

The Classical Tradition in the Vaisnava Music of Assam

Maheswar Neog

www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents before the readers a pioneering paper on the Vaisnava music of Assam, authored by Dr. Maheswar Neog. It covers virtually every aspect of the music of the Sankaradeva Movement (and also touches upon other traditions of music in Assam). As is evidenced by some of its references, this paper was written in the early part of the latter half of the 20th century when *Bargit* research was still at a nascent stage. We have retained these references as they reflect the important milestones in the progress of research on the Sankaradeva Movement in Assam. The paper is redacted from the *Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute, Nagaon* (2006).

Editing note(s):- Diacritics has been used sparingly; only the long diacritic (macron) pertaining to a/A has been highlighted and that too, depending upon the context.

We do not have any particular evidence to show what exact type of music was prevalent in Assam anterior to the spread of the wave of neo-Vaisnavism which was ushered into the valley of the Brahmaputra in the last decades of the 15th and the initial decades of the 16th century by Sankaradeva. We are left to our imagination in this matter; but this imagination can be based on the evidence of the writings of a few pre-Sankaradeva poets, and the song compositions of at least two poets, Mankara and Durgavara, who seem to have remained outside of the neo-Vaisnava circle of Sankaradeva.

In the early period of Assamese literature preceding the neo-Vaisnava 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 in simple 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 - *Āhir*, *Ākāshmandali*, *Kambār*, *Gunjari*, *Chālani*, *Devajini*, *Devamohan*, *Dhansri*, *Patmanjari*, *Varādi*, *Vasanta*, *Belovār*, *Bhāthiyāli*, *Manjari*, *Mārovār*, *Meghamandala*, *Rāmagi*, *Srigandhakāli*, *Srigāndhāra* and *Suhāi*. Meghamandala in this

list may actually be *Meghamallāra*; and on the other hand, the same reminds us of such ragas mentioned in the 17th century biographies as *Vāyumandali* and *Meghamandali*. *Mālachi* may perhaps be equated to *Mālavasri* or *Mālasikā*. *Chālani* is perhaps *Chalengi* or *Sārangi*. *Devajini*, *Devamohan* and *Srigandhakāli* 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*, of course in a derogatory sense, while a great number of musical instruments are enlisted by the poet. *Mardala*, *Khumuchi*, *Bhemachi*, *Dagar*, *Karatāl*, *Rāmtāl*, *Tabal*, *Jajjhar*, *Jejiri*, *Bheri*, *Mahari*, *Tokāri*, *Dosari*, *Kendārā*, *Dotārā*, *Vinā*, *Rudravipani*, and so on. Another poet of this period, **Harivara Vipra**, gives the names of some of these and other instruments.

Pitambara Kavi, a contemporary of Sankaradeva, used these rāgas in the lyrics in his *Usa-Parinaya*: *Āhir*, *Gurjari*, *Gondagiri*, *Dhanasri*, *Nāga*, *Nāta*, *Patamanjari*, *Pāhāri*, *Varādi*, *Vasanta*, *Bhāthiyāli*, *Bhairavi*, *Mallāra*, *Suhāi*.

Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva employ the following rāgas in their *Bargits* and *Ankiyā-gits*: *Āhir*, *Āsovāri*, *Kalyāna*, *Kānāda*, *Kāmoda*, *Kedāra*, *Kau*, *Gauri*, *Tud*, *Tud-Vasanta*, *Tud-Bhāthiyāli*, *Dhanasri*, *Nata*, *Nata-Mallāra*, *Purvi*, *Varādi*, *Vasanta*, *Belovār*, *Bhāthiyāli*, *Bhupāli*, *Mallāra*, *Māhur*, *Māhur-Dhanasri*, *Rāmgiri*, *Lalit*, *Syām*, *Syāmagadā*, *Sri*, *Srigāndhāra*, *Srigauri*, *Sāreng*, *Sindhurā*, *Suhāi*. In this list *Kau* alone seems to be an unfamiliar name to the student of Indian music, unless it has got some connection in its etymology at best, with classical *Kaisika* or *Kakubha*, the latter as in the *Abhilasitarthacintamani* and *Sangita-ratnakara* or *Kahu* found in Middle Bengali texts.

Sankaradeva, who lived the very long life of a *Mahapurusa*, that is 120 years, spreading from 1449 to 1568 AD, founded a school of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. His tenets of the religion are simplified to the extent of being extremely bare. He preached *bhakti*, but emphasized that ***Sravana*** and ***Kirtana***, the chanting or muttering the glory of the Lord, and the listening to it, consisted of the simplest and, for that matter, the highest type of devotional activity as a way unto the Lord. *Bhaktas* found the greatest pleasure in

the mimicking and enacting the acts of the Lord as **Krsna** or **Ramacandra** in the form of dramatic performances. This in fact happened in different parts of India wherever this new religion spread; and it is this that gave a stupendous impetus to the creation of a variety of music and none-too-classical drama.

There was the efflorescence of a great literature and culture in this part of India with the advent of this religion. **Sankaradeva** and his disciple **Madhavadeva** composed a number of songs of various orders – **Bargit** (devotional lyrics, lit., ‘noble songs’), **Ankiyā-git** (songs of the dramas), **Kirtana-Ghosā** (narrative songs), **Nāma-Ghosā** (devotional couplets), **Bhatimā** (prasastis of God Visnu or Krsna, Guru or king), something like the South Indian varna in import, **Payāra** (recitational verses), Sanskrit odes, etc.

The Vaisnava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety. It helped the new religion to spread like wild fire. **Bhavananda**, a rich merchant, was attracted towards the message of the Vaisnava leader, at the instance of **Bhaskara Vipra** who used to sing the Saint’s lyrics on the *rabāb* which is still to be seen in some parts of India like Rampur and Afghanistan. A great commander of the Koch army of Kamarupa, **Sukladhvaja**, who was responsible for the Saravati commentary of the Gita-govinda, happened one day to overhear one of his wives singing a song of Sankaradeva on the *Cherengdār*, that is, *sārindā*, and he lost no time in resolving to secure ordination to the Bhakti cult.

Among the different forms of the Vaisnava music of Assam, the two tuned to *rāgas* 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 at the top. In all the ankiya-nats, the time or *tāla* is also mentioned, and in three bargits (which are known as ‘*sad-chandar-git*’) three tālas 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 and the *khol* or *mrdanga*, and cymbals provide the accompaniment. The adept knows which tala is to be adopted in executing a particular melody. The Asovari-raga is commonly timed to Yati-tala, Kalyana to Kharmān, and so on. This is a somewhat peculiar characteristic of bargits and ankiya-gits that the few songs in a particular raga generally keep same tala, so much so, that a raga like Belovar is often called Rupaka-Belovar, this melody-mode being almost invariably performed in Rupaka-tala. Prof. P. Sambamoorthy of Madras University tells me that similar is the case with ragas and talas in the South Indian *Tevārām* (7th - 9th cent). On the other hand, an expert musician can and does employ as many as eight talas in the execution of one single piece.

In the bargit manuscripts the names of talas are not mentioned except in the case of the three sad-chandar gits which I have mentioned. The following talas are seen attached to the ankiya-gits - *Ektāli*, *Kharmān*, *Cutikalā* or *Tālcutā*, *Yatimān*, *Domāni*, *Visama-tāla*, *Rupaka-tāla* and *Māncok*. According to the Ojās of the Sattrā ojā-pāli chorus, there are twelve Tālas and twelve Upatālas. The 12 Talas are: *Ekatāla*, *Kharmān*, *Chutkalā*, *Dasbāri*, *Domāni*, *Dharamyati*, *Vara-yati*, *Vara-visama*, *Saru-visama*, *Paritāla*, *Racaka-tāla*, and *Rupaka*. The twelve Upatālas are: *Āctolā*, *Ādsari*, *Ārvisama*, *Unayati*, *Olotā-ganjal*, *Rupa-ganjal*, *Sudā-ganjal*, *Chāb-tāla*, *Chutā*, *Fora-visama*, *Pur-visama*, and *Mātha-tāla*. The Kamalabari-sattrā in the district of Sibsagar, which seems to present the norm in the matter of Vaisnava music and dancing still possess twenty-six talas, which include all these twenty-four except *Racaka*, *Ādsari*, *Ār-visama*, *Olatā-ganjal*, *Chāb-tāla*, *Chutā*, *Fora-visama*, *Pur-visama* and *Mātha-tāla*; and have in addition, *Roktatāla*, *Mātha-yati*, *Tāk-tāla*, *Virupa-tāla*, *Brahmatāla*, *Cārikhaniyā*, *Khan yati*, *Tinimāni*, *Cārimāni*, *Pānc-māni* and *Dovāj*.

Some amount of difference in the practice of these talas is seen from one Sattrā circle to another. A work in Assamese verse, *Vādyā-Pradīpa*, dating from the 17th century, mentions as many as 49 talas, although it deals only with 26 in detail. This work was noticed in *Journal of the Music Academy*, Madras, vol. XXII.

Wooden drums, strangely enough called *Mrdanga*, and earthen ones, called *Khol*, and cymbals of different sizes provide, now-a-days, all the musical accompaniment, although earlier the *rabāb*, which instrument is associated with the great Tansen, and the *cherengdār* or *sārindā* were also used. In individual singing among itinerant Vaisnavas, the *vinā* and *tokāri* (variation of the *vinā*) are found to be still used.

At the end of the second line of each *bargit* or *ankiya git*, the syllable *dhruv* 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 couplets we generally find the name of the writer. A *bargit* may be compared to the *dhruv* 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* (*asthaya*), *antara*, *sanchari*, and *abhoga* (the last with 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 *abhangas* 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 sportiveness of the *Khayal* type of Hindustani 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 that the former is always accompanied with *tala* and is rarely or never executed without it. These songs occur in the Brajabuli dramas of Sankaradeva and his chief apostle, Madhavadeva.

In the devotional lyrics written after the time of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva new names of melodies appear, some of which are *Karnāta* (*Kāuāda?*), *Gunaja-Kenāra*, *Gadā-Kalyāna*, *Gurjara*, *Chālengi*, *Chorat* (*Soratn*, *Saurāsta?*), *Jayasri*, *Pascima-Dhanasri*, *Vanga-Bhātiyāli*, *Vihāgadā*, *Mālancha*, *Multāna*, *Rāmkeli*, *Reli*, *Sruta-Mallāra*.

The language of the songs of the bargits and ankiya-gits variety is a *mischsprache*, that is, a literary and artificial idiom, known as **Brajabuli** or **Brajavali bhasha** with Maithili as the basis, and Middle Assamese and oddments of Western Hindi or Brajbhakha forming the superstructure. The borrowings in the language from Northern India may have something to do with the musical history of Assam's Vaisnava sect. But no opinion at the moment can be hazarded on this point. It is also to be noted that the first known bargit of Sankaradeva, '*mana meri Rāma-charanahi lāgu*', is said to have been composed at Badarikasrama. From a comparison of dates this lyric seems to have been the first ever composed in the artificial Brajabuli idiom practised in Assam, Bengal and Orissa from the 16th century.

Some people have, almost aimlessly, attempted to categorize this raga music of Assam, some trying to identify it with Prabandha Sangita, others with dhruvada, while others would like to reserve it as a category by itself. As in the sangita-sastras, the prabandha-gita, of which we scarcely have a living specimen now, consist of several parts like udgraha, dhruva, melapaka, antara and abhoga. In some Sattras, the alapa or anibaddha part of raga songs is called ugār, which some seek to identify with udgrāha. The characteristic dhrum, attached at the end of the burden, is, again, supposed to hark back to the dhruva part of pravandha. But all this leaves much ground for consideration. On the other hand, the early history of dhruvada refers to the reign of Ramsingh Tomar, a contemporary of Akbar the great. The technique of this type of music does not apply to the singing of bargits and ankiya-gits. In what relation this music of Assam may stand to the South Indian styles is yet to be seen. Apparently there are names of ragas common to all these schools, or common at least to two of them. A bargit in Dhanasri may look like Bhimpalasri of the North and Abheri of the South. Its Kalyana may correspond to Suddha Kalyana of Hindusthani. Assam's Dhanasri has *Sa*, soft *Ga*, *Ma*, *Pa*, soft *Ni* and *Sa* in the ascent, and *Sa*, soft *Ni*, *Dha*, *Pa*, *Ma*, soft *Ga*, *Re* and *Sa* in the descent. Kalyana has *Sa*, *Re*, *Ga*, *Ma*, *Pa*, *Dha*, *Sa* as arohana and *Ni*, *Sa*, *Dha*, soft *Ni*, *Pa*, *Dha*, *Pa*, *Ma*, *Ga*, *Re*, *Sa*, as avarohana.

In their execution, the Vaisnava raga songs of Assam have a different colour from the raga music of Northern India and, perhaps, that of the South also. Some people surmise that there was a process of decay after the Vaisnava leader Sankaradeva fixed the raga patterns of this music in the far distant 16th century. One of the reasons adduced for such a surmise is that no notational records in writing even in the training of pupils in the tonic solfa on a scientific basis exist for this Vaisnava music. Secondly no stringed or windblown instruments have, at least continually, been in use. But, on the other hand, the knowledge has been transmitted orally from *guru* to *sisya* through the last few centuries with much care and devotion. It may be pointed out here that there is a remarkable uniformity in the mode of performance throughout the State except for one slip here or another there. It is not, therefore, to be apprehended that all has yet been lost for us, and we can hope that with proper application, expert musicians will be able to put this music on terra firma. The rhythmic pattern of a raga, as revealed in the anibaddha or alapa part of it, is still recognizable to the traditional musicians of Assam. The bols of the talas have also a definite shape for each.

The Assam Sangeet Natak Akademi, helped by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, has undertaken a small scheme of research to be carried on in the field of this Vaisnava music. The work has already been started in a humble way, and the Committee appointed in that behalf is busy collecting specimens in tape-records and notations for further examination by experts. The Research Committee has already placed before the *vidvan* and *gunin* public a preliminary report of their investigations.

In executing the *alapa*, words like '**Rama**', '**Hari**' and '**Govinda**' are always used. Alapa is popularly known as *rāga diyā*, the giving of the raga, or *rāga tanā*, the spreading or elaboration of the raga. It is generally divided into four parts, which do not have any particular names except the third, known as *tolani*, the raising up of the voice to a higher pitch. This division would remind us of the four parts of classical alapa corresponding to *asthayi*, *antara*, *sancari* and *abhoga*. In Assamese *raga diya*, the fourth is generally identical with the first.

The singing of the text of the song then follows. But in some cases, the svara pattern held up in the alapa section is not very strictly followed while performing the text. The greatest reason for this is that in the training imparted by a teacher to his pupil, the svaras are not pronounced. Nor are the sonants, consonants and dissonants declared. It is only the devotional attitude towards the whole thing that has sustained this class of music, so as to render a raga adequately recognizable to adepts. Where, of course, there is a difference between the *anibaddha* and *nibaddha* parts of the rendering of a raga, all consideration and conclusion must come from the *nibaddha* part, because there the probability of decay is smaller. In another direction we might have some help in the matter; but there also the door is closed. I refer to dhyanas of ragas, known among the musicians of Assam as *rāg-mālītā*.

From quite early times in the history of Indian music attempts were made to visualize the melodies in the form of persons. It is, however, in the beginning of the 16th century that this tendency to deification of ragas took definite shape. This is known as raga-rupa or raga-laksana, and has been much popularized by the *ragamala* paintings of Northern India. This visualization seems to have been prevalent in Assam from pre-Sankaradeva times. One latter-day poet, **Rama Sarasvati** gives such raga-laksanas in his rendering of the *Gita-govinda*, and uses the term '*raga-mālītā*' to signify the thing. **Sukladhvaja**, Sankara's contemporary, in his commentary of Jayadeva's original text, quotes raga-laksanas from the *Sangita-damodara* of Subhankara, a copy of whose other sangita work, *Hastamuktavali* with an Assamese gloss, has been discovered in Assam. (This is being edited on the pages of the *Journal of the Music Academy*, Madras, by the present writer).

The popular raga-malitas, however, differ a great deal from the raga-laksanas of Sanskrit treatises on music. The following, for example, is the laksana of Malava in the *Sangita-damodara*:-

nitambini-cumbita-vaktra-padmah

skadyutih kuntalavan pramattah /

samketa-salam pravisan pradose

maladharo malava-ragarajah //

A popular version of the 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 the Malava king on the 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 Gandhara with his retinue provided the song. The raga Vasanta stretched the royal canopy over Malava and Sindhura waved a yak’s tail. Four damsels, Gauri, Bhairavi, Suhai and Lalita, made salutations to the king on the four sides, and attended him through day and through night.”

It would thus seem that raga-malitas of Assam had no indigenous growth. Some of the malitas do not give personified pictures of ragas, but connect them with some incident in the life of **Krsna**, **Visnu**, or some other god. In regard to Sindhura, for example, we have:

“When **Kānāi** (that is, **Visnu-Krsna**) restored the Vedas from the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, by killing them, the Lord sang the melody, *Sindhura*”.

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, *evam kalavidhim jnnatva gayed yah sa sukhi bhavet*. Opinion is, however, at variance in regard to the assignment of melodies to different hours. Among the Ojās 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-time 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.

The following division of time is found among the choral Ojā-pāli singers of the Vaisnava establishments:-

From dawn till noon: - *Kalyana, Kau, Syama, Lalita, etc.*

From noon till evening: - *Bhatiyali, Gauri, Vasanta, Gandhara, Dhanasri, Sri, Varadi, Kedara, Tud-Vasanta, Tud-Bhatiyali, etc.*

Evening: - *Asovari, Sareng, Belovar, etc.*

Forepart of the night: - *Suhai, Sindhura, Kanada, Mallara and Nata-Mallara*

Little hours of the night: - *Bhupali, Kamoda and Madhyali*

Dawn: - *Dhupali and Purvi*

Apart from the neo-Vaisnava music of the Sattras, we have the music of the choral singers, known as *Ojā-Pāli*. There are two different types of *oja-pali*. One is definitely non-Vaisnava, and it performs the songs of the serpent-goddess of eastern India, Manasa. The second type takes for its text any Assamese version of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the *Puranas*, and sets it to melody. It has in its repertoire as many as twenty-seven ragas, the most prominent among them, like Sāranga, Mallāra, Gāndhāra, etc., being also the most usual. Their performances have the two distinct parts of alapa, known as raga diya, and then the song set to the raga of which the basic form is given in the first part. As the leader of the Oja-pali group, who is called **Ojā** (Skt. upadhyaya), performs the text, he indicates the subject-matter in a number of *hastas*, known as *mudrā*, accompanied by *bulan* or foot-work (pada-calana) and *chāvan* or glances (Skt. drsti). The music of the oja-pali has a different colour and sway from that of the music of the Sattras.

Parallel to the school of music, there is a class of Ojā-pāli in the Vaisnava Sattras themselves. I have already referred to this type of musicians. In training and practice the **Sattra Oja-pali** are different from the Sattra musicians, who perform the bargits and ankiya gits and produce the dramas.

Among other forms of Vaisnava music the following of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva's compositions may be mentioned. These are not generally set to ragas.

Kirtana-ghosā or, simply, **Kirtana**: These are generally of a descriptive and narrative type. Several *Kirtanas* combine to make a story, like that of Hiranyakasipu, **Prahlada** or **Narasimha**. The Kirtanas are meant for mass singing during congregations. Each Kirtana has a *ghosā* or refrain, which is set by a leader called *pāthaka* and repeated by the whole congregation at the end of each couplet sung by the *pāthaka*. In the western part of Assam this is sung to the accompaniment of *nāgerā*, that is, the naqqara of Northern India, in addition to big cymbals and clapping of hands, which are common to all places. Sometimes the Kirtanas are performed by the chorus Oja-pali.

A book of *Kirtana-ghosās* was made by Sankaradeva.

Nāma-ghosā or, simply, **Ghosā**: A *ghosā* generally consists of a couple of tripadi or *padakulaka-vrtti*. It is sung in solo or in group. Several *ghosās* go to make a prayer or a poem of some devotional sentiment. The book **Nāma-ghosā**, with its deep philosophical import and devotional outburst, was composed by Madhavadeva.

Bhatimā is a poem of eulogy to the Lord or the Guru. It may also be a panegyric of a king or the praise of the hero or heroine in a drama. It is sung sometimes over a standing note or may be set to a raga.

No proper scientific study of the Vaisnava music of Assam is today available. Scarcely has any attempt been made in that direction. I have referred to a maiden effort made by the Bargit Research Committee of the Assam Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Committee has drawn up a detailed scheme of survey of this music for the consideration of the State Akademi and the National Akademi in New Delhi. Apart from the question of adequate funds which has so far failed us but may not be so any more in view of the National Akademi's sympathies, we suffer from an extreme penury of working hands for research. An urgent sense of the need for such work is of very late growth in Assam. But it has to be roused if this rich heritage of India, which would go a great way to testify to the cultural oneness of India, is to survive the test of time.