

## Exploring Spiritual Expressions and Cultural Significance through Devotional Music as a Source of Oral Tradition in Assam



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### Abstract

*As a powerful expression of spiritual devotion and cultural identity, devotional music is an essential component of the oral heritage of the Assamese people. Devotional music is rooted in the rich fabric of Assamese religious rituals and beliefs. It includes lyrical works and a wide range of musical forms that convey profound spiritual stories from generation to generation. This paper will explore the varied forms, thematic content, and cultural heritage preservation value of devotional music in Assam, highlighting its importance as a primary source of oral tradition.*

**Key words :** Devotional music, Oral heritage, Spiritual, Assamese rituals, Oral tradition

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Oral tradition is a component of the intricate whole that we refer to as culture. A group or community's material culture, social folk traditions, and performing arts legacy are all included in its broadest definition, which is limited to oral literature or verbal knowledge. For all the indigenous communities around the world, there is not a single documented tradition or history. On the contrary, their oral tradition, which they heavily depend upon, is their main source of communal memory and identity. Where history is not written down, oral tradition rules the past. And therefore, the process of forming an identity becomes intimately connected to oral tradition. Orality, in other words, can serve as both a communication channel and a strong enough basis for identity creation.

When we talk about literature, we're talking about written and spoken expressions of the creative exuberance of the human intellect in words. Because of this, the history of literature worldwide is far older than the history of writing in any one nation. Thus, it is accurate to say that oral tradition is the mother of written literature. It encompasses a huge array of ancient traditional knowledge about a region's people and their way of life in its entirety. An extremely comprehensive encyclopedic body of literature is also found in Assamese oral tradition.

"Oral tradition" refers to a vast body of information, values, and symbols that are typically assembled by the laws of tradition into nonliterary or aesthetic-literary language objects. Occasionally, disagreements on originality and supremacy surface. However, there is now less differentiation between the two. Bruce A. Rosenberg created the term "oralature" as a compromise between oral and written production in the context of the debate over whether or not oral literature is the product of the illiterate class (because "illiterate" implies "lacking" in something). By whatever term, oral tradition originally referred to the transfer of information, customs, memories, values, etc. through word of mouth. It is spread through an extensive network of mutually reinforcing, in-person discussions among group members. Therefore, oral tradition is the sharing of cultural artifacts among members or strangers. At the time of a later transmission, those items are heard, retained in memory, and, when necessary, remembered. (Saikia)

#### Research Objectives

1. To trace the various forms of devotional music in Assam, including their musical styles, and performance practices.
2. To investigate the thematic elements of devotional music, focusing on the lyrical content, religious narratives, and cultural symbols embedded within the songs.

3. To evaluate the role of devotional music as a vehicle for preserving Assam's cultural heritage and oral traditions, identifying key practices and methods used in transmission.

### Research Problem

Even though Assamese devotional music has a rich history, little is known about its various genres, themes, and function in cultural heritage preservation. By analyzing its many forms, lyrical topics, and the manner in which these musical practices contribute to the region's cultural identity and legacy, this study aims to explore how devotional music functions as a major source of oral tradition in Assam. Additionally, the study will discuss the difficulties in maintaining and passing down this oral tradition in modern culture. This issue offers a framework for comprehending devotional music's influence on both individual and collective identities and for a thorough investigation of its cultural, social, and historical relevance in Assam.

### Methodology

The method used in this paper is descriptive-evaluative method. It is supported by Primary sources of data i.e. Interview and Secondary sources of data i.e. books, Journals and articles etc.

### Discussion

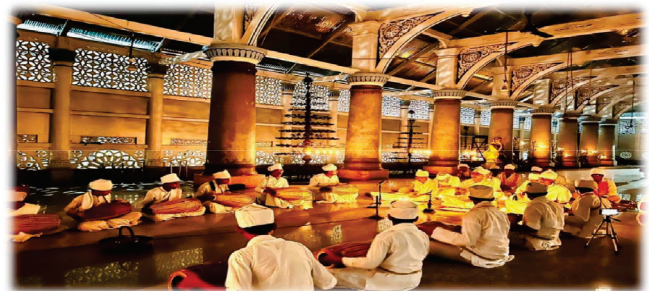
#### Oral literature of Assam

There is a wealth of oral literature in Assam. The main field in which folklore materials are studied is oral literature. Other names for oral literature include "folk literature" and "verbal art." The phrase "verbal art," initially used by W.R. Bascom, makes evident the differences in relationships between myth, legend, folk songs, stories, and other forms of oral tradition. The phrase "Expressive Literature" is also occasionally used. In addition to these terminologies, there exist other classifications that are specifically helpful in comprehending this specific category of folklore content. It was only when R.M. Dorson introduced the term that oral literature gained popularity." Oral literature is passed down from one generation to the next based on the collective memory. The folk literature of Assam is incredibly inventive. In actuality, Assam is a place where numerous communities, religions, and cultures come together. This state has long been the center of cultural diversity because it is home to several ethnic and non-ethnic cultures. As a result, Assamese

oral literature is quite rich." (Deka)

"Oral literature is primarily produced by folk societies; in fact, it developed and was passed down orally from generation to generation. Oral literature is a component of folk culture. It is composed of the expressions of an unknown composer and is expressed in a language or dialect that is commonly spoken by a large number of people in the same community (Goswami)." "Oral literature does not recognize boundaries between academic doctrines and expresses the instincts, inner happiness, or sorrows of common people. The oral literature of a community belongs to its common people, whose thoughts and feelings are embedded in a spontaneous way. Folk literature may have originated with a single, unidentified author, but despite this, it has influenced and touched the lives of so many ordinary people that it has inspired new generations of writers. It gains popularity, moves through several stages, and isn't identifiable as the work of a certain individual. Be a result, it is referred to be common people's property". (Deka)

In Assam, Vaishnavism holds a profound influence among Hindus, with Vaishnava myths, particularly those associated with the Neo-Vaishnava tradition, being widely celebrated. This popularity is largely attributed to the extensive and vibrant written literature of Neo-Vaishnava origin. However, the oral tradition also remains active and flourishing.



A notable aspect of Assamese Hindu life, especially within the Vaishnava community, is the communal singing of hymns by both men and women. These hymns are performed regularly and formally in prayer halls, known as Namghars. In addition to routine sessions, hymn singing is organized on special religious or auspicious occasions or as an act of devotion. Such gatherings take place in public spaces. These traditions, deeply rooted in Assam, were established by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva and are preserved in Namghars(1) and Satras(2) through the guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple lineage).

The accompanying image illustrates the guru-shishya tradition, which exemplifies a form of oral tradition.

### Forms of Devotional Music in Assam

Devotional music in Assam is characterized by its diversity and cultural richness:

**Borgeets:** “Borgeets are devotional songs composed by the medieval saint-scholars Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, founders of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Through his Borgeets, Srimanta Sankaradeva demonstrated to the populace that Sri Krishna, as portrayed in the Bhagawat-purana, was the greatest of all the gods and that Brahma and Maheswara were merely instruments of his will (Lahkar).” Sankaradeva appeals to all groups in his teaching since his life philosophy transcends all religious communities. Sankaradeva's Borgeets are comparable to hymns of supplication. The Borgeets' music and diction are perfectly complete, and they all work together to complement one another in a very harmonious way. The foundation of Borgeets is high, moral, and spiritual philosophy. This sublimity is accomplished in all aspects, including word choice and tone. (Nirmolia)

*Pa we Pari Hari Karoho Ka tori*

*Pra na Ra khobi Mora*

*Bixaya Bixadhara Bixa Jarajara*

*Jibana Narahe Mora” (Sankaradeva, Borgeet-17)*

This line of Borgeet acknowledges to the Lords that life is full of misery and transgression. The suffering of life is something we cannot avoid. The only thing that can take the edge off is to pray to the Lord.

**Naam Kirtan :** Recitation of Nam is a structured choral singing performance that is also known as Nam Kirtan or Nam Prasanga. This type of Nam Kirtan was prevalent in the post-Sankaradeva Vaisnavite civilization; specifically, the Satra is the conventional framework that was methodically established following the initial wave of Vaisnavite activity in the sixteenth century AD. Nam Kirtana is regarded as the best meditation technique out of the nine available. In terms of "atmanivedan," the devotee automatically dedicates himself to the service of God as he uses both his body and mind to recite the words of God; "Shravana—deep hearing—is a form of meditation (Bhakti) and is fulfilled when he hears his associates utter "Krishna"; "Smaran"—remembering; and "Bandan"—praising—are essential components of Nam Kirtana. Self-realization yields Dasya and Sakhitya, while Nam Kirtana brings about a state of self-estimation. (Mahanta)

As example—

Ghosa : *Jaya Hari Govinda Narayana Ram keshava Hari |  
Ram Ram Keshava Hari ||*

Pada : *Prathame Pranamu Brahmarupi Sanatana |  
Harva Avatarar Karana Narayana ||*

The lyrics often praise Lord Krishna and celebrate the principles of bhakti (devotion).

**Ankiya Bhaona Songs (Ankiya Geet) :** “These songs are essential to the Ankiya Naat tradition, which also contains Srimanta Sankaradeva's one-act plays with religious themes. Songs that convey legendary tales and spiritual lessons are played in tandem with the performances. It also called Ankiya Geet (Bora).” The Natyashastra lists five different kinds of Dhruva songs. Ankiya Bhaona uses all of these different kinds of Dhruva's songs. The play's concept is developed from start to finish through these songs. Ankiya Bhaona contains five different kinds of states or movements, each of which is necessary for the Bhaona to be complete. These motions or states are communicated through songs in Bhaona. Pravesiki, Naishkramiki, Aksepiki, Prasadiki, and Antariki are the names of these songs.

“The play's characters enter the stage to the singing of Praveshiki Geet, an entrance song. There is an opening song for the most of the Bhaona's primary characters. The Dohars, who are Bhaona's singers and musicians, perform these tunes. To the beat of the song, the play's characters come onto the stage in sync. These songs are called Praveshiki Geet. The songs sung when the characters exit the stage at the conclusion of a scene are known as Naishkramiki Geet.

The audience becomes intrigued in the character as a result of these specifics of the character's departure revealed in the song. Prasadiki songs are those where the characters are happy and joyful. These songs convey a happy feeling in the mind when the characters accomplish their goals. Aksepiki is a song performed by the characters themselves that is related to their emotions or is sung in the context of death, separation, or a breakdown in care. These are songs that convey feelings like genuine combat, melancholy, weariness, melancholy, and the cast's rage. Sareng, Suhai, Sindhura, Kannada, Kau, Ashwari, Dhanshri, Mahur, Gauri, Bhatiali, Belwar, Basanta, Sri, Sriganthar, Tur, Nat, Natmallar, Ahir, Kedar, Shyam, Kalyan, Purvi, and so on are among the ragas that are used in Ankiya Nat's songs. Ektal, Parital, Chutkala, Rupak, Yatital, Barbisham, Sarubisham, Kharman, Jauti, Dharamjauti, and so on are





some of the rhythms.” (Hazarika)

As example : Naat – Rukmini Haran (Pravesiki Geet )

Raga – Hindhura ,Taal- Ek taal

Dhrung – *Aaye Jagata Guru Kayu parabekha*|

*Jiniye Raam Kauti Natavara Bekha* ||

This song means the Guru of the world has entered. Krishna enters the assembly in the guise of an Oja dancer. The Dancer in the form of Krishna, has surpassed the form of crores of Kamadevas. As Krishna Entered the stage so it’s an entrance song (Pravesiki geet).

**Ojapali:** Assam has distinguished itself in India with a unique cultural heritage and customs. The Ojapali tradition is one of the earliest performing arts among the many traditional cultures. The presentation of a narrative poem using song, music, dance, and drama is the primary feature of this art form. The principal performer, known as "Oja," is usually joined by auxiliary performers, known as "Palis," in a group of five to six guys. The primary musical instrument utilized in the performance is a little set of cymbals known as the "Khutitaal." It has been evolved over many generations under the teacher-student or guru-shishya parampara. “Scholars have drawn comparisons between Oja and "Udgata," the primary vocalist in Vedic Saam music (the Hindu writings known as the Samaveda are said to be the source of classical Indian music and dance). The Oja play cymbals, mark time with their feet, and sing epic poems and mythological stories in verse while adhering to rhythmic ragas, talas, and mudras. The Palis repeat the song. Known as "Daina-pali," or the right-hand helper, the chief of the Palis adds interest to the topic with his lighthearted conversations”. (Barua 12-18)

**There are several ways in which devotional music in Assam contributes to oral tradition:**

- **Cultural Continuity:** From one generation to the next, Assamese language, Assamese Culture, religious customs, and moral principles are all passed down through the generations with the use of devotional music.
- **Community Bonding:** Assamese people's sense of communal identity and social ties are reinforced when they sing devotional songs together in Satras, Namghars and at religious festivals.
- **Spiritual sustenance:** Devotees can establish a strong connection with their faith and convictions through the melodies and lyrics of devotional music, which bring them emotional comfort and spiritual sustenance.

- **Education and Moral Guidance:** Devotional songs are a means of educating listeners about the religious values and qualities that are ingrained in Assamese culture, as well as moral and ethical precepts.

### Cultural and Historical Context

Assam's several ethnic groups, each of which has contributed unique musical traditions to the area, have influenced the state's cultural landscape. In the spiritual sphere, devotional music—especially those connected to Vaishnavism—is predominant. Bhakti (devotion) was spread by the saint-scholar Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva in the 15th century through their compositions, which are the foundation of Assamese devotional music and are known as Borgeets and Ankiya Naats. These works, which reflect the region's syncretic fusion of Hinduism and indigenous beliefs, are not just songs but also vehicles of spiritual teachings.

### Spiritual expression in Devotional Music

Borgeets emphasize themes of love, surrender, and philosophical inquiry while expressing a deep devotion to Lord Krishna through their beautiful lyrics and exquisite melodies. These songs, which are written in traditional ragas, inspire transcendence and can be used as a tool for individual spiritual practice by both singers and listeners. Borgeets' repeated style promotes a strong spiritual bond with the divine and is beneficial for meditation and introspection.

Conversely, Ankiya Naats are theatrical productions that tell mythological tales and provide moral teachings by blending dance, music, and drama. Through lively retellings of religious epics, these performances—which are accompanied by traditional instruments like the 'Khol' and 'Taal'—transmit cultural values between generations.

### Cultural Significance and Oral Tradition

In Assam, devotional music embodies historical narratives and collective memories, acting as a living archive of cultural legacy. These musical traditions have been passed down orally for generations, from master to pupil, preserving its authenticity and purity. In addition to preserving language subtleties and melodic complexity, the oral tradition of Borgeets and Ankiya Naats upholds Assamese communal identities and values.

Additionally, devotional music is essential to religious ceremonies and celebrations because it heightens the spiritual atmosphere and promotes a sense of community among attendees. Devotional music is performed at Namghar and Satras, where locals gather to rejoice and strengthen their cultural ties.

## Conclusion

In Assam, devotional music has a deeper spiritual and cultural meaning than it does as light entertainment. It is a type of oral tradition that facilitates the dissemination of religious teachings, the preservation of native beliefs, and the promotion of social cohesion. The continuous popularity of Ankiya Naats and Borgeets and other devotional music highlights their relevance in modern Assamese society as well as their timeless appeal. Assamese devotional music is a moving representation of the people's strong spiritual beliefs and enduring cultural heritage. Devotional music preserves Assamese cultural heritage and values while also celebrating heavenly love and devotion through its melodic interpretations and thought-provoking lyrics. Devotional music plays a vital role in preserving cultural continuity as Assam accepts modernity, signifying the unbreakable link between spirituality, communal togetherness, and the ageless traditions of the Assamese people. Efforts to cherish, promote, and protect devotional music ensure that its invaluable contributions to Assam's oral tradition endure as a source of inspiration and spiritual enrichment for future generations. In addition to helping the next generation learn about Assamese culture, tradition and different forms of devotional music, this research paper will assist society in defining and forming its identity, culture, and customs. It will be used as a teaching tool to transmit traditional knowledge and values.

## Operational Definitions

1. **Namghar** : The Namghar is a traditional Assamese prayer-house where the devotees, present as the congregation, sing the names of God. It serves as the center of spiritual and social life in villages.
2. **Satra** : Satra is a special indigenous social institutional centre, mainly associated with the Eka-Sarana tradition of Vaishnavism in the state of Assam. It combines religious practices, education and preservation of Art forms like Sattriya/Sankari Dance and Music.

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