



A Brief Study On Assamese Oral Lyrical Poetry

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1.1 Abstract:

Assamese oral lyrical poetry derived from past which are now available in their written form, reflects various aspects of Assamese society. Its huge bulk is a proud asset to Assamese literature and culture. To trace out the earliest stage of it, one will have to resort to oral-lyrics which were originated in the hoary past. The great variety of the oral-lyrics like Nicukani gīt, Biyā-nām, Āinām, Bihugīt etc. and many other ballads like Badan Barphukanar gīt, Piayali Phukanar gīt, Manirām Dewānar gīt, Patharughātar raṇar gīt etc. which were transmitted from generation to generation, despite undergoing a natural process of distortion and interpolation, are valuable assets for researchers. This paper aims at giving an account of the old literary intellectual tradition and heritage and history of the Assamese.

1.2. Keywords:

Oral lyrics, folk song, Nicukani gīt, Biyā-nām, Āinām, Bihugīt, Badan Barphukanar gīt, Piayali Phukanar gīt, Manirām Dewānar gīt, Patharughātar raṇar gīt.

1.3. Introduction

In 1812, the initiation of studies on folk-lore and archaeology by the Jacob brothers, Grim and William in Germany drew attention of the folklorists, historians, archaeologists and philologists all over the world. Now, it is an undeniable fact that the oral-lyric or oral-poetry of a particular population, which is an important ingredient of folk-lore, plays a pivotal role in arousing a sense of nationalism among its members. Therefore, Assamese oral-lyrics may also, besides its various scopes, unfurl before its researchers, the scope to study them from its historical, cultural, nationalistic perspectives.

Bihugīt, biyānām, āinām etc. including various ballads found in Assamese literature are in vogue from generation to generation because of their simplicity and spontaneity. The paper will also find out how different factors at different ages made their contributions to the growth and development of Assamese lyrical poetry.

1.4. Assamese Folk-Songs:

Like in any other literature of the world, oral-lyrics or folk-songs in Assamese were also the poetic-expression of the intense feelings of the folk-poets. That, they

preceded prose, because of its “special relationship with the power of memory,”¹ is also applicable with Assamese oral lyrical poetry. They were the creations of some anonymous “unsophisticated people”² giving expression of their “sentiments, images and spiritual absorption ...of a pristine civilization”.³ These oral-lyrics which are also termed as folk-lyric, folk-poetry or folk-song, in its wider sense, are an ingredient of folk-literature. Folk-songs in Assamese were meant for singing by the “singing folk”⁴ which came to be evolved in an age classified as “gītiyug,”⁵ supposed to be extended from 600 to 800 A.D.

1.5. Characteristics of Assamese Oral-Lyrics

The followings are some of the special characteristics of Assamese oral-lyric:-

- (a) They are the outburst of folk and unsophisticated people.
- (b) They were composed anonymously.
- (c) Their expression was free from artificiality.
- (d) Simplicity and directness of oral-lyric were the result of poignant spontaneity of the mind of the lyric-poet.
- (e) Subjectivity and objectivity, both feature Assamese oral-lyric

1.6. Classification of Assamese Oral-Lyrics

Assamese literature is rich in its oral-lyric or folk-poetry, both in volume and variety. They have been transmitted to the subsequent ages orally asserting their rich tradition into the present age. Historians of Assamese literature like Maheswar Neog, Satyendra Nath Sarma, Hemanta Kumar Sarma, etc. had made their efforts to bring them under some specific divisions on the basis of their thematic variety from their respective approaches. In doing so, their inclusion of some oral-poetry, under certain divisions, of course, lacks resemblance. Despite it, Assamese language “can boast of a rich body of oral and folk literature”⁶ which have been inherited from its past, enriching the literatures of the succeeding ages.

1.7. Institutional Folk-Song or Lyrical Poetry

These are the folk-songs associated with different ceremonial and festive occasions of the Assamese society since olden days.

1.7.1. Bihugīt

The attempt to search out origin of the bihugīt takes one into the lap of the conjecture only. But, the fact is that a bihugīt cannot be separated from its bihunāc

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1. Maheswar Neog, *Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, p.17(trans.)
 2. Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature*, p.10.
 3. Ibid
 4. Dimbeswar Neog, *New Light on History of Asamīyā Literature*, p.49
 5. Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *Asamiya Sahityat Dristipat*, p.13
 6. Upendra Nath Sarma, *Assamese Literature*, Assam Land And People, Basanta Deka (ed.) p.257

i.e. its dance. Because, both the bihugīt and bihunāc are the integral parts of each other as the dance may be taken just for an interpretation of the former. Prafulladutta Goswami surmises bihunāc to be a dance of primitive age, mantramulak and an incentive for sexual union. ⁷ Association of both bihugīt and bihunāc, with that of the primitive belief of human folk in agrarian society, to take the earth for a goddess in the shape of a feminine, inspired them to perform various incantation accompanied with songs and dances. They did it under the belief that that would enhance fertility of the earth. And, it was owing to such a belief which in turn is responsible for evolution of bihugīt and bihunāc in Assam.

1.7.2. Āinām

These are the kinds of devotional songs scattered in different parts of Assam and supposed to be in vogue among the people since past. Some other similar types of this class are: subasanir gīt, apeśwarīr gīt, lakhimī sabāhar gīt, gōsanī pujār gīt. With an awe-struck heart the people pray the Goddesses mentioned in such songs, believing in their miraculous power. People believe that devotion to such supernatural power can get rid of all sorts of perils and adversities that may appear in their normal way of life.

1.7.3. Biyānām

Biyānām i.e. the marriage-songs are the ceremonial songs associated with different rituals attached to celebration of a marriage. The common village women-folk were the creators of this species of oral-songs which are in vogue from generation to generation. Jorānām is a variety of marriage-songs which may aptly be called “teasing songs”.⁸

1.8. Ballads

Ballads are the songs conveying a story of historical or pre-historical happening, supposed to be “created cooperatively”⁹ by the folk. Assamese literature is replete with such genre of poetry, though not at all free from confusion regarding genuineness of their date of compositions or the stories narrated in them. They are one of the best ingredients of objective folk-literature as to stand before us as mirror reflecting our forefather’s days and traditions in it. Nabin Chandra Sarma, a distinguished scholar of Assam, classifies ballads into three groups, namely--- mythical, legendary and imaginary¹⁰. On the other hand, in an exclusive work on Assamese ballad entitling it as *Asamiya Akhyan-Git Sangrah*, Bhabaprasad Chaliha has collected altogether 66 Assamese ballads presenting them under three specific categories viz. historical ballad, miscellaneous ballad and artificial or literary ballad. Miscellaneous ballads are further sub-divided into categories as popular

7. Prafulladutta Goswami, *Asamiya Jana-Sahitya*, p.19 (trans.)

8. Hem Barua, *op.cit.*, p.17

9. Bhabaprasad Chaliha (ed.), *Publisher’s Note in Asamiya Akhyan-Git Sangrah*

10. Nabin Chandra Sarma, *Axamīyā Pāñcālī-Gīta*, p.3

ballad and “bāramahī gīt”¹¹ Apart from it, there are also some ballad-like songs in Assamese which have been contained in Jiba Kanta Gogoi’s Swadhinota Sangramor Geet. These are the songs based on the story and activities of Mahatma Gandhi, Kanaklata, the massacre of Barhampur etc. In Assamese literature, mālitā, purān, bardoi-gīt or gīti-kābha are some terms used synonymously to mean ballad.

1.9. Historical Ballad

A set of ballads in Assamese that tell about some historical events can be discussed under this category. A few such popular among them are: Nāharar gīt, Jaymatī Kūwarīr gīt, Ājān Phakīrar gīt, Cikan Sariyahar gīt, Mowāmarīyār gīt, Bākhar Barār gīt, Barphukanar gīt, Mañirām Dewāna r gīt, Patharughātar Raṇar gīt, Cīnā Akramaṇar gīt, Anil Barār gīt, Asam Āndolanar gīt, Khargeswar Tāludārargīt etc.

1.9.1. Nāharar Gīt

The story of the song called Nāharar gīt claims its historicity associated with the history of Assam during the reign of Khora Raja (1552-1603) belongs to the Ahom dynasty. Nahar was the adopted son of the king who grew insolent to evoke displeasure of the ministers and the lords of the king by his unwanted activities. In doing so, he was emboldened by Kanchan, his former beloved, originally a maid servant of the queens and later became queen herself after their deaths. The displeased ministers and the lords alleged the king against Nahar’s activities. Consequently the king ordered them to give punishment to Nahar as he deserved. And thus, finally Nahar was murdered. The songs entitled as Nāharar gīt describes all about his achievement and his final consequence of tragic death.

1.9.2 Jaymatī Kūwarīr Gīt

Jaymati is a historical character of Assam during the reign of the Ahom dynasty under the kingship of Lōrārajā, a king enthroned in his boyhood. The king, being instigated by his ministers and lords became a despot and sought to secure his throne permanently. For it, he began lacerating any organ of an eligible aspirant of the throne to deprive him from it. Because, according to the Ahom custom a man having any sort of imperfection in his body could not be eligible to be a king. In contrast to it, Gadadhar, an eligible descendent of royal blood for the throne stood as a threat to Lōrārajā incurring his vile design. Therefore, Gadadhar, at the advice of Jaymati, his wife, when left his country for his safety; she had to meet severe corporal punishment leading to her death. The songs called Jaymatī Kūwarīr gīt, in an elegiac manner narrates the rare sacrifice of her life for the cause of her husband as well as the countrymen.

1.9.3. Ājān Phakīrar Gīt

11. Bhabaprasad Chaliha(ed), op. cit., (preface, p.17)

These are the songs depicting the life of Ajan Pir, a Muslim spiritualist, especially to narrate the revengeful punishment he met at the hands of the Ahom king. It was at the instigation of one Rupai Dadhara, during the reign of Gadadhar Singha, that he had to sacrifice his life.

1.9.4. Cikaṅ Sariyahar Gīt

The songs called Cikaṅ Sariyahar gīt, narrates tragic killing of Cikan and Sariyah, the two brothers among seven during the reign of Jaydhwaj Singha, an Ahom King. They were supposed to be killed in order to give a check to their growing aspiration for the throne.

1.9.5. Mowāmariyār Raṅar Gīt

These are the kinds of war-song, sung by the rebellious Mowamariya in their revolt against the Ahom king. A few lines of such a song recorded in the history of Assamese lyrical poetry run thus:-

Eidhenuaikāṅḍḍekādeodhenuudhar

Muluṅ māribalōijāno.

Bhālkōi guri dhar maṭakar ḍekādeo

Bharāgiyātirenao. (AGS.p.31)

1.9.6. Maṅirām Dewānar Gīt

Maniram Dewan, who began his career under the British administration as a faithful friend as well as an admirer, latter turned to be a vehement opponent of it. In his anti-British stand, he advocated for restoration of the old regime of the Ahom and represented the rising middle classes of his time. His hatching of a conspiracy being encouraged by the wave of the great rising of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, to uproot the British was timely detected leading to his death by hanging. The songs of Maniram Dewan depict his sacrifice for the cause of independence of Assam as well his initial nexus with the British.

1.9.7. Patharughātar Raṅuwār Gīt

They are also popularly known as doli-purān. These songs are one of the strong evidences of the peasant revolt that took place at a place called Patharughat at Mangaldai district in Assam. It was in 1868 that the peasants at Patharughat stood against their oppressors and exploiters i.e. the British in an unprecedented way.

1.9.8. Cīnā Ākramaṅar Gīt

People's reaction to the Chinese Aggression of India in 1962 came for an outburst in these songs where Chau-En-Lai, the first Premier of the Republic of China has been ridiculed and abused bitterly by the people of Assam.

1.10. Popular Ballad

In contrary to the historical ballads, popular ballads are engulfed under confusion regarding their authenticity of time, place and character. Despite, owing to their

simplicity and popularity, they are transmitted to the subsequent ages. A few of such ballads available in Assamese literature have been mentioned below:-

1.10.1. Phulkōwar and Manikōwarar Gīt

These are the “oldest extant ballads so far known and discovered in Assamese literature”.¹² They narrate the story inviting its association with the king known as Sankardeo, his son Manikonwar, Kasanmati, Phulkonwar and Dayita Pastula. They came through ages orally and “show evidence of new and ever new interpolations as time passed and manners changed”.¹³

1.10.2. Janā Gābharur Gīt

Janā gābharur gīts are replete with historical elements. The apparent similarity exists between the Bangla hero Gopichandra and Assamese hero Gopisan of these songs seems to evoke debate among the scholars. Yet, a few researchers and historians of Assamese literature are of the view that these are the songs composed towards the end of the Ahom rule in Assam.

1.10.3. Kamalā Kūwarīr Gīt

Kamalā Kūwarīr gīts have come to be recovered incompletely from various places of Assam with a great variety. More than one versions of Kamalā kuwarir gīt, are mostly confined in various parts of lower Assam. The songs are basically based on popular tales. Maheswar Neog entitles these songs as the songs of tale as like that of some other kinds of ite.g. songs of Tejīmalā, Pāneśoi, Tulā, Tejā etc.¹⁴ But, the people of Baniyā Sun village in Shree Hatta (now in Bangladesh) believe that Kamala Konwari sacrificed her life plunging into a tank called Sāgar Dīghi there.

1.10.4. Rādhikā Satīr Gīt

Rādhikā Satī episode has a significant association with the great Vaishnavite saint of Assam, Sankaradeva. The gīt of Rādhikā narrates how the damsel, Radhika, belonging to a so called low-class society in Assam, came through a stupendous feat of action, fetching full of water in a fishing basket proved her chastity before Sankaradeva.

1.11. Conclusion

Apart from discussed above, a great variety of Assamese oral lyrical poetry is also categorized as miscellaneous ballads. It includes songs like Nicukanī gīt, Garakhīyā gīt, Nāorīyār gīt etc. On the other hand, Hemanta Kumar Sarma includes such songs under an exclusive division called work song.¹⁵ Characteristics of oral-lyrics or folk-songs are generally universal in all literatures. The folk-songs in Assamese

12. Hem Barua, op.cit.,p.21

13. Ibid.

14. Maheswar Neog, *Asamiya Giti-Sahitya*,p.30 (trans.)

15. Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *Asamiya Lokagiti-Sanchayan*, Introduction, p.13.

also, coming through a process of natural distortion or modification, retain their distinctive characteristics which differentiate them from the subsequent literary poetry of present age.