Kr Sarmah, an Assamese

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folk song can be divided into four different divisions. These are as follows:

1. Song of Festivity
2. Work song
3. Ballad or Malita
4. Miscellaneous

1 Songs of festivity

Songs of festivity can be divided into two parts; these are 'mythological and profane'. Mythological songs are sung by both male and female in different festivals. The songs that are sung by women are likely in praise of Goddesses to get rid of diseases and epidemics, long life for husband, for wealth etc. These are *Sheetala aair naam*, *Chora brator geet*, *Mansa pujar geet*, *Tulsi geet*, *Lakhimi aadorar geet*, *Dihanaam* etc. Some of the songs are sung by male called *Bhakat*. These songs are sung by playing *khanjori* to beg for food and money. These are called *Dehbisaror geet*, *Tukari geet* etc. *Haidang geet* of *Kasari tribe* also a kind of devotional song of Assam. Songs of *Krishna Janmastami* and *Gusai naam* (*ghur andhokare shila boroxile e...*) are some mythological songs which are very famous in entire Assam. *Jikir* and *Jari* are also famous devotional songs of Assamese Muslim community with esthetic value. The famous *Holi geet*; (*Gunjore Madhukare....*) of Barpeta can be considered as devotional song of festival *Holi*.

Village elders move of household to households singing carols, also in the style of *bihu geets*, called *husoris*. The singers are traditionally Welcomed into the courtyard where they sing the *husori* songs and perform a ring dance. At the end of the performance they are thanked with an offering *dakshina* (contribution) of *paan* (betel leaf) *tamul* (betel nut) in a *xorai* (brass dish with stand), whereupon the singers bless the household for the coming year. These devotional songs are playing a crucial part in Assamese music.

In Profane part the heart throb of Assamese music '*Bihu*' *geet and dance* can be included.. *Bihugeet* is sung in spring festivals. The *Bihu* songs are very close to the heart of Assamese people. It is seasonal and are sung by young boys and girls. Basically juvenility is expressed by the young boys and girls in *Bihu*. *Bihu* songs are accompanied by the musical instruments like *dhol*, *taal*, *pepa*, *gogona* etc. The young girls wear golden *muga mekhela-chadar* and boys were white dhoti and *chapkon* (shirt) to dance in *Bihu* songs. The dance is also known as *Bihu* dance. *Bihu* is the most popular form of music in Assam.

The marriage ceremony is also a renowned occasion of singing. The marriage is known as *Biya* in Assamese, and the songs on this occasion are known as *Biyanaam*. There are three kinds of *Biyanaam* found in Assam. One is for the universal ceremony, marriage. Here, all the *aayati* (singers) flourishes every step of the ceremony and give advices, make fun, pour the emotions and make the ceremony culturally rich. Other two kinds of *Biyanaam* are singing on the occasion of the first maturation period of a girl child and the other one is in the marriage ceremony of a frog. A frog marriage ceremony is celebrated when there is drought in an area.

Through these songs, singer prays to god for rain and proper harvest.

2 Work songs

from Cassells's Encyclopedia we get "any activity, in fact, the rhythmic movement was called for, might readily and easily give rise to melody and song, as it still does amongst the laboring classes in many parts of the world". Similarly, in the Assamese community the manual labours sounds some rhythmic words like '*hei joor, o' heiya*' etc. to improve the strength of workers. There are some other work songs like songs of cowboy, songs of fishermen, songs of the boat race, lullaby, *nangeli geet*, *shaktula geet*, *kuhiyar pera geet*, *mohohogeeet*, *songs of elephant catching*, *ranuwar geet* etc. These songs work as catalyst of the work by incising the spirit of the worker. The famous Assamese lullaby is '*aamaare moina huboye, barite bogori ruboye...*'

3. Ballad or Malita

A ballad is a lyrical poem, usually sung to accompany the music. It is usually a short poem which could be sung or simply narrated and read. Assamese music is flourished by uncountable ballads. It is run from the prehistoric period. The Assamese ballads popularly known as *Malitas* are based on historic and prehistoric stories. The pathos (*birah*) is its main essence. Ballads of *Nahar*, *Janagavoru*, *Moniram Dewan*, *Joymoti*, *Mulagabhoru*, *Lachit* etc. are "Historic Ballads".

Ballads of *Phulkonwar – Monikanwar*; *Dushmanta – Sakuntala*, etc. are pre-historic. The birth story of different Ragas which are applied in *Oja-pali*, *Lookgeet*, *Borgeet* etc. also found in the form of beautiful Ballads.

4 Miscellaneous

In this section *Bongeet*, *Kamrupi lokgeet*, *Goalporiya lok geet* can be included. These Folk songs are very famous in both upper and lower parts of Assam. Seasonal songs (*Baramahi geet*), *Kuchan geet*, *Juna* or *Dhemeliya geet* etc are also part of Assamese folk songs. *Bongeets* are the outcome of some spontaneous feeling of young boys towards the opposite sex. The pathos or *Birah* is the main theme of *Goalpariya lokgeet*. The bonding of a married woman generally expressed here. In *kamrupi lok geet* singers express natural sceneries, day to day life, the bonding of the woman with the family, story of Ramayana – Mahabharata etc. *Chah masdur* (tea garden labour) is a big branch of Assamese family. Their dance and song is called *Jhumur*. In it both men and women participate of the ages. It involves the community and performs as a group dance. It is also a seasonal art form. *Durgabor* was a great lyricist of the 15th century. His songs are known by his name as *Durgabori's geet*. *E joya raghura nandana ...*, *Moiu bone jaw swami hei ..* etc. are his famous songs.

The classical form of Assamese songs can be divided into two categories:

1. Oja-pali

2. Sankari Sangeet

Oja-pali :- Ojapali is an ancient musical art of Assam, which consists of song, drama and dance. Here the Oja (the lead artist) perform the art form with the help of some Pali (team of performers). The performance is based on tales from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Padmapurana* etc. The songs are based on raga which are similar with the *Chajya Pada*. At a time *Oja-pali* was the main source of entertainment in different ceremonial functions and festivals of lower Assam. The Oja and Pali(s) must be expert in entertaining the audience and sometimes they even involve the audience to make the performance more interesting. Performers infuse **Hara-Gauri** (Lord Shiva and Parvati) as a common Assamese couple; who work in paddy fields, weave cloths, go to the river to bring drinking water etc.

Many shades of the Indian classical dances, like *hasta*, *gati*, *bhramari* and *asana*, can be seen in Oja-Pali classical dance of Assam. There is a typical pattern of dressing for the Ojas as well. He has to wear a *pag-jama* or a *ghuri*, along with bangles, *unti*, ring and *nupur* and also has to tie a *tangali*. The Oja-Pali dance is again subdivided into three types - *Vyasageet Oja*, *Suknarayani Oja* and *Ramayani Oja*

Vyasageet

This dance and singing form are mainly a preaching of the Vaishnava culture of Assam. The themes of this music have been adopted from the epic stories of the Bhagavata, Mahabharata and Harivamsa and the attire for the chief is slightly different from that of the other Ojas. The leader here wears a long white skirt, a tight fitting jacket, a turban, anklets, and various gold ornaments in the neck, hands and ears.

Suknarayani

The hymns for this form of music were composed by an ancient Assamese poet, Sukabi Narayan Dev and are dedicated to the worship of the snake goddess, Manasa. The subject of this dance is the story of Beula and Lakhindar, which mainly deals with the tales of Goddess Manasa. In this case, the attire for the Oja consists of a long skirt (Chapkan), a white Dhoti, a pointed turban and various gold ornaments.

Ramayani

The costume in this form of dance is similar to that of the Vyasa Oja and the songs sung here actually relate tales from the Ramayana.

This way, though the tales were taken from the great epics the performer mingle the lyrics with Assam's folk life. The songs of Oja-Pali are based on different ragas and many of them similar to the Buddhist *charyapada*, which is claimed to be the common musical property of east India. But the performance of Oja-Pali is flourished by Assamese folk essence. That is the reason of the popularity of Oja-Pali in Assamese villages.

Sankari Sangeet:-

It is the most systematic and grammatical musical art of Assam. The creator of this music form is Srimanta Sankaradeva and his work is further enriched by his disciples Madhavadeva, Gopal Ata etc. *Borgeet*, *Ankiageet*, *Naamprasanga*, *Kirtan-Ghosha* are main singing elements of *Sankari Sangeet*.

Some scholars compare the Borgeet with ancient Prabhandha gayan. According to scholar Golap Mahanta the Astapadi of Gita-Govinda were perhaps the creation of fully developed stage of the prabhandha type of music. Being possessed of five Dhatus and six angas, they may rightly be categorized as *salagasuda prabhandhas* of the *Medini Jati*. Written in Sanskrit the *Astapadis* were the last and probably the best specimens of *prabandha sangita* in the general Indian context. No other musical composition is available today anywhere in India compared to the tradition of music represented by the *austapadis* of Gita Govinda save the Borgeet by Sankara – Madhava. More than that, the musical practice *Astapadis* being no more seen anywhere, the Borgeet of Assam may with justification be projected as the only leaving reminiscence today of the ancient *prabhandha* type of music in entire India.

The uniqueness of *Borgeet* are also corroborated by its accompanying *Talas*. Both in structure and in rhythmic patterns, the *Talas* of *Borgeet* display more complex than those of Hindustani and Karnataki music. There are *Talas* of ten to twenty eight *matras* (sometimes even more) comprising of three parts viz. *Gaman*, *Ghat* and *Chok*. In the traditional style of singing, Borgeet is sung in more than one tala. The special instrument that is played to keep the rhythm in *Borgeet* is *Khol*.

Borgeet and *Kirtan-Ghosha* are sung without definite beats. *Prasangiya*, *Borgeet*, *Kirtan*, *Naam Prasanga* are used to sing in three different speeds of rhythm. There are very slow (*vilamvit laya*), medium (*madhy laya*), high (*drut laya*). But the rhythm of *Ankia geet* remains fixed. The strength of Sankari Sangeet is its close relation with the devotees of the lord Krishna. *Borgeet*, *Kirtana-Ghosha* and *Naam Prasanga* are basically used for spiritual & devotional functions. On the other hand *Ankiageet* is the major ingredient of *Ankia Naat*. Now a day *Borgeet(s)* and *Ankiageets* are popularly used for stage performance and used in different form of *Satriya Dance*.

Almost all *borgeets* were written in the *Brajavali* language. Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva accepted this language in *Ankia geet* and *Ankia naat* also. This language is not the spoken language of Assam.

Modern

The modern era of Assamese music had started from the period of gramophone records. Prafulla Baruah, Umesh Choudhary, Anandiram Das, Kirti Nath Sarma Bordoloi, Ambikagiri Rai Choudhary, Purushutam Das, Joytiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha are the pioneers of the modern Assamese songs. The modern lyricists at first composed the songs on folk base like Biya Naam, Borgeet, Gualporia Lokgeet, Kamrupi Lokgeet etc. These are considered as modern because they are found in Gramophone in recorded form and also in printed form. Here we get definite lyricists and the songs are known by the name of the writer. The theme or the subjects

of the songs are varied by the progress of the modern civilization. Now it is flowing with its rich varieties by adding new elements from entire world. But the new lyricist and composer should remember what Muktinath Bordoloi said, "In the creation of tune in music, there should always be the presence of the holy water of classical and folk music, otherwise it become rootless and will not be able to reach into the hearts of the people ."

References

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