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Importance of Folklore in Human Life: A Study on Assamese Marriage Songs (Biyānām)

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Abstract:

Assamese folk literature is strikingly rich in folk songs in volume and variety. In most of the functions related to the religious practices, festivals and ceremonies, Assamese women play an important role in part of singing folk songs. In the corpus of Assamese folk songs; there are many such varieties that can be categorized specifically as 'women genre'. One such variety is the marriage songs commonly called as *Biyagit* or *Biy ānam* sung in a traditional Assamese Hindu marriage. In Assamese society marriage is one of the most commonly observed social functions celebrated with great enthusiasm, spirit and merriment? To add to this merriment Assamese women sing different types of marriage songs at different stages of the marriage ritual. In this paper, the author intends to study the various types of *Biyānam* of the specific area of Lower Assam. Here, I will also try to show its importance in an Assamese marriage with its changing nature and continuity at present time. As Assamese marriage songs are transmitted vocally from generation to generation, no printed records of earlier times are available. Hence, the author had to collect these songs from the elderly women, especially of the rural area.

Keywords: *Biyānam*, Assamese marriage, folk songs, Assamese women, lower Assam

1. Introduction: Importance of *Biyānām* in Assamese Marriage

Assamese folk literature is strikingly rich in folk songs in volume and variety. Most of these songs are associated with religious practices, ritual, customs; some of them are connected with seasonal festivals and ceremonies of the folks. In most of the functions related to the religious practices, festivals and ceremonies, Assamese women play an important role in part of singing folk songs. In the corpus of Assamese folk songs; there are many such varieties that can be categorized specifically as 'women genre'. As for example, '*ā i nam*' (healing songs sung to appease the pox Goddess *ā i*'), '*apeswari sabā har git*' (sung in praise of female goddess for the well being of the family, unmarried girls, etc.), '*Kati Pujar git*' (songs of worship to god and Goddesses of procreating and sexual fulfillment). "One such variety is the marriage songs commonly called as *Biyagit* or *Biy ānam* sung in a traditional Assamese Hindu marriage (Dutta & Goswami, 1993)". In Assamese society marriage is one of the most commonly observed social functions celebrated with great enthusiasm, spirit and merriment. To add to this merriment Assamese women sing different types of marriage songs at different stages of the marriage ritual. It can be specifically called as women songs where women voice their inner world — their thoughts, feelings, their sense of worth dignity and power. Moreover, it is reflective of their way of looking at the world. Many a time such expressive genres turn to be a critical of the social system. They not only voice their resistance against the prevailing social dominance of a man central patriarchal structure, but at the same time they represent a different identity of their own.

Taking into account the thematic aspect, we find that Assamese marriage songs encompass a wide variety of themes, motifs and character ranging from the mythology to the ordinary folk life of the people. The mythical stories of *Ram - Sita*, *Hara - Parvati*, *Krishna Rukmini* etc. play an important role in building up the structural whole where the folk mind attaches the local colour. The *Shiva-Parvati*, *Ram-Sita*, *Krishna-Rukmini* are the mythical pairs who are placed as ideals. Without their reference at different stages of singing performance, it would lose its meaning and colour through these songs the women folk try to project a set of rules and regulations, code of conduct and value system that the patriarchal society has already set a norm for them. Thus in the marriage songs Assamese women generally cherish the patriarchal values superimposed on them by the male governed authority. In a traditional Assamese marriage, songs are sung in groups at the time of performing different rituals and customs such as at that time of preparation of marriage, at the time of carrying water from the nearby river or tank for the ritual bath of the bride/groom. Unless and until the specific customs or ritual is observed, one cannot get hold of the proper meaning of the singing performance held side by side of it. For the women singers the ritual, customs and the singing hold equal importance. Apart from the song of mythical references there the teasing songs that mock, ridicule.

A contextual study on Assamese marriage songs with special reference to Bajali Area, an unpublished M.Phil dissertation of Gauhati University by Rubi Das, page 9). The Assamese term for marriage song is '*Biyānam*' or *Biyāgit*' and the women who have a special knack of singing them are called '*gidalis*'. *Biyānam* are sung almost every stages of the marriage starting from the pre-nuptial rites to the post-nuptial rites. Though these songs are found all over Assam, yet the songs of Upper Assam are a bit different from that of

Lower Assam. It is very important to be noted here that now in contemporary period due to the impact of modernization as well as some other causes performance of 'Biyānam' has undergone lots of changes. At present day, instead of singing by themselves they used to play the cassettes of 'Biyānam, Bihu git and also Hindi as well as English songs etc. However, only because of the mass media these Biyanam become popular among the new generation. With little improvisation they try to make it one of the best medium of entertainment.

1.1. Assam and Assamese Society

Assam is the easternmost outpost of Indian civilization. It is situated between the parallels of 24°88" and 27°10" North longitude and 89°42" and 96°10" East latitude. Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal in the North, Nagaland and Mizoram in the East, Bangladesh, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in the South. "The land of Assam consists of Valleys and hills and mighty rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak. It has had links with Aryan civilization and culture since ancient times (Bharali, 1999)". Known by the names Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa, the land finds frequent mention in ancient literature, particularly in the epics and the Puranas. While there had been migration of hordes of Aryan settlers at different times, the indigenous population had also come under the influence of Aryan religio-cultural mores and modes, giving rise in the process to a very interesting synthesis of Aryan and indigenous strains.

"In the medieval period different parts of Assam were under the Chutias, the Barahis, the Bhuyans and other chieftains. But later there arose two very strong ruling powers, the Ahoms in the East and the Kochs in the West. The Ahoms of Tai-Shan affiliation originally came here as invaders, but soon became completely indigenized, and their uninterrupted 600-year rule not only gave the land its present name but played a signal role in forging its social and cultural unification. Various tribal communities - now at different levels of acculturation, integration and assimilation vis-à-vis the Assamese Hindu Society - live in the Hills and plains, the chief among them being the Karbis, the Dimasas-Kacharis, the Zemi Nagas, and the Kukis in the hills, and the Bodos- Kacharis, the Mising, the Rabhas, the Tiwas(Lalung) and the Deuris in the plains. The local Muslim population is also sizeable in proportion and their place in, and contribution to, the composite socio-cultural milieu is quite significant and considerable. Thus, with the contribution of a large number of invaders as well as the indigenous people the greater Assamese society is built (Dutta D. B., 1994)".

Assam is very famous for its variety of folklores. In Assam, almost fourteen or fifteen festivals or ceremonies are celebrated in a year. The institution of birth, marriage and death is also celebrated very widely. Most of the ceremonies or rituals have their own descriptive songs. In Assamese society, people used to express their feelings at joy, sorrow, sacredness etc. through certain songs, dance and drama performance. Therefore, these performances, mostly reflect the day to day life of the Assamese people. There are many folk songs in Assam which give a beautiful description of its natural beauty. One thing we have to mention here that Assam is broadly divided into two parts - Upper Assam and Lower Assam. A community who reside in different geographical area may practice different lifestyle, custom, tradition, culture and language and these also result in the creation of different songs and art forms. Because of this variation the culture of Upper Assam is slightly different from that of Lower Assam. This fact can be seen in case of Biyanam also. In Biyanam mostly the words are different from one part to the other.

2. Institution of Marriage in Assam

Since ancient times in India, marriage is celebrated with great enthusiasm and spirit. Through the institution of marriage, a man and a woman get the social nod to live together as husband and wife. In the distant past, when people lived in forest there were no such customs of marriage, but as people began to live in a more organized way, society was formed and within the organized social structure they felt the need to regulate the sexual behavior of the two sexes - man and woman in an ordered way. As a result the different forms of marriage customs have evolved among different groups of people living in different parts of the world. Thus marriage is institutionalized as a social code through which a man and woman enter into the marital life. In the patriarchal social structure, as a woman enters into a marriage, she parts with her conjugal family in order to live with her husband in her natal home for procreation and fulfillment. In India as mentioned in different classical texts, eight different types of marriages were performed among the Hindus during the Vedic period. There were 'Brahma Bibāh', "Daiva Bibāh", "and Prajāpatya Bibāh", "Gandharva Bibāh", "Asura Bibāh", "Rakshash Bibāh and Pishas Bibāh". Although the last four types of marriage were in practice in past, at present only the Brahma and Prajāpatya types of marriages are in practice.

In Assam, however the system of marriage is more complex among the mixed population of Hindus and aboriginal tribes. Among the Hindus of Assam, it is the Prajāpatya type of marriage that is found to be in practice. In Prajāpatya type of marriage, the guardians of the bride and groom arrange the marriage and the bride's father by performing the *pūjā* ritual offers his daughter as 'Dan' in the hands of the groom. However, as observed by H.C. Barua in his "Notes on the Marriage Systems of peoples of Assam" in 1892, "The marriage rites of the Assamese Hindus are a curious mixture of rules and formulas laid down in the Shastras and those sanctioned by local people" (Marriage System, 1908). Among the Hindus, the ceremony is performed by setting up a fire ritual where both bride and groom promise to unite for procreation. However, under the influence of New Vaishnavism, a sect of Assamese Hindus observes the ceremony with a difference, without performing the Vedic fire ritual. The tribal communities follow their own customs while the Ahom community follows the origin "Shan" tradition with local modification. However, a marriage is always more than the rituals. Apart from the rituals performed in the marriage, there are different folk customs, beliefs and local cultural attributes that intermingle in the whole process adding colours to the marriage ceremonies.

2.1. Importance of Biyānām in Assamese Marriage

Biyanam is one of the most important elements of Assamese marriage ceremony. Singing of songs by the womenfolk enlivens the proceedings of a marriage in Assam as in many other parts of India. "In fact a traditional Assamese marriage is a very musical affair.

At every stage of the celebration from the early negotiations to the final post nuptial rites - women sing appropriate songs that are characterized by tender feeling and homespun imagery (Dutta D. B., Asamiya Sangitar Aithya, 2001)". The singing of songs is intimately connected with the various customs and rites, after giving an insight into their nature. There is a big volume of such songs avidly sung in the various parts of the region by the women folk. These are the product of the creative mind of the uneducated women folk. By hearing these songs one can be able to know what ritual is going on in one Assamese marriage ceremony, because the womenfolk describe the situation very skillfully through these Biyanams. In an Assamese traditional marriage system, there are different stages and in every stage, there are different types of Biyanam which reflects its importance. In Assam, "a wedding ceremony consists of five days. The songs sung in each of these days are different: containing different tunes and different sentiments. In the Assamese society, the bridegroom is called as the 'Darä' and the bride is the 'Koinä (Bhagawati, October-2012) "".

3. Types of Biyānām in Assamese Marriage

3.1. Sāndāh Khundar Git

This type of song is sung as part of the folk custom performed five or seven days prior to the marriage day. The mother invites the women of the neighborhood to grate rice to prepare 'Chirā' (a kind of traditional food item) for the wedding day. The women sing songs, share the works and thus, mark the beginning of the proposed marriage function

/ Zoy Zoy Zoy Porom moNgale /

/ hare Kisno e /

/ e zoy zoy bāxudeu o rām /

/ doiboki nondon kisno e /

/ Zoy jodupati kisnoi more gotie /

/ O tozu pāwe koru xeu oi rām /

/ doiboki nondon kisno e /

/ ek nondor ghore zajo - zojo koree /

/ hare kisno e /

"O Lord Krishna, we are your subjects, we after our obeisance to you. In Nanda's house there is a happy ceremony to take place and happiness bounds no limit. We pay our homage to you in the eve of the happy occasion .In the song "Nandar Ghor" has two implication of meaning, in one it refers to Krishna's parental home, while in other sense it means the present household of the groom or bride.

3.2. Joronar Git

The system of sending loads of presents (bhār) to the bride' house is followed throughout Assam. In Upper Assam an aspiring groom makes several such presentations. In the colloquial Assamese of the area, bhār pelowa(literally , putting down the load) means "to make presents to the bride's party signifying final settlement of a marriage."(A contextual study on Assamese marriage songs with special reference to Bajali Area, an unpublsh M.Phil dissertation of Gauhati University by Rubi Das, page 9) .Joron or Joran in Upper Assam means "the ornaments, clothing etc. sent from the house of groom at the commencement of a marriage" and the presentation of joron is one of the most important pre-nuptial rites. In Lower Assam, however, the term joron is not so popular, but the rite, equally important, is called telar bhār. The term pānchini is also used by some people in the North bank to designate the present giving ceremony. In this ceremony a lot of songs are sung. These songs are - *Joron Sāju Kara Git. Joron āha git, Koināk alankār pindhowā git* etc. The *Joron* function takes place at bride's house where the groom's mother offers her the ornaments, traditional wedding dresses etc. Besides these, she is also presented with a big fish, a gourd, a pair of coconuts, betel nut etc., which are symbols of a prosperous married life. The women folks of the bride's party attend the function and sing songs while the formal presentation function continues.

/ telar bhār xazu kore e /

/ āhār azi ki /

/ O rām rāzāi biyā koroi /

/ Zonokore Zi /

What is it that you are preparing for joron? It is because Ram is getting married to Janka's daughter. This is a biyanam of Nalbari District which is sung at the time of preparing for *joron* .

3.3. Pāni Tola Git

This types of songs are sung on the marriage day, when the bride's /groom's mother with other women, Marriageable girls go to the nearby tank or river to carry water for the ritual bathing ceremony of the bride/groom. This type of songs varies according to the actions that take place within it. These songs include - *Kalah Sāju Karā git, Pāni tuliboloi joā git, Pāni Kata git, pāni tolā git, Duwār melā git* etc. The function takes place in the morning - the women carrying earthen pots join the procession with great enthusiasm and spirit, while walking they sing songs of mythical reference, songs that tease and make mockery of others while filling up the earthen pots the mother after betel nut to the water gods and prayers for his blessing.

/ digi deelong puskani deelong /

/ jal kyāne gholā /

/āmār bou ratane jale /

/bāli kyāne kālā/
hājirā diyā khāisen re bāli/
/saril karsen kālā/

Why the water of river and pond is dirty? Our maiden is glazing like the pearl, why the groom is black?

3.4. Adhivās or Srāddhar Git

During the day times, the priest performs the puja or *sraddha* ceremonies. While these ceremonies are going on the women sing different songs referring to the different rates that is being performed. These types of songs include *goxāi pujār git*, *srāddhar git*, *pinda shānā git* etc.

Ki puje gahai puje
Rangiār bali
Narasingha rupa dhari
Bahise āpuni

(Collected from Bimala Dutta, Dhekiajuli)

With what purpose you are worshipping the God by sitting like the *Narasingha*

3.5. Dorā / Koināk Gā Dhuowā Git

These sections of songs are sung at the time of the ritual bath taking ceremony. Under a newly planted banana tree the bride/ groom takes her/his bath in midst of all the women folk. There are different songs sung while the ceremony is going on, for example *nakh kāmoā git*, *māh - hāladhi shāna git*, *gādhuwā git*, *āg diy git*, *suwāg tol git* etc. The *suwag tola* ceremony is a secret ritual performed by the mother of the bride/groom secretly at the backyard of a neighborhood or in the river or pond. These songs talk of sexual life, relation etc

Only the married women are allowed to attend the ceremony.

/āideore padulite hāli ase nal/
kalahe kalahe dāhle/
/Zamunāre jal/

Thatch is bending in the background of your mother's house. A gallon of river Januna's water is pound upon you. This is a Nalbaria *Biyā nām* sung at the time of taking ritual bath.

3.6. Koinā Sajowā Git

Mostly the marriageable girls and friends of the bride before the arrival of the groom sing this type of songs, while they prepare her for the nuptial ceremony. These songs they impart different values, advices to the bride as she enters into a new life.

O moromiā
Koinā sajāboloi
Nahe samoniyā

(Collected from Bogi Haloi, Nalbari)

(O dear sweet girl, why your friends are not coming to prepare you for the marriage)

3.7. Dorā Olowā Git

“This section of song is sung at the groom place while the groom is being prepared for the nuptial ceremony. These songs include — *bar sajowā git*, *bibāh yātrār git* etc.

/dhoti nv pendhe re monirāj/
/dhoti bhal sajere monirāj/
/dhoti bāhl sāje/
/dhoti dhasokre moniraj tor/
/diba nisi boine dekhe re moniraj/
/Biyai saje/

Why you never wear ‘*Dhoti*’? You are looking nice with *dhoti*. Your sister always sees you with ‘*Dhoti*. “This is a Goalparia *Biyanam* sung at the time of preparing the groom, which is referred here as ‘*moniraj*’ (Dutta D. B., A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalparia Region of Assam, 1995)”.

3.8. Koinā Uliowā Git

This section of songs begins when the fire ritual is performed and the bride is invited to the *mandap* for the nuptial ceremony. With the chanting of ‘*mantras*’ the father offers his daughter as ‘*dān*’ to the groom. Along with his daughter he also gives some traditional utensils as ‘*dān*’. The songs sung at this time can be divided as — *koinā mātā git*, *xampradānar git*, *ākhoi tolā git*, *pāni grahanar git*, *jorā nām* etc.

/bon gharar parā olāi āh lagari o/
/marar morom sāri o lagari/
/ā jihe lagori laghone ol ā li o/

Please come out from your own home by leaving your mother's affection. Only today you come out without taking a single meal. This is a Nalbaria git sung at the time of inviting the bride to come out from her house.

3.9. Koinā Bidāyīr Git

These songs are sung at the time of the final parting of the bride for her husband's house. These songs are sad and after ends in sobs, weeping.

*Mainā bairiya jai dako diya
Babak koy ba go tumar tiner bari
neo boilo sapiya
sundar maina bairiya jai
dako diya mak koyo
tomar bari nyao bol sapiya*

(Collected from Kanak Roy, Gauripur)

In the above Goalpariya Biyanam it is said that at the time of her leaving the bride told her mother and father that she has given the house and other things to them.

3.10. Dorā Koinā Adorā Git

As the bride groom arrived at the groom's house the women folk of the family welcome them. Again they are to be performing some folk customs like playing exchanges games. Through the songs of the women give different advice to the newly married couple, tease them and thus, share the fun and happiness.

*Ākasare sikimiki
Dighal dighal doi
Sonamuwa boire aisi
Bori ana goi*

(Collected from Akan Barman, Nalbari)

The meaning of the song is as such, your beautiful daughter-in-law has come. So go and welcome her.

3.11. Khichā Git

One most important and interesting feature of the marriage songs of Assam, is the fact that a sizeable proportions of them, either wholly or partially, are meant for teasing. Such teasing songs are called *Jora nam* in Upper Assam and *Khicha Git* in Lower Assam. With these songs the singing parties of the bride's and groom's side lampoon each other. These teasing songs are sung at different stages of the marriage. It is interesting to note that, in these songs the dialectic variations are mostly reflected. These songs are the most skillful production of the womenfolk.

*/ O paka bilahi darare bhayakar/
/ Datar style soahi /
Ifale ata o paka bilahi
Sifale ata O paka bilahi/ majedi thela ja alihe /*

4. Conclusions

The singing performances of the marriage songs are closely interlinked with the different customs and rituals of marriage. For each and every occasion observed in a traditional marriage, the woman has one or the other types of songs to match with it and thus, the marriage songs are part and parcel of the traditional marriage.

One thing we have to mention here that all the above rituals are performing specifically in the lower Assam area. In Upper Assam there are certain other rituals such as *Gathion Khunda* (This is a ceremony in which a piece of a kind of aromatic root, called *Gathion*, is placed upon a flat stone, is pounded with a large muller jointly held by seven married woman), *Doyan Diya* are performed. But most of the other rituals are similar both in Upper Assam and Lower Assam.

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