

CLASSICAL MUSIC IN ASSAM

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There has been a strong tradition of the culture of music in Assam (or ancient Kamarupa) from the earliest times. When the great Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang visited the capital of the seventh century Kamarupa king, Bhaskaravarman, the holy guest was entertained with music and dances almost everyday for a month. It is further held that a maid-in-waiting, who was adept in dancing and music, died on the funeral pyre of Bhaskaravarman, a great lover of these arts.

King Vanamalavarman of Kamarupa (9th century) erected a temple to Hatakasulin Siva, and this was properly endowed with dance. In the copperplate inscription of this king, the boats on the waves of the Lauhitya, or Brahmaputra, are likened to dancing women agitated at the approach of male dancers.

In the Bargaon inscription of another succeeding Kamarupa monarch, Ratnapala, obeisance is paid to Natesvara Sankara, the master of dances, always exhibiting *tandava*. Indrapala of the same dynasty is eulogised in an inscription as *anavadyavidyadhara*.

Among the early sculptural remains we find many dancing figures, and men playing on different types of drums, flute and *vina*.

In the *tantric*, text, *Kalika-purana*, written at Kamarupa in the 11th or 12th century, there are several references to vocal and instrumental music in connection with different rituals. The sixteen-armed Mahamaya, for example is to be worshipped with certain music in the autumn,

the eighteen-armed goddess likewise is to be adored on *mahanavami* day. It has been ordained in this *tantra* that kings, seeking victory in wars, should have the army worshipped by women performing music and dance. In the *sabara* ceremony on *vijayadasami* night, young men and women dancers should give performances to the music of *sankha*, *turya*, *mridanga* and *pataha*.

The same *upa-purana* gives detailed descriptions of 108 *mudras* or handposes of worship, which are akin to those employed in dance. There are also references to a hillock, *Natakasaila*, which was a place of drama and dance, being sacred to *Natakesvara Siva*.

Classical Ragas

An inscription of King *Isvara-ghosa* (10th, 11th centuries) refers to professional singers, called *sutas*, who sang the glory of the monarch's royal father, *Dhavalala-ghosa*.

The *caryas*, written in eastern India from the 8th to the 11th century A.D. by Buddhist *siddhas*, were tuned to several classical *ragas*—*Patamanjari*, *Gavada*, *Aru*, *Gurjari*, *Devakri*, *Desakha*, *Bhairavi*, *Kamoda*, *Dhanasi*, *Ramakri*, *Varadi*, *Baladdi*, *Sabari*, *Mallari*, *Malasi*, *Malasi-Gavada*, *Kahnu-Gunjari*, and *Vangal*. The eighty-four *tantric* Buddhist *siddhas* exerted immense influence over the whole of the eastern region of India, and their songs must have carried the rhythm of *raga* music very far and wide in those distant days.

In the early period of Assamese literature, preceding the neo-Vaishnava movement of the last part of the 15th century and the early part of the 16th, the *Ramayana* and portions of the *Mahabharata* were rendered into Assamese verse; and these verses were put to *ragas* or recited to tunes. This is perhaps evidenced by the attempt of a 16th century poet, *Durgavara Kayastha*, to render the *Ramayana* of *Madhava Kandali* (14th century) into lyrics and add new ones, both of which total fifty-eight. These songs are put to the *ragas* — *Ahir*, *Akashmandali*, *Kambar*, *Gunjari*, *Chalani*, *Devajini*, *Devamoha*, *Dhansari*, *Patamanjari*, *Varadi*, *Vasanta*, *Belowar*, *Bhathiyali*, *Manjari*, *Marowar*, *Malachi*, *Meghamandal*, *Ramgiri*, *Srigandhakali*, *Srigandhar*, *Suhai Meghamandal* in this list may actually be *Maghamallar*; and on the other hand, the same reminds

us of such *ragas* mentioned in the 17th century biographies as *Vayumandali* and *Meghamandali*. *Malachi* may be equated to *Malavasri* or *Malasika*. *Chalani* is perhaps *Chalengi* or *Sarangi*. *Devajini*, *Devamohan* and *Sri-gandhakali* are somewhat unfamiliar names although we get such names as *Devaranjani* in old Sanskrit treatises on music.

Madhava Kandali's *Ramayana* mentions *natas* and *natis* in a derogatory sense, while a great number of musical instruments are enlisted by the poet — *mardala*, *khumuchi*, *bhemachi*, *dagar*, *karatal*, *ramtal*, *tabal*, *jhajhar*, *jijiri*, *bheri*, *mahari*, *tokari*, *dosari*, *kendara*, *dotara*, *vina*, *rudra-vipanchi* among others.

Another poet of this period, Harivara Vipra, gives the names of some of these and other instruments. Another very detailed list of musical instruments is provided by the poet Suryakhari Daivajna in his historical narrative, *Darang-raj-vamsavali*. This list includes, beside some of the instruments named by Kandali, those like *dundubhi*, *nagara*, *rambena*, *kavilas*, *khanjarika*, *dotana*, *rabab*, *sarinda*, *rudraka-tokari*, *turi*, *khol*, *gogona*, *murali*, *upanga*, *gomukha*, *dholok*, and others.

Vaishnava Movement

The neo-Vaishnava movement, which started in the final years of the 15th century in Assam, brought in its train a wide culture of music. The Vaishnava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety. It greatly helped the new religion to spread. Bhavananda, a rich merchant, was attracted towards the message of the Vaishnava leader, Sankardeva, by Bhaskara Vipra, who used to sing the saint's lyrics on the *rabab*, which is still to be seen in other parts of the world like Rampur and Afghanistan. A great commander of the Koch army of Kamarupa, Sukladhvaja, happened one day to over-hear one of his wives singing a song of Sankardeva on the *cherengdar*, that is, *sarinda*, and he lost no time in resolving to secure ordination to the Bhakti cult.

Among the different forms of Vaishnava music the two tuned to *ragas* are known as *bargit*, or noble songs, and *ankiya git*, or songs in a drama. The name of the *raga* in these two types is indicated. In all the *ankiya gits* the time or *tala* is also mentioned and in three *bargits* (which are known as *shad-chandar git*) three *talas* are named for each song. In

other *bargits* no name of *tala* is given. A *bargit* does not always have to keep time in its singing. When an individual Vaishnava pours forth his devotion in public or in a domestic temple in the measures of *bargit*, he does not generally submit to the control of time beats. At other times, especially in congregations, *tala* is maintained in performing *bargits*. The adept knows what time-cycle is to be adopted in executing a particular melody. The *Asowari-raga* is commonly timed to *yati-tala*, *Kalyana* to *kharman*, and so on.

At the end of the second line of each *bargit* or *ankiya git*, the syllable *dhrum* is placed, which indicates that the first two lines of the song constitute the *dhruva*, and are to be repeated from time to time in course of singing the succeeding verses called *pada*, which consist of a few couplets. In the last couplet generally we find the name of the writer. A *bargit* may be compared to the *dhruvad* style of northern India, which, in the words of Fox Strangways, "has a free masculine character; its words are religious, but not exclusively. It is in slow time . . . and to perform, requires a good command of the breath". Or, it may be compared to the *prabandha*, with its four parts of *dhruva* (*asthavi*), *antara*, *sanchari*, and *abhoga* (the last with the author's name in it), the *bargits* are religious in content and devotional in purpose like the Hindi *bhajans* of North India, and the Marathi *abhangs* of Tukaram. Some of these songs concern themselves with the early life of Krishna; but they are free from the erotic element of the Radha-Krishna lyrics of North India and Bengal. Markedly enough, there is no lightness of the *khayal* type of Hindusthani music in the *bargit*, which might indicate its freedom from Perso-Arabic influence. The *ankiya gits* do not differ from *bargits* in musical execution except in that the former is always accompanied with *tala*, and is rarely or never executed without it. These songs occur in the Brajabuli dramas of Sankardeva and his chief apostle, Madhavdeva.

Pitambara Kavi, a contemporary of Sankardeva, uses these *ragas* in the lyrics in his *Usha-Parinaya*—*Ahir*, *Gunjari*, *Gondagiri*, *Dhanasri*, *Naga*, *Nata*, *Patamanjari*, *Pahari*, *Varadi*, *Vasanta*, *Bhathiyali*, *Bharavi*, *Mallar*, *Suai*. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva employ the following *ragas* in their *bargits* and *ankiya gits*—*Ahir*, *Asowari*, *Kalyana*, *Kanada*, *Kamoda*, *Kedara*, *Kau*, *Gauri*, *Tud*, *Tud-Vasanta*, *Tudbhathiyali*, *Dhanasri*, *Nata*, *Nata-mallar*, *Purvi*, *Varadi*, *Vasanta*, *Belowar*, *Bhathiyali*, *Bhupali*, *Mallar*,

Mahur, Mahurdhanasri, Ramagiri, Lalit, Syam, Syamgada, Sri, Srigandhara, Srigur, Sareng, Sindhura, Suhai. In this list *Kau* alone seems to be an unfamiliar name to the student of Indian music, unless it has some connection with classical *Kaisika*, or *Kakubha*, the latter as in the *Abhilasarthachintami* and *Sangitaratnakara*.

New Melodies

In the devotional lyrics written after the time of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva new names of melodies appear, some of which are *Karnata* (*Kanada*), *Gunja-Kedara*, *Geda-Kalyana*, *Gurjara*, *Chalengi*, *Chorat* (*Sorata*, *Saurashtra?*), *Jayasri*, *Paschima-Dhansri*, *Vanga-Bhathiyali* *Vihagada*, *Malancha*, *Multana*, *Ramkeli*, *Reli*, *Sruta-Mallara*.

Indian musicians and theorists have ascribed different melodies severally to the eight watches (*prahara*) of the day. It is possibly Narada's *Sangita-makaranda*, which for the first time formulated the time-theory. Opinion, is, however, at variance in regard to the assignment of melodies to different hours. Among the *Ojas* or traditional musicians of Assam also the time-theory exists but in its own independent way. *Purvi* or *Puravi* for example, which is commonly known as an evening melody, is placed by these *Ojas* in the early dawn. The *Sangita-makaranda* considers *Purva* as a noon-tide *raga*. *Vasanta*, which is placed by Assamese *Ojas* in the afternoon, is assigned by Narada to morning, and by the *Sangita-darpana* particularly to the first watch only.

From quite early times in the history of Indian music attempts were made to visualise the melodies in the form of persons. It is, however, in the beginning of the 16th or 17th century that this tendency to deification of *ragas* took definite shape. This is known as *raga-rupa* or *raga-lakshana*, and has been much popularised by the *raga-mala* paintings of Northern India. This visualisation seems to have been prevalent in Assam from pre-Sankardeva times. One of his contemporaries, Rama Sarasvati, gives much *raga-lakshanas* in his rendering of the *Gitagovinda*, and uses the term *ragar malita* to signify this: Sukladvaja, the general and another contemporary, in his commentary of Jayadeva's original text, quotes *raga-lakshanas* from the *Sangita-damodara* of Subhankara, a copy of whose other *sangita* work, *Hasta-muktavali*, with an Assamese gloss has been discovered in Assam. The popular *raga-malitas*, how-

ever, differ a great deal from the *raga-lakshanas* of Sanskrit treatises on music. The following, for example, is the *lakshana* of *Malava* in the *Sangita-damodara*:

*With his lotus face kissed by maidens of beautiful hips,
With the hue of parrots,
Bedecked with ear-ornaments and garlands and wanton,
Malava, the king of melodies,
Enters the place of rendezvous at dusk.*

A popular version of *malita* of this melody in Assamese runs as follows: "Adi Niranjana destroyed the world of beings. The Lord then slept upon the bed of Ananta. He then stood up and crowned *Malava* king, on a throne. When *Malava* became a king, *Malavati* became his queen. *Acharya* (?) became his chief minister, and *Dhanasri* another minister of state. The melody *Purvi* served *karpura* and *tambula* to *Malava*, and *Gandharva* with his retinue provided the song. The *raga Vasanta* stretched the royal canopy over *Malava*, and *Sindura* waved a yak's tail. Four damsels, *Gauri*, *Bhairavi*, *Suhai*, and *Lalita*, made salutations to the king on four sides, and attended him day and night."

Indigenous Growth

It would thus seem that the *raga-malitas* of Assam had an indigenous growth. Some of the *malitas* do not give personified pictures of *ragas*, but connect them with some incident in the life of Krishna, Vishnu, or some other god. In regard to *Sindhura*, for example, we have: "When Kanai (that is, Vishnu) restored the Vedas from the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, by killing them, the Lord sang the melody, *Sindhura*."

A work in Assamese verse (dating the 17th century) on musical *tala*, styled as *Vadya-pradipa*, has recently been discovered. This work mentions 48 *talas*, and describes twenty-six in some detail.

Northern India saw the growth of many different *gharanas* or schools of classical Indian music on the basis of the patronage the musicians of great merit received from Moghul emperors, other Rajas and Nawabs. This kept up the tradition of music through healthy competition among the *gharanas*. This vogue of patronising music was emulated by the Nawabs of Bengal, and the tradition of North Indian Music

thus could spread over Bengal. This did not, however, it seems, happen in Assam (that is, the old Ahom kingdom) and the Koch kingdoms of Kamrup and Cooch Behar. And we do not, therefore, have any Assam *gharanas* of Hindustani music, supported by royal persons. The tradition of Assam's music had to be borne through the centuries by religious circles. Towards the final decades of the last century, however, the example of the Nawabs and big Zamindars of Bengal inspired the Hindu Zamindars of the Goalpara division of Assam to take up the cause of culture of Indian music. One such Zamindar was Raja-Prabhatchandra Barua Bahadur of Gauripur, the illustrious father of the late Pramatheshchandra Barua. He was responsible for inspiring a love of classical music in many individuals; and one such person was Lakshmiram Barua of Gauhati, whose musical talents went a long way to create a taste for North Indian music in Assam. This taste has since been growing in the State, and in recent years many music schools have been brought into being presumably to teach Hindustani music to people. All India Radio has also contributed much to the vogue of this type of music. In the last few years annual music conferences have been held, where musicians of north India give performances.

Dr. Maheshwar Neog, a scholar of Assamese Literature made a special study of Assamese music and dance. He has written several works including "Rythm In The Vaishnava Music of Assam" and "Hastamudra" a treatise on hand-gestures in dance. He was organising Secretary of The Congress of Orientalists held in 1964. He is at present Prof. of Assamese Literature at Gauhati University, Assam.