

Bargeet : Songs of Devotion

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Ask any culture-conscious Assamese to draw up a list of items that should be considered as representing the best in Assamese culture. You can almost be sure that high among the priorities in the list will be the **Bargeets** - the devotional song-compositions created about four hundred years ago by the rare guru-shishya duo of the astonishingly versatile master **Sankaradeva** and his almost equally gifted disciple **Madhavadeva**. To them goes the credit of spearheading the neo-Vaishnava bhakti movement in Assam and of ushering in a remarkable cultural renaissance of the Assamese society.

Literally meaning 'great songs', the Bargeets are composed in a pleasantly artificial language called Brajavali or Brajabuli. They are truly great not only for the lofty heights of the contents centering on devotion to **Krishna** and the exquisite literary craftsmanship of the texts but also for the excellence of the musical moulds in which they are cast. In fact, the Bargeets represent a distinctive school of music which boasts of its own system of ragas and talas and a style of presentation peculiar to itself so much so that many knowledgeable Bargeet enthusiasts see in them an independent system of Indian raga music which they would like to call the **Kamarupi system** as distinct from both the Hindustani and Karanataka systems.

Ahir, asowari, dhanashri, kalyan, kama, basanta, mahur, suhai shri, etc. are the names of some of a few of the large number of ragas to which Bargeets are set. True, these are familiar raga names in the field of Hindustani classical music. But except in a very few cases, dhanashri and kalyan for instance, the raga forms in the Bargeet system are substantially different from those in the Hindustani system.

Similar is the case with the talas. There are in the Bargeet system of music talas like ektal rupak, yati, pari, kharman and so on. Of these, ektal and rupak have their Hindustani counterparts. But apart from having identical names, the respective talas in the two systems share little else in common. The ektal or etali of the Bargeet system, as found in some Satras, has 24 matras while in some others it has 12 matras. But the movement in either case is substantially different from that of the Hindustani ektal. Similarly, the rupak tal of Bargeets, which has 12 matras, is structurally very different from the Hindustani rupak tal which has seven matras. It has rather some affinity with the Karnataka rupaka tala.

Usually the singing of a Bargeet starts with rag diya or rag tana which is a kind of delineation of the raga in which the song is to be sung something akin to alap. There are also rules regarding the appropriate times for the singing of particular ragas. Thus, ahir, kou, shyam, lalit, etc are morning ragas; asowari, belowar, sareng, suhai, sindhura, etc are evening ragas while bhupale, kamod madhyavali etc, are late-night ragas. These rules are, however, not equally strict in all cases. There are also rag-malitas which are a class of lyrics describing the origins of different ragas something akin to raga dhyanas. It is a technique by which the structure of a raga is sought to be outlined.

Satras or Vaishnava monasteries have close association with Vaishnava devotional music. In fact, the music heritage associated with the Bargeets has been preserved and nourished in the Satras which have

served through centuries as the citadels of a highly refined and enriched indigenous artistic tradition. Generation after generation of gayans (vocal specialists) and bayans (instrumental specialists) have been trained up in the Satras since the days of the great saint artists.

Strange as it may seem, the traditional exponents have no knowledge of musical notation, they do not even use the names of the swaras in their system: the raga structures are just got by heart by the learner through years of constant listening and practising. This method of preserving the raga structure is obviously not fool-proof and vulnerable to various kinds of deviations. Yet it is remarkable that with this rather loose method the Bargeet heritage has not only been saved from being lost but has been kept vigorously alive through these four hundred years or so. It is a measure of the devotion and dedication of those connected with Satra institutions and also, perhaps, of the quality of the music itself.

Although the Satra based exponents are the true representatives of the Bargeet system of music, it must be admitted that their mode of presentation often betrays a lack of finish and as such might not be agreeable to the ear initiated to the system. One big factor responsible for this apparent lack of finish is the fact that no string or wind instrument, not even anything like the tanpura to keep the scale, is used by the traditional singers. References to some string instruments being used for accompaniment in the past are to be found in the old texts. But since quite a long time past, the only instruments that have used to accompany the singing of Bargeets have been the *khol* (a kind of drum) and the *tal* (cymbals).

However, the modern singers of Bargeet do take the help of such instruments as the tanpura, the flute, the violin and so on, and their rendering being musically more presentable are becoming increasingly popular with all sections of people except the most orthodox who see in such unconventional renderings a deviation from tradition. Not only do modern renderings of Bargeet constitute important elements of the programmes of the Gauhati and Dibrugarh stations of Akashvani, they have also made their impact on music lovers at large through other mass media like the cinema, the gramophone records, the cassettes, television and so on.

It may be mentioned here that although the Bargeet tradition as a whole represents one single music system, there are considerable variations in style within the system. Centering round some important Satras in which the Bargeet tradition has been zealously maintained, such variations in style are not always confined to the modes of rendering the songs but occasionally extend to the raga structures as well.

And of course there are the distinctive styles of individual exponents who have been accepted as authorities. Some well-recognized stalwarts of the recent past have been the late Maniram Gayan Muktiyar of the Kamalabari Satra, the late Dayal Chandra Sutradhar of Barpeta Satra, the late Gahan Chandra Goswami of Nikamul Satra, the late Girikanta Mahanta of Sravani Satra, the late Jadab Chandra Pathak of Sundaridiya Satra and the late Gandhoram Bayan of Sualkuchi. Each of them had an unmistakable distinctive style that was inimitable in its own way but that was at the same time truly faithful to and representative of the time-honored tradition. Unfortunately such musical giants are getting rarer and rarer with the passage of time.

It is perhaps an index of the attachment of the Assamese people to the Bargeets that many of them have been cast in easier and more popular music modes in place of the orthodox ones. Sometimes this has been done simply from zeal for innovation and sometimes with the purpose of bringing Bargeets to the easy reach of lay enthusiasts for whom the intricacies of the orthodox raga and tala systems often prove too elusive. Needless to say, such attempts at innovation and popularization have been frowned upon by the traditionalists.

The *Bhaonas* which are traditional dramatic performances of the model set up by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva constitute one of the most popular entertainment media of Assam. In these there is a fine blending of acting, dancing and singing. Bargeet-like songs come every now and then throughout the performance of a Bhaona. It is often through these Bhaonas that the villagers have a nodding acquaintance with the Bargeet system of music.

In fact the Bargeet system incorporates within itself the songs of the dramas composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Usually referred to as *natar git* or *ankar git*, these songs of the dramas are also sung in the same manner as Bargeet proper. The only difference is that while in a Bargeet the raga alone is fixed, the singer being free to sing it in any tala or combination of talas, both the raga and tala are fixed for a natar git or ankar git. Interestingly, there is a convention prevalent in some Satras according to which an accomplished Bargeet singer is expected to sing a Bargeet in all the better-known talas.

Now, according to the convention associated with the traditional Vaishnava dramas of Assam, the last song of a drama is almost invariably a composition that is in the kalyan raga and set to kharman tala. In fact, in the world of Vaishnava music and drama of Assam, the expression ‘Kalyan-kharman’ carries the sense of a finale.

Reference:

- *Mahapurusha Sri Sri Madhavadeva*, edited by Akshay Kumar Misra & Tilak Das

[Source: *The Assam Tribune*, as reproduced in <http://www.bipuljyoti.in/music/bargeet.html>. The writer is an eminent folklorist, scholar, singer-composer and litterateur.]