

The Traditional Songs of the Assamese: Voice and Connection



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ABSTRACT: The folk songs of Assam are mainly associated with rites and rituals; these folk songs reflect the livelihood of the Assamese community. The songs are related to *Shitala Puja*, *Koli burhi nritya*, *Gopini naam*, *biya naam* and *Bihu geet*, which have a unique position in traditional singing among the Assamese community. *Sitala* is a folk goddess and it is believed that she has an intimidating presence who distributes infected pulses in village markets, or sends hordes of disease-demons, thus causing outbreaks of smallpox and other contagious illnesses. Only when properly worshipped she agrees to heal her victims (Ferrari 2015:2). The women sing *Aai Naam* to please the Goddess *Shitala* as she is described as the deification of smallpox. *Koli burhi nritya* is associated with *Magh Bihu*, which is a post-harvest festival, held in January. *Koli burhi* is an Assamese term, which means a black woman. Women put the burning banana leaves on their bodies and sing the song which is known as *Koli burhi nrityar geet* (the songs of black women). It is believed that burning banana leaves removes all the obstacles from their life. *Durga Puja* is a famous festival held in India and during this *puja* (The English term of *puja* is ritual) the Assamese women sing *Gopini Naam* to please the Goddess Bhagavati or Kamakhya (a form of Goddess *Durga*). Songs related to marriage are also very significant among the Assamese community, and these marriage songs are known as *Biya naam*. The song related to *Bihu*, which is the main harvest festival of Assam, held in mid-April, is known as *Bihu geet*. Merriment, love and sad these feelings are described through these *Bihu geet*. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the traditional singing that is related to rituals among the communities of Assam, India.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional songs are those which have been passed down by word of mouth perhaps across many generations. The term folk song suggests the literature which is transmitted orally or verbally from generation to generation. India is rich in varied folk music. The extreme diversity in rural culture spawns endless varieties of folk-styles. Each region of India has its own particular approach and repertoire. Folk-music is a rustic reflection of Indian society at large (Das 2016: 41936). Folk music is an inalienable part of functions such as rituals, ceremonies and engagements (Deka 2020). Women are a vital part of folk life, but women are often unnoticed by popular media and academic literature. Sometimes their hopes and expectations are dominated by the respective societies. These women are the most important medium to transfer these folk songs (Das 2016: 48).

Though folksongs are thriving as oral tradition in various part of Assam, systematic study concerning the voices of woman is often lacking (Das 2016: 41936). Therefore, the paper is an effort to find out the voices and connection with folk life of Assam and how they confront their identity in society.

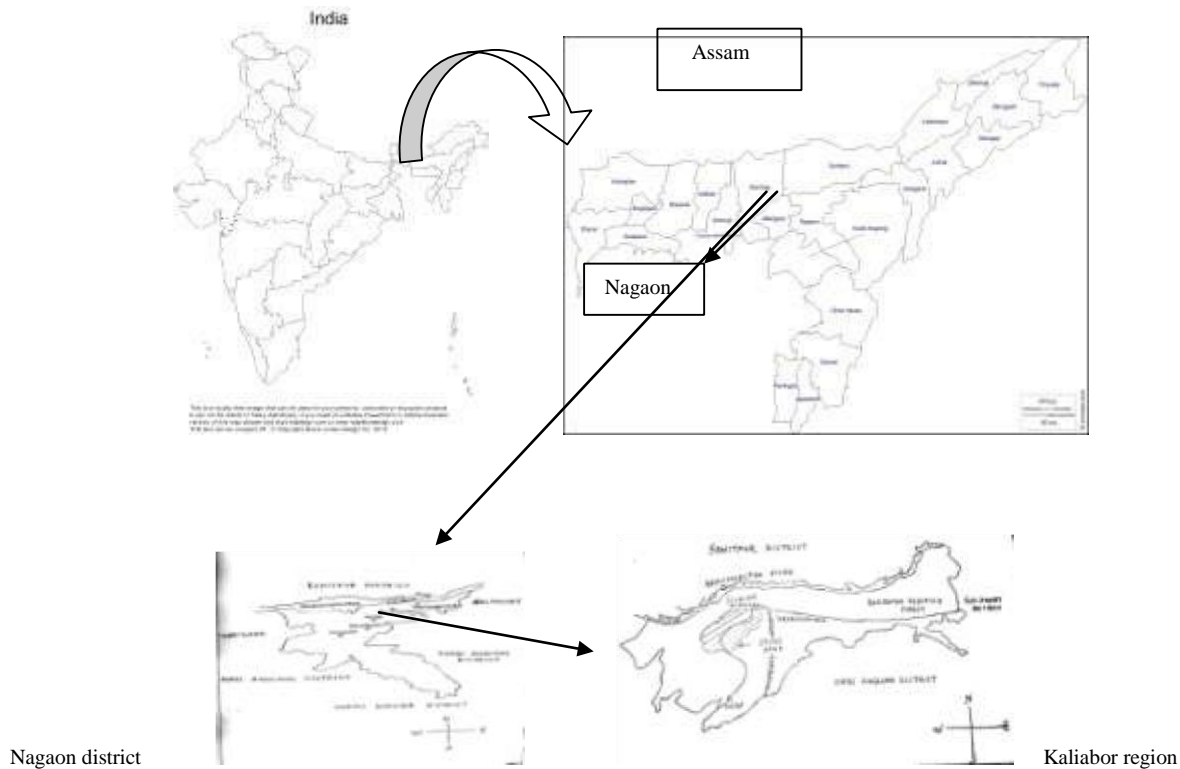
Folksongs or oral songs can be classified into the following sub-genres. e.g –

- 1) Songs connected with the seasonal or agricultural festivals
- 2) Songs connected with rites and rituals
- 3) Songs connected with worships
- 4) Ballads
- 5) Songs associated with children
- 6) Work songs
- 7) Love songs

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

A close look at the map of India reveals Assam as the first state of India's North-Eastern region. This Northeastern state of India shares its international borders with China, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Assam is a land of full natural beauties, mountains, dense forests, inhabited lands, and hills. Assam is famous for its *Muga* (golden thread) production, tea leaves, and one-horned rhino.

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Kaliabor is a sub-division of the Nagaon district of Assam and is an important place of Assam and it has a distinct historical and cultural background. This place is selected for this research topic. The traditional singings in the Assamese community of Kaliabor are going to be discussed here.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIM

My central research question is how folksongs are associated with rituals and folklife of Assam and I aim to understand how people adopt the way rituals and beliefs through traditional singing.

OBSERVATION AND FINDING

The study found the common genres and sub-genres of folk songs in the Assamese community. The genres of folk songs can be categorized as a) ceremonial songs, b) nonceremonial songs and c) Miscellaneous songs and sub-genre of folk songs can be categorized under these three sections. „*Aai Naam*” and „*Biya Naam*” are two examples of sub-genre of ceremonial songs; '*Bihu geet*' is an example of a sub-genre of non-ceremonial songs and „*nisukoni geet*' is an example of a sub-genre of miscellaneous songs (Sarma:1981).

The Assamese term for all kinds of sung form is known as “*Gēē*”. Folksongs always express the inherent tradition of a particular ethnic community. In this paper, it has been found that how the folksongs have reflected different concerns of women in the Assamese society

The folksongs of *Kaliabor*

The folksongs of *Kaliabor* can be divided into three categories –

- a) The ceremonial songs i.e. „*Aai Naam*’ and „*Biya Naam*’
- b) The non-ceremonial songs i.e. „*Bihu geet*”
- c) Miscellaneous songs i.e. „*Nisukoni geet*’

a) The ceremonial songs

1.1 Songs related to worships

The healing power of '*Sitala Puja*' and '*Aai naam*' :

Goddess *Sitala* has a unique position among the Hindu communities in India. It is believed that *Sitala* is a village/folk goddess. The worship of „*Sitala*” is not just functional to protection. It has served for centuries to learning and disseminating basic hygienic norms for the wellbeing of the household (Ferrari 2015:1). In the „*Sitalamangalkavyas*”, *Sitala* is an intimidating presence who distributes infected pulses in village markets or sends hordes of disease-demons, thus causing outbreaks of smallpox and other contagious illnesses. Only when properly worshipped she agrees to heal her victims (Ferrari 2015:2). This belief has been received

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enthusiastically among the communities of India and the communities like Assamese, Boro and Tea garden communities of the Kaliabor region have practised this ritual.

She is predominantly worshipped by women whom she blesses with fertility, healthy sons and decent husbands. She is invoked because she is gentle, compassionate and loving. Like any mother, she protects her children from all imbalances like illness, poverty, injustice, misfortune etc.

„*Sitala*“- the meaning of „cold“, who causes and heals smallpox (scientifically known as varicella). Though the *Sitala* goddess is a benevolent mother, it is believed among the communities victims are possessed by her. And before going to take the medicinal help, the victim family likes to please Goddess *Sitala* to rescue from the fearing the rage of *Sitala*. „*Aai naam*“, the folk song of the Assamese community is associated with the „*Sitala*“ ritual or „*Sitala Puja*“. These songs are used to please Goddess „*Sitala*“. A group of women has performed the songs. The lead woman usually directs the performance. The leader acts as a coordinator, and she often sings a few solo lines that are then repeated by the chorus (Ferrari 2015:27). The female devotees are known as „*gopini*“ and they sit in a circle and clapping their hands rhythmically.

(Women has kept Goddess *Bhavani*¹ (*Sitala*) as a supreme deity and asked her blessings on them).

Ghosa – Murot fulor choru loi/ Bhavanik adorugoi
Ahiche Bhavani jagat janani/ Chaya di rakhibole
Pod - Axi asa Bhagawati ae ase doroxone/
*Kiba puja dibo lage tumar chorone*²

(We are going to welcome Mother *Sitala* with flower, Mother is coming to protect us. O Mother, tell us what kind of ritual would you like to accept?)

Gopini Naam³:

Gopini is an Assamese term which means a group of women. The word *Gopini* is related to mythological character Lord *Krishna* (Incarnation of Hindu God *Vishnu*). *Gopini* were devotees of Lord *Krishna* and worshipping him. *Naam* indicates the devotional songs. The *Gopini* sings these devotional songs in prayer house which is known as „*Naamghar*“⁴. These songs are related to divine character Lord *Shiva*⁵, Lord *Krishna*⁶, Goddess *Bhagavati* etc. *Durga Puja* is a famous festival held in India and during this *puja*⁷ the Assamese women sing *Gopini Naam* to please the Goddess *Bhagavati* or *Kamakhya* (a form of Goddess *Durga*⁸).

1.2 Songs related to rites and ritual

Biya naam (Marriage song):

Marriage is an essential part of life. Particular rituals are associated with Assamese wedding ceremony. Love and arrange both marriage system is there in Assamese community. Before marriage day a kind of rituals are there like to fix the marriage date, here both families are introduced each other. The second important day is „*jurun diya*“, where groom’s mother and other family members comes to bride’s home and offer wedding dress and ornaments to the bride. Third day is the main wedding day. From dawn time to end of the ritual of wedding a remarkable rituals are associated and in every rituals the Assamese womenfolk sings the songs. They are known as „*biya naam*“. The bride’s mother need to go to bring water from pond or river along with other women companions for the bride and the women folk has sung the „*biya naam*“. These „*biya naam*“ is known „*Pani tula naam*“⁹ (songs associated with holy water). The same ritual and songs also used for groom too. The example has given below:

Songs associated with „*jurun diya*“¹⁰-

a) *Jurunor tekeli anahe biyoni oi Ram/ ratnor xinhaxonot tulihe/*
Amare ghoroloi ki kaje ahila oi Ram/Deutarar agote kuwahe/

(The holy pot for the offering ritual has arrived, would you like to tell our father the reason of the arrival?)

Songs associated with „*pani tula*“ (the songs associated with sacred water for bath ritual of both bride and groom)-

b) *Kaxe ghot luwa Radha ae/ mure luwa mala/*
Jomunaloi jabo lage/nokoriba hela

(Take the pot by your side/ put the garland on your head

Have to go to *Jamuna* (a river)/ don’t be lazy)

At every stage of celebration, from early negotiation to the end, women sing appropriate songs. The delicacy and refinement of woman’s heart come out in caressing tunes when and *Namati*¹¹ or leader of the chorus has to describe the beauty and grace of the bride, they describe the procedures of sacred water, and other related rituals. The *Namati* genius is revealed most when she has to give expression to the atmosphere of sadness that prevail when the dear girl is to be taken away. In the *Biyānāms* automatically flows out of the mouth of the women folk who are by nature sensitive, and here the pain of the women heart is reflected, various

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instructions are given to the bride to lead a problem free life as lives are not at all satisfactory at the houses of the in-laws (Das 2016: 41937).

Māār Ghôrôt Jetiyāā Uliṣāārèè Tèṭiyāā, Sāāhur Ghôrôt Jetiyāā Xūtār Kāāpor Āṭiyāā..
Bāāideūr Kôthāāo Xunibāā
Sāāhu Hole Nôṣūwai Kôṣū Khāāle Khôjuwāāi,
*Sômôniyāā Nānād Hôle Kôthaipôti Kônduwāāi.*¹²

(When you were at your Father's place, you had woollen cloths to wear,
You have cotton cloths now at your in-laws Place, Listen To your contemporary elder
sister.
Mother-in-law will make you dance at her own tune just like arum will make your throat scratch.
If your sister-in-law will be of your age, she will make you cry at every conversation (Das 2016: 41937).

Koliburhi nrityar geet :

Sonari gaon of kaliabor region is well-known for *Koliburhi* dance and song. This is associated with *Magh Bihu*¹³, which is a post-harvest festival, held mid of January. On the 3rd day of *Magh bihu* women burn the bamboo made huts which is covered by banana leaves. It is a folk belief that the burning banana leaves help to grow plants and hence they bring burnt leaves to home and tie with plants. The songs are as follows -

Aati doiya paati doiya
Tamul kota kotari
Dayaloni tulapator
Nahoror tolot choku saam
Tumar taloi godhuli jam
.....
Sonari Kamakhyai koli burhi nochuwai
Koli burhi geetoke gaam

(This is song of amusement during the above mentioned event)

b) The non-ceremonial songs : 'Bihu Geet'

Bihu is the main festival of Assam and it is celebrated among Assamese community. There are three *bihu* – *Bohag bihu*, *Kati bihu* and *Magh bihu*. *Bihu* is mainly associated with agricultural. There are three *bihu* observed in Assam – *Bohag Bihu* or *Rongali Bihu* (the spring festival), *Magh Bihu* or *Bhogali Bihu* (the winter festival) and *Kati Bihu* or *Kangali Bihu* (the autumn festival). *Bohag bihu* is the most cherished festival of joy and merry making. *Husari* and *Bihu Geet* are the most important part of celebrating *Bohag bihu*, and these are the most distinctive type of folksongs of Assam, both for their literary contents and for their musical mode. The charm and popularity of *bihu* is reflected in the songs and dances. The songs and dances are the expression of youth, love and union of young hearts. *Bihu* songs describe the beauty of nature, the beloved; it glorifies the youth and also represents frustration and sorrow. Some *bihu* songs also take the pride of representing contemporary issues (Das 2016: 41934).

*Hatot muthikharu*¹⁴ *jaan oi*
*Dingit Junebiri*¹⁵ *jaan oi*
*Tumar nu oi iman dhunia naak*¹⁶

(O darling, you have a *muthikharu* on your wrist, and *Junbiri* on your neck, and also you have a very beautiful nose.)
Through these lines the male singer expresses his love to his beloved one. The *Bihu* songs are only the songs where male also participate along with the women, because it is a festival of joy and merriment, and some *Bihu songs* also includes in love songs.

c) Miscellaneous songs : 'Nisukoni geet'

A mother can express her feelings through the lullabies too, and these lullabies reflects the bonding a mother and her child love. A lullaby is a soothing song, usually sung to young children before they go to sleep, with the intention of speeding that process. In Assamese literature, the lullabies are known as „*Nisukani Geet*“. These songs are constructed with very liberal words. *Nisukani geet* comes out directly from the heart of the mothers. So these songs are wrapped with the love of mothers. These songs represents a imaginary world which takes the children in a different world of moon, stars, trees, leaf, flowers, helpful and talkative animals. The children establish friendship with all these objects. Each and every mother of this world creates a world of fantasy to make her child happy and represent that world in front of the child coupled with some music, words and rhymes. These songs are sung to please the children by mothers or nurses and thus *Nisukani Geets* are also known as *Dhainam*¹⁷ (Das 2016: 41935).

Amare moina xubo e

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Barite bogori rubo e

Barire bogori poki xoribo

Amare moinai butoli khabo

(Our baby will sleep, and he will grow a jujube tree. One day the jujube tree will grow and he will eat from the fallen ones.)
From these line, the mother tries to introduce her child with the nature.

Junbai e beji eta dia

Bejinu kelo

Muna silabole

Munanu kelo

Hati bhorabole

(Jonbai dear, let me have a needle Why a needle?)

To sew a bag Why a bag?

To put an elephant)

Here, the moon indicates the main object, and the baby asks the needle from the moon. It is completely an imaginary picture or fantasy, which is introduced by his mother. The mother tries to introduce with the sky, planets, and animals.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Assamese women have always played an important role in formation of the society through their intellectual capability, mental strength, charisma and beauty (Das 2016: 48). From giving birth to the child to run the household and contributing to the economic condition of the family through helping their husbands, and family, a woman plays a vital role not only in a house but in a society as well. But in a patriarchal society like Assam, women are neglected some way, and the women folk try to express their emotions through the folk songs. Thus, folksong is not only the tool of expressing different emotions, it is the voice of women folk, and they tries to connect the society with their emotions, and it is a strong message to the society. It is true that the modern societies have changed, and women are strong than the earlier, but still in some areas, some societies, women are living with their emotions, and they try to hide their emotions and don't try to share with their companions. In fact, they are the main source to preserve the folk songs. Due to modern time most of the Assamese women don't practice in regular basis still these songs are alive among Assamese community. Worshipping or participating in ritualistic association is a matter of spirituality, the way women prayed to God for the wellbeing of her family, husband and children earlier, the process is still continuing and very much popular in Assam.

NOTES

1. *Bhavani* is a form of Hindu Goddess *Durga*.
2. Informant and singer Lilima Bora from Sonari *Gaon* (Sonari village of kaliabor region).
3. *Naam* indicates a form of devotional songs, especially it sings in *Naamghar* (prayer hall or prayer house). of Assam, introduced by saint Sankardeva in the 14th century). The *Namghar* word is combination of two Assamese words- *Naam* (song) and *Ghar* (house). The *Naam* specially sings inside the *Naamghar*.
4. *Naamghar* is the prayer hall or prayer house of Assam, introduced by saint Sankardeva in the 14th century. The *Namghar* word is combination of two Assamese words- *Naam* (song) and *Ghar* (house). The *Naam* specially sings inside the *Naamghar*.
5. Lord *Shiva* is a Hindu God. Lord *Krishna* is an incarnation of Hindu God *Vishnu*.
6. The *puja* is an Assamese term and its English term is ritual.
7. Goddess *Durga* is a Hindu Goddess.
8. „*Pani tula naam*’ (songs associated with holy water), *Pani* (water) which brings from the pond or well for the bath ritual for both the bride and groom).
9. *Jurun diya*- The offering ceremony for bride from groom's family. The groom's mother generally offers the main wedding dress (traditional) along with other traditional attires, and gold ornaments.
10. *Namati* is known that kind of singers who is expert in devotional songs, specially sung in the prayer house or other ritual purpose like *Aai Naam* (song associated with *Sitala Puja*), *Biya Naam* (marriage song).
11. Through this *Biya Naam* the *Namati* tries to describe the horrible situation of in-laws family. For some Assamese society or any other Indian society it is common to observe the behaviour the in-laws towards the bride. Though it is change now, but still the bride has to face the new situation or new challenging life in her husband's family.
12. *Bihu* is the main festival of Assam, and this festival is associated with harvesting. There are three *Bihu*- *Bohag Bihu*, *Kati Bihu*, and *Magh Bihu*. The main is *Bohag Bihu*, the Assamese new year has started from this *Bihu*, during *Kati Bihu* ,

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farmer starts to harvest, and during *Magh Bihu*, the farmers have finished the yearly crops and celebrated the festival. This festival (*Magh Bihu*) is also known as feast festival.

13. *Muthikharu* is a traditional ornament of Assam, wearing by woman on wrist
14. *Junbiri* is a traditional ornament of Assam, wearing by woman on neck.
15. Informant and singer Om Prakash Bora from Sonari *Gaon* (Sonari village of Kaliabor region).
16. *Dhainam* is a form of lullaby. The Assamese term of nurse is *Dhai*, and sometimes the nurse also tries to put the baby to sleep, and she also sings the songs which are associated with the fantasy world to please the child.

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