

FOLK-SONGS OF ASSAM

Prof. Praphulladatta Goswami

Dr Birendranath Dutta

Nestling in the north-eastern corner of India, Assam has traditionally been the meeting ground of Aryan and non-Aryan modes of life and thought. Side by side with the Aryan-Assamese speaking Hindus and Muslims there live the various tribal or Adivasi groups with their Mongoloid affiliations fairly clear even now and cherishing their languages, rites and ceremonies, though washed by the tidal waves of broad Indian civilization. Thus Assam's culture is a compound of diverse elements in which the Adivasi contributions are not to be easily set aside. This peculiarity of the state's culture is fully reflected in the bewildering variety of folksongs and dances that we have in this part of India.

Perhaps the most distinctive type of folksongs of Assam, from the point of literary form and content as well as musical mode, is the *Bihunam* or *Bihu* song associated with the springtime Bihu, the most widely observed festival of the region. Bihu (from Sans. *visuvan*) has both seasonal and agricultural bearings. It ushers in the New Year; it also marks the advent of seed time as also the season of mating. In fact, the festival had its roots in some earlier fertility cult. This preoccupation with fertility, both vegetal and human, is reflected in the songs and dances with their erotic overtone expressive of the joys of spring and youth. It is Bihu time which occasions an opportunity for marriageable young men and women to meet and exchange their feelings and even to choose their life partners.

The joyfulness of the festival is echoed in songs like the following :

*Bihu this year is so glorious,
the nahar is in blossom,
its perfume so rouses my sweetie,
she crushes her spinning-wheel as she walks.*

*How I fail to persuade you, dear,
to me you pay no heed,
it is not a seed that will appear again,
once it passes, youth is difficult to recover.*

*If you would dance, dance well,
that your fellows may see,
life will go away, go to the land of death,
the body will be eaten up by vultures.*

The *Bihu* songs are quatrains with alternate rhyme. While minor modifications to suit individual purposes are made, the songs on the whole circulate like much-handled coins and boys and girls repeat them in certain melodic patterns suitable for the rhythm of the *Bihu* dance. There are hundreds and hundreds of such songs, some of which, judged by language and tone, must be at least a century old. Some are of comparatively recent origin. They are excellent poetry. They are primarily the language of love, often used anti-phonally. They describe beauty, adore the sweetheart, express yearning, they also speak of frustration and sorrow in life. Yearning, which combines a developed sense of beauty, seems to be the strongest inspiration :

*To see you in a flash I am no lightning,
nor am I a flowing river,
flying to see you I am no bird
with two wings to my sides.*

*High you tied your long hair,
as you walked you crushed the grass,
as I looked into your eyes you smiled,
my mind is distracted now.*

*Who made you so beautiful ?
there's a smile on her face,
would you see her hands, would you see her face,
rose petals are her cheeks.*

*A jacket suited to your body,
parted hair suited to your head,
a jewelled keru in your ear,
without sight of you
hardly a day can I pass,
how to pass an entire year!*

Though lyrical in spirit, some of these songs notice various aspects of social life and the values the rural folk cherish. The physical features of the land, hills and rivers, specially the mighty Brahmaputra, frequently appear as a

background to the sentiments expressed and also as suggestive of the people's affection for their land of birth. Of the two songs just to be quoted, the first one is a satire on a wife who is not able to weave well, while the second shows that the folk draw on the handloom institution for imagery :

*This one calls her a weaver, that one calls her a weaver,
she is a weaver indeed,
she takes a month to set up her loom, she weaves for six months,
the weaver takes a full year !*

*You are the weft of foreign yarn, dear,
you are the weft of foreign yarn,
you reeled in my heart as you did your cotton,
your mind only you kept back.*

Sung to the accompaniment of the *dhol* (drum), *pepa* (buffalo-horn pipe), *taka* (bamboo clapper), and the *gagana* (jew's harp) and vigorous hand-clapping, *Bihu* songs are set to a variety of melodic and rhythmic patterns of a robust and exciting nature. Some of the songs themselves deal with musical technicalities, for instance :

*One plays the pipe with three fingers,
the middle one presses,
if our dancer starts dancing
like a butterfly she races.*

*Play the pipe to the correct rhythm, dear,
play the pipe to the correct rhythm,
do not play too much, do not play too fast,
play to the dance rhythm.*

The Huchari institution which forms a complement of the springtime *Bihu* has its distinctive songs known by the same name. The menfolk of the village form into bands, visit different households, and with dance-like movements sing songs of a religious nature, wishing welfare of the household visited. A verse like the following has a Vaishnavite flavour,

*Being soaked in the dew
on the head of Krishna
the bakul unfolded its petals.
O Govinda, Rama.*

Religious Songs

Of the many classes of songs composed and sung against the religious and ritualistic background of the land, perhaps the most attractive and moving

are those known as *Ainam*, sung in order to propitiate Mother Sitala, the small-pox goddess. *Ainams* are characterised by a refined tenderness that flows out of the sincerity of the female mind bent in supplication :

*They are coming, Ai's seven sisters, across the seven mountains,
All bow their heads — the grass, the creepers, the trees, for*

Ai is coming.

*The Golden butterfly, round it circles on its two silver wings.
The Ais have come to visit the homes, we beg our life of them.
Unconsciously did we trespass into Ai's garden, unaware did we*
pick the buds.

Forgive our crimes this once, O Bhavani, we lay ourselves at your feet.

The Ais have come to poor houses, nothing do We have to offer.

We will rub their feet with our hair, lie down to make fords of our bodies...

There are also songs similarly sung by females in praise of Lord Krishna, Lakhimi or Lakshmi, and other deities. Set to simple melodies and sung in chorus to the accompaniment of the rhythmic clapping of hands, such songs are not only devotional in spirit but furnish strength and hopefulness to the female mind in many perplexing situations of day-to-day life. In the Goalpara region, bordering on North Bengal, where the social and religious milieu has a local distinctiveness, there is current a large body of narrative songs connected with the worship of such local deities as Kati, Madan-Kam, Sonaray, and Manasa or the snake goddess.

Ritual Songs

Deh-bichar songs constitute another class wrought in the religious cast, though they are not directly connected with any particular *puja* or rite. Generally sung by wandering mendicants to the accompaniment of the *dotara* or *tokari*, these songs suggest that their inspiration flowed out of esoteric Tantric practices. They insist on the acceptance of a *guru* in order to find the hidden significance of the body (*deha* — body) and speak of the entrapped individual soul in symbolical language. *Deh-bichar* songs seem to have spiritual kinship with the *Baul* songs of Bengal. The following song seems to say that a person serves no purpose unless he devotes himself to the service of his spiritual master and fellow disciples,

*Alas, what is the use of my being a lovely coral?
Why have I blossomed at all ?
Neither to the Guru nor to the Bhakta's am I of any use,
But just lie covering the ground.
Oh, but I blossomed, the lovely coral,
I have budded too,
And have served the Guru and known the Bhaktas
And up in heaven resided !*

Does the last line refer to some kind of Tantric bliss ? The language of the

songs is often enigmatic, the meaning esoteric, but to the superficial observer what immediately catches the attention in these songs is the message that the human body is prone to decay and that mundane existence has no worth.

There is a class of songs known as *Zikir* (Arabic *ziqr*) originally said to have been composed by a Muslim saint named Ajan (or Ajam) Fakir in the late seventeenth century. Ajan Fakir was perhaps a Sufi saint, but though the songs speak of Allah and the Quran, their language and spirit seem to be of the same cast as the *Deh-bichar* songs, speaking in enigmatic language of a *Guru*, of the caged myna (the soul), of fellow devotees, the worthlessness of the body, and so on. It is rather difficult to translate such songs, but just to give an idea :

*Think, O my mind, of the name of Allah,
Pay homage, O my mind, at the feet of the Guru.
Water thirsts, fire suffers from cold,
Rasul is hidden among the devotees.
You do not care that Rasul lies hidden,
On the gates of Mecca the key is turned,
On the gate of Mecca the soul knocks,.
The caged myna has many tricks,
With a flutter it went away and left earthly ties,
Having gone the soul remains waiting,
See my creatures, the plight of the body.*

These songs are usually sung by a group to the accompaniment of clapping in the manner of Vaishnavite people.

Also clothed in a religious garb are a large number of songs current in the Kamrup district which are rather popular and known as *Kamrupi Loka-geet*. What is remarkable about these songs is not their religion but the richness of their musical modes. Considerably influenced by a class of Vaishnava songs of the highest sophistication and refinement, both literary and musical, the *Kamrupi Lokgeets*, although sung to the humble *dotara* and the *dagar* (or *khanjari*) demonstrate great intricacy and range in melodic and rhythmic patterns.

Songs of Love

Closely akin to the *Kamrupi* songs in musical structure but largely free from any religious affiliation, there are the *Bhawaiya* and *Chatka* songs of the Goalpara district, two essentially lyrical types, also popular in adjoining North Bengal. The *Bhawaiyas* are songs of love and desire, particularly of the female heart yearning for male companionship. Most of the *Chatkas* too have love as their theme but they are light and flippant in spirit. The melodies of the *Bhawaiya* are characterised by slow and floating movements evocative of the mood of desolation and unfulfilled desire. Though musically the *Bhawaiya*

has some affinity with the *Bhatiyali* of East Bengal, it is by no means a variation of the latter as often wrongly assumed, but an independent style. Certain *Bhawaiya* songs centre round the lives of elephant-catchers and buffalo herders.

Singing of songs by the womenfolk enliven the marriage functions in Assam as in many other parts of India. Strewn over the different parts of the state there are a large variety of such songs sung at the various stages of the marriage ceremony. These songs, which are characterized by imaginative power and home-spun images, describe feelingly the beauty of the bride, her loving relationship with the family and the sorrow caused by her leave taking. Some are a commentary on the rites performed in the marriage ceremony. There are also teasing songs which are hurled at each other by the groups of singers on the bride's or the bridegroom's side. Though all these songs are sung in chorus a *Namati* or leader usually starts the song and sets the tune. The following song from the Sibsagar district mentions various weaving implements used by the young girl and shows how all-embracing a sorrow the giving away of a daughter can be :

At the gate, under the areca palms, is the loom,

*Her shuttle clatters, her bangles clang, but not to be heard is Aideo's voice;
While yet a child the little girl asked her mother;*

"What would you give as my wedding gift?"

*"My daughter the youngest, you would take a gold dorpati, also mahura-
kathis."*

*In the main house weep the neothani and the jatar, for they hear the
dear girl is going away.*

*The letais and cherekis weep on the shelf, the mother weeps in the
store-house,*

In the living-room weeps the father. Oh, Why should they weep?

Weaving is a cottage industry in Assam, hence the constant references to weaving and spinning in the folksongs. Another song goes like this :

After her bath the maiden asked her mother:

"What clothes am I to put on?"

*"Such that dry in the shade and hide in the clasp
You are to put on."*

After her bath the maiden asked her brother :

"What flowers am I to put on ?"

"Not the souti, not the malati either;

"She does not put on the kharikajai;

In the midst of the seas is the parijat,

That you are to put on."...

Ballads

The age of the ballad seems to be over and the traditional ballads are seen in printed books rather than heard on the lips of the minstrel. Nobody recites or sings the ballad of the amazonian princess Jana; neither is heard *Barphukanar Geet*, the historical ballad associated with the Burmese invasions of Assam in the early part of the last century; the ballad describing the laying of the railway in Lower Assam, composed by the Oja-Pali dancers, is forgotten; even the ballads and songs inspired by the magnetic personality of Mahatma Gandhi and the Non-co-operation Movement lie forgotten. The only ballad that is sung sometimes is *Maniram Dewanar Geet*, associated with the trial and hanging of a patriot of the 1857 period. The song has a sad and rather languorous tune and goes like this :

*You smoked a gold hookah, O Maniram,
You smoked a silver hookah;
What treason was it that you committed
That you got a rope round your neck?
How could they catch you, Maniram,
How could they catch you?
Jorhat on this side, Golaghat on that,
Through a letter did they catch you.
Secretly did they arrest you, O Maniram,
Secretly did they take you.
Holroyd Sahib on the Tokolai bank
Secretly had you hanged....*

It is not that ballads are not being composed even now, for instance, this light one, utilizing the motif of the Chinese aggression of 1962, and sung by Huchari singers during Bihu :

*I heard at Sibsagar
That they would bomb Dibrugarh;
if they bomb Dibrugarh
the trains would stop running,
the shops would shut down;
if the shops shut down
the tins of powder would disappear,
if the tins of powder disappear
the difference between the dark and fair girls would be revealed.
the fair would be carried off by the Chinese
the dark would then be ours.*

The *Baramasi* type of songs, current in Kamrup and Goalpara districts, with a slight narrative core and describing the pangs of a wife whose husband is away on trade and the husband sometimes returning unrecognised and

testing his wife's chastity, illustrates a genre found from Assam to Pakistan, but perhaps not in south India.

Before we end the topic of ballads, an important fragment found among the Bado-Kacharis of North Kamrup deserves to be quoted. It is an exhortation to resist Bhutiya invaders from the north, perhaps a century or so old.

*Come, Bodo children. Come, let's march to battle.
 Armed with swords and shields, with courage in our heart,
 Let us go to drive back the enemy. Come.
 Brother Bachiram, heroic as you are, go ahead on your horse.
 See how the enemy is coming down trampling the ground;
 If the battle is in a ravine, let it be,
 If the enemy seek death, let it have death,
 The victory will be of the Bodos.
 No fear, Bachiram, there's no fear.
 Son of a hero, yours is the victory.
 Brother Daoharam, take your sword
 And riding your elephant, stem the surge of the enemy.*

This is tribal material.

Some of the tribals, like Sonowal Kacharis of upper Assam, Pati-Rabhas of Goalpara and Lalungs of Nowgong, have their songs in the Assamese language. Each tribal group has its harvest of songs and dances. Here only scant justice can be shown to this rich material. The Miris (Michings) of Upper Assam, a riverine tribe, have their Ai-nitams, akin to *Bihu* songs, both in theme and music. These are highly poetic compositions, full of tender love and yearning. To give one or two example :

*Just as one does not get water when one is thirsty,
 I cannot see my darling though I yearn to see her.*

*Just as the Brahmaputra flows unceasingly, so also
 thoughts from my tender body always flow towards you.*

The comparison in these songs is explicit; in the Assamese *Bihu* songs the comparison is suggested rather than stated explicitly.

The Rabhas too have attractive love songs known as *Chathar*. These are sung at their spring-time Baikhu and the Grimbuda ceremonies. The songs are anti-phonial like *Bihu* songs :

Youth : *When I sit down to have my meal
 The rice does not go down my throat,*

*I am reminded of you,
But I do not see your golden face.*

*Maiden : Sitting down at my loom
I only think of you,
When I remember you
My mind is blown away.*

The Bodo-Kacharis, who are scattered over a large area in lower Assam, are a musically inclined people. They have songs connected with their two big festivals, Boisagu (spring-time) and Domasi (harvest, in winter), songs of love and marriage, songs of jest and humour, and nursery rhymes. Here is a Bodo-Kachari nursery rhyme which has its parallel not only in Assamese but also in Bengali, Oriya and in one or two Central-Indian tribal languages :

*O Potato, O Potato, why don't you sprout?
The Cow tramples me, why should I sprout?
O Cow, O Cow, why do you trample the Potato?
The Cowherd does not feed me, why should I not trample?
O Cowherd, O Cowherd, why don't you feed the Cow?
There is no Stick, why should I feed the Cow?
O Stick, O Stick, why are you not here?
There's no Umbrella, why should I be?
O Umbrella, O Umbrella, why are you not here?
There is no rain, why should I be?
O Rain, O Rain, why don't you fall,
The frog does not croak, why should I fall?
O Frog, O Frog, why don't you croak?
The Snake bites me, why should I croak?
O Snake, O Snake, why do you bite?
The King orders me to, why should I not?
O King, O King, why do you order the Snake, to bite?
I haven't ordered, why is he so ferocious?*

In the Assamese parallel the object addressed first is the flower. Such songs follow a formula type pattern.

Here is a Bodo-Kachari song which states a problem:

*Come friends, after picking the greens
Let's go to the house of our dear ones,
Our parents have not given us away in marriage,
We can't discuss this with our brothers,
The years have rolled by piecemeal,
We too are ageing slowly.*

As for the tribal melodies, it is true that they are of a comparatively limited range, being mostly pentatonic, but they have a directness of appeal hardly found in more sophisticated music. Tribal people use a variety of indigenous instruments, among which the flute (Bodo *siphung*), the jew's harp (Rabha *gamenā*), the drum, large or small, and the bamboo clapper (Bodo *tharka*) seem to be common. The Bodo *siphung*, with five holes, plays haunting music. The *karha-nal* of the Rabhas is a peculiar bamboo pipe several feet long. The string instrument (*serja*) that Bodos use has four strings, played with a bow.

It may now be added that rural folk in Assam respect their music and even give it a divine origin. This reverential attitude is beautifully illustrated in the following *Bihu* song:

*It was god who planted the seedlings of songs,
it was a Brahma who tended them,
forgive me, people, if an unbecoming song comes out,
first I sing of love.*

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Dr. Praphulladutta Goswami. is Professor of Folk-lore at the University of Gauhati, Assam. He is also a member of the Executive Board of the Society for Asian folk-lore, Indiana, U.S.A.

Prof. Birendranath Dutta, teaches at Borooah College, Gauhati. He has completed his Doctoral thesis in Folk-lore studies. He is also a musician.

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