

# Perso Arabic Influence on Assamese Folk Songs: A Folkloristic Study

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## **Abstract:**

*Folk songs of Assamese language bear various types of traditional arts and culture of the people of Assam. Usually their representation appears in the folk culture of tribal people. Here in this paper an attempt has been made to show the fact that the folk songs of Assamese language are replete with considerable Arabic and Persian words, while this matter is also conspicuous in its overall literary issues.*

## **Introduction:**

Folk songs<sup>(1)</sup> are one of the assets of folk-culture in the human society. They are supposed to be created in the working experience of common people as and when they expressed delightful sentiments in the flowery language. The elements of folklore have been passing over the periods on oral tradition. It is sure; people of modern period find mental satisfaction through folk songs. Every individual finds many noble objectives in the contents of folk songs. In the human society, the folk-literature has been playing a key role in pacing ahead with the written literature. It adorns social life with nobility and grandeur. Moreover, it keeps essence to have performance of literary activities. Indeed, we are bound to study folk-cultures in view of knowing the internal aspects of a society. So, folk literature is considered a mirror of the society. In the domain of folklore we come to know how people eat a dish, wear dresses, reside in a place, keep belief in traditions, and celebrate religious rites and activities, share in games and sports, cook foods and prepare dishes, chant hymns, play dramas, take medicines, use utensils of cottage industries, deal with different arts of folk-songs, dances, blessings, curses, reproaches etc. In fact, these are the elements of folk-literature. It is imperative to know that the folk literature holds the whole range of human activities of a society and people follow the traditions as appeared in the culture. Furthermore, people find lessons in the courses of folk literature. Definitely folk literature has achieved a warm acceptance in every society of every nation.<sup>(2)</sup>

## Discussion:

Folk songs are one of elements of folklore which embodies the customs, legends, beliefs, myths, rhymes, tribal dances, herbal medicines and superstitions. It has been observed that oral literature and popular tradition are preserved among every nation of the world. It may take the form of fairy tales, ballads, epics, proverbs and riddles. Folklore is the unwritten literature of a nation related to particular place, group, activity etc. as expressed in different means of human intuitions in the rural life of common people.

The history of Assam dates back to the time of the Aryans.<sup>(3)</sup> The people of this state who belonged to different tribes and communities are keeping friendship with each other enjoying their folk songs, of which trend continued from earlier periods down to the present age. Here we notice different tribes namely Bodo, Santhal, Dimasa people, Karbi, Khamti, Khamyang, Mising etc. belonging to secular outlooks. In fact, different creeds and beliefs are also practiced in this state. The diverse culture of the state has brought a rich treasury of art, craft and music with it. The feet tapping *Bihu and Jhumur*<sup>(4)</sup> dances of the state are no more bounded by its borders but they are quite popular in all parts of the country. As a matter of fact, all these tribes are seen to have nourished the folk songs in their own ways.<sup>(5)</sup>

Folk Songs in Assam have been originated from the tribal culture of Assam which is full of historical heritage as appeared in the past several centuries. In connection of the folk songs of Assam now-a-days mainly two kinds of melodic variations are noticed, they are namely *Jhumur* and *Bharigaan*. Throughout Assam these two melodic variations find due respect and boastfulness in tact. The different tribes of Assam are said to have preserved the tradition of folk songs in its geographical jurisdiction.

Here mention may be made that folk songs took a concrete shape only in the villages of this north-eastern state of Assam. The entire class of Assamese folk songs possesses many kinds of melodic variations. The vibrant festivals of the state are the prime occasion when these folk songs are sung by the rural people of Assam.

It is imperative to know that 'Bihugeet' is regarded as the most important folk form of Assam. While celebrating the Bihu festival, the local people of Assam, mainly in the village areas, sing the 'Bihugeet' and visit each and every household of their locality to wish people. In fact, Assamese folk songs collectively express the inherent tradition and cultural opulence of the state.<sup>(6)</sup>

Every community has their own literature, both in written as well as in oral form. Similarly, the Assamese language also has folk songs, folk-tales, ritual songs etc, in oral form in abundance. The folk songs are still continuing amongst its people, noticed generation after generation in oral forms, in spite of the pressing influence of the modern civilization. There are various types of literature in oral form, which have enriched the field of folk literature in Assam.

It is very difficult to ascertain the exact date of the Assamese folk literature. But most probably, the date goes back at the earliest to a period in between 600 and 800 AD. Concerning the evolution of Assamese folk songs, Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma mentions that the age of Assamese folk songs or ballads is determined to be the ancient period of Assamese language. In fact, the Assamese folk songs were composed in proto-Assamese language of which age fell between 600 A.D. – 800 A.D., but some of the words of folk songs may be changed in the subsequent ages. <sup>(7)</sup>

It appears from the investigation into the objectives of folk songs of Assam that they are mostly sung to express the anthropological feelings, emotions etc, of a group of people. There are various types of folk songs which are sung orally and they are divided into the following categories:

**1. Socio-festival folk songs:** Husori, Bihugeet, Biyanâm, Ainâm, Lakhimi Sabahar Geet (song for agricultural crop harvesting), Bhekulir Biyar Nâm (songs for frog marriage), Mahoho Geet (song for mosquito prevention) Bâtfula geet, Janmastamir Nâm, Lakhmipujar Nâm, Apesari Sabahar Geet, etc.

**2. Ballads:** Assamese ballads are mainly divided into three broad sections viz. (a) Historical ballads, (b) Mythological and (c) Imaginative ballads. Amongst the historical ballads, Borphukanar Geet, Maniram Dewanar Geet, Gaurinath Sinha's Geet, Horadatta and Viradatta's Geet etc. are prominent. However, it is very difficult to ascertain the exact period of mythological ballads in Assamese folk literature. It is assumed that the song of 'Jana-Gabharu' is the oldest one. Amongst the imaginative ballads in Assamese folk literature, the prominent are Phul konwarar Geet, Kamala Kunwari's Geet etc. All these three types of ballads are narrative in nature.

**3. Imaginative Folk Songs:** In this connection we find Madhumatir Geet, Baramahir Geet (Kanya Baramahî, Sita Baramahî, Râm Baramahî and Santi Baramahî), Djuna etc.

**4. Miscellaneous Folk Songs:** They are comprised of Dhainam Nichukani Geet, Khel-Dhemalir Geet, Nao-khelar Geet, Sadasivar Nâm etc.

**5. Theoretical Folk Songs** comprise of Dehabicharar Geet, Tokari Geet, Brindabani Nâm, Zikir etc. <sup>(8)</sup>

As a matter of fact, the poets or composers of the Assamese folk songs are unaware to us, but their necessity is felt greatly by every individual related to them, since the folk songs comprehend the feelings and emotions of common people that came out time to time from the smooth corner of their minds and hearts. Really the Assamese folk songs took the form of lyrical hymns rolling down orally over the distant past. They are preserved in the literary form in the subsequent modern period.

Here mention may be made that in the linguistic scenario Persian and Assamese are grouped with Indo European family of languages, but Arabic is an offshoot of the Semitic languages. The synthesis on Assamese language shows that it is consisting of many Perso Arabic words and their testimony is also observed in the expressions of Assamese folk songs. Indeed, different type of Assamese folk songs are noticed in the folkloristic study of arts and culture in Assam.

It is appeared from the census report of Assam that Muslim population exceeds more than thirty percentage of the state population. They are historically concentrated in the south and west Assam in large numbers. In addition, we find in central Assam (mainly in the districts of Nagaon and Marigaon) has significant Muslim populations. History of the origin of this huge numbers of inhabitants does not represent one single period. Almost a quarter of their Islamic origin belongs to 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is certain that Muslim settlement and conversion to Islam occurred at various point of times. The newly settled Muslims (13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> A.D.) of Turk, Afghan, Arabic, Persian and other backgrounds, mingling with the newly converted Muslims, and Non Muslims paved the way for the enhancement of language, Polity, economy and society of Assam. Thus local languages and dialects became filled with new words used by the adventurer. In such a way, Assamese language is fraught with Arabic and Persian words. <sup>(9)</sup> So Muslims added new dimension to Assam and opened a new chapter in Assamese literature from the specific point of folklore.

Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua is of the opinion that Assamese culture is the creation of multi-facet dimension, a fathomless deep ocean, broadened by the resident of Assam as well as Assamese speaking people irrespective of Hindu and Muslim. Despite the modern Assamese language, the ancient Assamese was also influenced by the languages of Islam. Right from thirteenth century A.D. the ancient poet of Assamese literature Hem Saraswati by name showed his broad-mind using the term *nafar* <sup>(10)</sup> in the contents of ballad

of Hinduism. Accordingly Sankardeva also used many Islamic terms like *farman*, *jân*, *sahab* etc. and his contemporary poets also did not leave using Islamic religious words. In this connection, Perso- Arabic words may be shown in the following categories:

1. Monarch, monarchy honour and warfare related words.
2. Taxes, administration and law related words
3. Islamic religious words
4. Mental and social words
5. Goods related words for enjoyment <sup>(11)</sup>

The folk songs like Bihunâms and Biyanâms – lyrical ballads of spring and marriage are sung in the Assamese society in view of maintaining the traditions and culture. Undoubtedly the ‘ballad tune’ occupies a distinct place in Assamese folk song and dance. Kanak Chandra Saharia (2007) highlighted in an article entitled “Loka Sahitya Aru Iyar Samajik Prakarjya discussing about Assamese folklore in which he mentioned as follows:

*Ajir pora bopa Sanjot hoba,*  
*Oi Ram paliba Brahmanor ritihe,*  
*Chadaror aroten Gayatri sikaise*  
*Oi Ram paliba Gayatrir nitihe.* <sup>(12)</sup>

(Oh my son! You should be restraint from today to follow the regulations of the Brahman, while Gayatri has taught the principles of herself under the cover of *chadar* i.e. wrapper.) Here the word *chadar* is of the Persian vocabularies.

We find folk song regarding “Mohkhedar Geet” as follows:

*“Aghon mahor purnima hol,*  
*Moh khedibor hokum hol.*  
*O’ Hari moho ho,*  
*Moh khedibar jao jo.* <sup>(13)</sup>

(“Ahgon” is the eighth month of the Assamese calendar and when it arrives, during its fortnight, there comes out order for driving out the mosquito; oh the lord! let me make able to drive out the same.) Here the term “*hokum*” is of the Arabic words.

Here it may be noted that the folk song like ‘Zikir and Zari’ has played a great role in incorporation of Perso Arabic words into Assamese language. In this connection, we may exemplify the following ‘Zikir’:

“Mor manat aan bhaab naai o’ *Allah*,  
Mor manato naai aan bhaab.  
Hindu-ki-*Musalman* ak Allahar *farman*  
*Akherat* ak Allahar naam lay.  
Hindu zolabo *muminak* garibo  
*Khakar* tan thakat milabo.”<sup>(14)</sup>

In the above mentioned verses we find *Allah* (The Omnipotent God), *akhirat* (hereafter world) and *mumin* (believer) as Arabic words; on the other hand, *Musalman* (Muslim people), *farman* (order), and *khak* (soil) are of Persian words. Likewise we find so many words belonged to Perso Arabic vocabularies used in the Assamese folk songs.

### **Conclusion:**

Here mention may be made that the influence of Persian and Arabic words on Assamese language as well as its folk songs started with the arrival of Muslims in Assam and ended with the establishment of British power in India and Assam as well. Certainly the availability of Persian and Arabic has been so smooth touch in the present situation of Assamese language which cannot be differentiated at a glance except linguistic approach of investigation. In fact, Persian and Arabic vocabularies have been mingled with Assamese basically in lexical mode of expression. Their influence on Assamese literature has been very limited but linguistically it has been varied, intense and extensive.

### **Notes and Reference:**

1. The term ‘folk song’ is known in Assamese language as ‘*Loka Geet*’ appears in five categories related to socio-festival songs; ballads; songs for soothing, consolation, comical, mosquito prevention, cow-herds; anthropological songs, and other miscellaneous songs – express the traditions of the tribal people of Assam.
2. Saharia, K.C (2007) *Lokasahitya Aru Iyar Samajik Prakarya*, Bhasa Sahityar Sobha (Guwahati: Bani Mandir) pp.134 – 35
3. Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua (2001) mentions in *Asomia Bhasa Aru Sanskriti* that the modern Assamese culture is supposed to be created basing on Aryan culture. Alongside, Assamese culture was thriving time to time by the different tribal people.
4. Bihu is celebrated thrice in a year all over Assam felt by her people as a core folk culture and *Jhumur* is a folk dance of the tea community of Assam.

5. <http://www.mapsofindia.com/assam/society/folk-songs.html>
6. Ibid
7. Sharma, L (2006) *Lokageet Aru Asamar Thalua Geet-maat* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir) p.9
8. Nath, P.K. (2004) *Asamiya Sahitya Aru Sanskritir Rup Rekha* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir) p.184
9. <http://knol.google.com/k/assam-muslim-history#>
10. Here the term *nafar* is a pure Arabic word in singular number and its plural number is *anfâr* means band, party , troop, troops, person, individual; furthermore, in military department the term signifies soldier, private, man (as a numerative) referred to by A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, edited by J. Milton Cowan (1974) p. 984
11. Barua, B.K. (2001), *Asomia Bhasa Aru Sanskriti* (Nalbari, Assam: Journal Amporium), p. 118
12. Saharia, K. C. (2007) op. cit., p. 137
13. Sharma, L. (2006) op. cit., p. 65
14. Ibid, p. 75

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