

Reimagining Traditions: The Changing Representations of Women as Tradition Bearer in Assamese Modern Songs

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Abstract

Assamese modern songs have long reflected the beauty of nature, social realities, and the identities, emotions, and social positions of women within the cultural framework of Assam. Women have traditionally occupied a significant place in these songs, both as symbols of beauty and as bearers of Assamese cultural values and traditions. The culture of Assam is rich, diverse, and hybrid in nature, shaped by the interaction of multiple cultural influences over time. This paper examines the changing representation of women in Assamese modern songs and explores how traditional images and cultural expectations have been reinterpreted across different periods. Earlier songs often portrayed women as embodiments of beauty, sacrifice, and custodians of cultural traditions. However, with changing social, economic, and cultural conditions, contemporary Assamese modern songs have begun to depict women in more diverse and complex roles. At the same time, some songs also present women as objects of desire and sexual commodification. Using an observational approach and qualitative analysis of selected Assamese modern songs from different periods, this study investigates the transformation in the representation of women and the factors contributing to these changes. By tracing the evolution of women's portrayal in Assamese modern songs, the paper highlights the dynamic relationship between cultural traditions and contemporary social values. To ensure a systematic analysis, the study employs various theoretical perspectives, including Representation, Globalization, Modernization, and Feminism.

Keywords: Assamese, Tradition, Representation, Feminism, Modernization, songs.

Introduction

Music is often regarded as one of humanity's greatest creative achievements. Assamese music possesses a rich and ancient heritage, with its origins deeply rooted in mythology and folklore. Traditional narratives trace its beginnings to the era of King Bana, when Princess Usha and her companion Chitrlekha are believed to have sung and danced together at Agnigarh, located in present-day Tezpur, Assam. Chitrlekha is also celebrated in local traditions as one of the

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earliest artists of the mortal world. Although these accounts belong to the realm of mythology rather than verifiable history, they reflect the deep cultural significance and antiquity associated with Assamese music. Over the centuries, Assamese music has evolved while remaining closely connected to the natural environment and cultural life of the region. The scenic beauty of Assam, its rivers, forests, and landscapes, along with the creativity and resilience of its people, have served as enduring sources of inspiration. As a result, Assamese music embodies both the cultural heritage and the emotional experiences of Assamese society.

Assamese music is as vast and deep as an ocean. Assamese songs can be divided into three categories which are as follows:-

- Folk music
- Classical music
- Modern music

People generally give more respect and importance on Classical music rather than folk music and modern music. Therefore in the field of practice and research of Assamese music people select mainly classical songs or music as their study or practice. But in contemporary time the concept of giving more emphasize on just classical music is changed. Now a day's Assamese people start to practice the Assamese modern songs and give respect to it .Because modern songs are closely associated with the society. Modern song is a method of modern assessment.

This paper is dealing with the representation of women as tradition bearer in Assamese modern song. Therefore another two categories which are folk music and classical music are excluded in this paper. The modern era of Assamese music had started from the period of gramophone record. Prafulla Baruah, Kirti Nath Sarmah Bordoloi, Umesh Choudhury, Purushutam Das, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Bhupen Hazarika are the pioneers of modern Assamese songs. The modern lyricist at first composed the songs on folk base like *Biya Naam, Borgeet, Goalporia Lokgeet, Kamrupi Lukgeet* etc. These are considered as modern because they found in Gramophone in recorded form and also in printed form.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

For the purpose of a methodical study the researcher has been selected few objectives through which it has given more emphasize. These are as follows-

- To study about the origin of Assamese modern songs.
- To make a comparative analysis of reimagining Assamese traditions.
- To study about the changing representation of women as tradition bearer in Assamese modern songs in past and contemporary time

Existing Studies

Goswami (2016) discusses about history of origin and chronological developments of Assamese modern music including singers, lyricists, music composers along with various mediums like Gramophone records, cinema etc. This book gives an idea of about Assamese modern music and its golden history. The book *Asomiya Geet Aru Geetikavita* composed by

Hazarika (2011) is a compilation of seminar papers on Assamese songs. The seminar paper titled *Samajik aru Sangskritik prekhyapotot Asomiya Geet aru Geetikavita* by Ali (2006) describes about a historical evolution of Assamese music. Another paper *Asomiya Bulshobir Geetot Asomor Xomaj Jeebonor Protifolon* by Borah (2020) talks about songs in Assamese cinema. It also discusses about the reflection of Assamese social life in cinema through the songs. Other hand the article *Art For Rescue- Future of Assamese Music Industry* by Khatoon (2017) discussed how Assamese modern songs are going to be lost its originality. Nayar (2015) gives a distinctive guide to the major theories such as Representation, Feminism, Globalization, etc. The author provides these theories through this book which are evaluate and understand in modern society.

Methods of Data collections

For a proper understanding of this study the data has been collected from both primary as well as secondary sources.

- Primary data are collected from own observation, interpretation etc.
- Secondary data collected from the textual analysis, for example specific books, articles, seminar paper, internet sources etc.

Origin of Assamese Modern songs: An Insights:

In earlier stage many middle-class Assamese people who were lived in Kolkata (present Calcutta) did not think that Assamese modern song may be create a new genre of its own. According to them there were no sweet words, tune and other features which are essential for modern music in Assamese language. Many Assamese people already had accepted the Bengali music. They felt prouder and more respectful to sing a *Rabindra Sangeet* rather than sing an Assamese *Borgeet* or *Bihugeet*. But other hand another group of Assamese people who were also lived in Kolkata in that time wanted to do something for Assamese music and literature which will be called as their own. Among them in the field of music Lakshiram Boruah, Kirtinath Sarmah Bordoloi, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Satyanath Bora, Bhaktaram Dutta Choudhury etc were the main. In 1888, late Satyanath Bora published *Geetabali*, the very first book on Assamese songs in then Bengali tunes. So, Satyanath Bora can be considered as the first composer of Assamese modern songs. Other hand, *Pranay Gan* (1903) by Bhakatram Choudhury, *Banhi* (1906) by Benudhar Rajkhowa and *Durlabh Prem Sangeet* (1926) were also published which also contributed to establishment of a new genre of Assamese modern song. They offered their contribution to modern music in Assam with a strong sense of nationalism.

In the history of Assamese modern music which name is taken as most prominently is Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala who inaugurated a new chapter of Assamese modern music and made Assamese tunes acceptable to Assamese society. He selected the lacking points of new born Assamese music and tried to remove these lacks. He was able to brighten and popular the Assamese modern songs through which Assamese music got a beautiful position in the field of music. Along with him other Assamese lyricist, singer such as Bishnuprasad Rabha, Parbati Prasad Boruah, Keshab Mahanta, Nabakanta Boruah, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Lakhyahira Das, or Dipali Borthakur, Tafajjul Ali, Bhupen Hazarika, Khagen Mahanta, Jayanta Hazarika,

Hemen Hazarika etc. were able to make Assamese music as a rich one. Assamese music was started through the drama proscenium theatre. But in later period with the emergence of gramophone records, cinema etc Assamese modern music was popularized among people. In the year of 1924 the first Assamese gramophone record song was released in the voice of Prafullachandra Boruah. After that the first Assamese film *Jaymoti*(1935) by Jyotiprasad Agarwala was able to start a new journey of Assamese film industry. Along with *Jaymoti* was also successful to extend the Assamese modern music. Though the Assamese modern songs started sometime around the year 1890, in the absence of proper media, it did not reach out to the common people. On the 1st of July 1948, when the Akashvani Guwahati Kendra (then known as the Shillong Gauhati Kendra) was inaugurated, it opened a new door of opportunity to many lyricists, singers, musicians who were coming out from the dark to the lighting field of music and they were introduced. In Assam, a creative wave of renaissance was ushered in by Akashvani.

A new and fresh trend was started in the music scenario that brought modern hi-technology and digitized music in Assam. Noted singer, composer Jitul Sonowal was the pioneer of this trend in region. Later Zubeen Garg with his album called “Anamika” created a new sensation in the music world of Assam. Since 1992 to death, he was recognized as a trendsetter who not only experienced with the fusion of western and regional music but also contributed to reviving the traditional songs and styles of music in Assam. In this way from the starting point of Assamese modern songs, it has been developing and in present time through various medium it is successful to get a very good position not only in Assam or India, in abroad also.

An Exploration into the Discourse of Women and Assamese modern songs:

The Assamese modern songs and women are very closely associated with each other. Women always have played an important role through their beauty and as a tradition bearer of Assamese culture in modern Assamese songs. The daily practices of Assamese women along with social and cultural activities reflect in Assamese modern songs. For examples, in the paddy field women are worked as *dawoni* or *ruwoni*, which are reflected very beautifully in modern Assamese songs. Other hands in the field of weaving Assamese women are played an important role as *sipini*. These are beautiful characters of Assamese women through which the social and cultural traditions of Assam also presented. In modern Assamese songs these delightful traditions are represented. The music is an important part of a society and every society has its relationship with music. The music reflects a society’s diverse traditions, practices and the unique way of life in that society. Assamese modern music also reflects various traditions and practices of Assamese society. In Assamese society women are played an important role to highlight its rich and hybrid traditions and practices. The modern music of Assam tries to highlight these roles of Assamese women in most of the time. But due to various impacts of changing time the traditions and practices are changed in Assamese society. Other hands the representation of women in Assamese modern songs are also changed. Therefore if we compare the Assamese modern songs of past with the present time then we will see that women are represented differently. For a systematic study the researcher has selected eight songs of different times of composition. There are lots of Assamese modern songs related to women of

Assam. For the help of discussion, the researcher has divided women centric old Assamese modern songs in to some types based on its representation which are as follows:

- a) Songs related to the field of agriculture
- b) Songs related to weaving culture
- c) Songs related to wedding culture
- d) Songs related to historical women

a) Songs Related to the Field of Agriculture:

Assam is an agricultural based society where in all the months of the year Assamese local farmers do various crops. Agriculture is the soul of Assamese people. There is a very tight bonding are here between the farmers and the land. Without these two components the socio cultural life of Assamese society is not complete. The Assamese modern songs very beautifully reflect all wonderful scenes of Assamese traditional agricultural society in their creations. The Assamese women are very closely associated with this agriculture and actively involved in diverse agricultural activities. They portray various alluring characters of traditional life of Assam like *dawoni* and *ruwoni* and some songs these characters in modern song through which the women are represented as traditional bearer of Assamese society. A song of one of the foremost music pioneers of Assam Luit Konwar Rudra Baruah has selected for example:

Poka dhanor maje maje xoru xoru aali oi

Xoru xoru ali,

Aalit pori geet jure jaak balimahi.

Himsesa botah ahi dhan gole sumi

Dawoniye hatot kachi khorai lole tuli

b) Songs Related to Weaving Culture:

The *taatxal* of Assamese *sipini* is a very significance part of Assamese culture and it is mainly related with women. It is said that, Assamese women can weave dreams in silk. Weaving is a traditional culture and industry of Assam. Other hand there is a tradition in Assam to gift *Gamucha* as *bihuwan* in the time of Bihu festival. *Gamucha* is also the symbol of respect and this *gamucha* has weave by Assamese women in *taatxal*. Other dresses of Assam like *seleng*, *mekhela sador* are also woven by Assamese *sipini* which not only help to give the identity of Assam; it also recognized Assamese women as tradition bearer of the region. Other hand in early period women woven *tangali* (a waist-band) made of silk for her men before his getting out to talking part in a war to fight against enemy. This weaving culture is very beautifully represented in the modern Assamese song. For example:

Taator durepoti solai ghonepoti

Polokot tulutha ghure,

Kunnu xei goraki silonir oi jiyari

Chelengnu sokothiya jure.

Ekathu oi bukate kunenu oi kothiya

Aakhiye aakhiye tule,

Bhoritnu kube pori kanore oi thuriya

Eefale xifale lore.....

c) Songs Related to Wedding Culture

Every region has its own wedding culture. Assam is a region of various cultural groups where every cultural group has its own traditional ritual related to wedding ceremonies. Assamese wedding ceremonies are referred to as *Biya* in the regional language of the state. Assamese weddings are attractive and beautiful in their own subtle manner. There are lots of traditions in Assamese wedding ceremonies like *juron*, *tel diya*, *pani tola*, *nuani* etc. Women are mainly associated with these mentioned rituals and these are very traditional. Many artists of Assamese modern music composed various modern songs where diverse traditions of wedding ceremonies reflect very delightfully. For example:

Maah halodhire nuwale dhuwale

Koina xojale kune dapunmotik

Koina xojale kune,

Dingite jolile heerane mukuta

Kopalot hahile june dapunmoti

Kopalot hahile june.

Mugare patore ki xaje xuwale

Gunar buta bosa phule,

Xunore rupore gohona jilike

Dingit junerbiri jole

Deutar podulit uduli muduli

Dora aadorise kune,

Kore gorokhiya pepati bojao

Tihiti tihit xur,

Uronir aarere neasaba dapinmoti

Sol pai sokulu bobo,

Aaji je buwari xajisa dapunmoti

Xeutar xendure kobo.

Above mentioned song is a famous Assamese song sung by one of the prominent Assamese singer Beauty Sharma Boruah. This song is directly related with the women and the wedding culture of Assam. Various traditional rituals of Assamese wedding such as *nuwani*, *jurun diya* and *dora adora* are reflected in this song through the character of women. In *nuwoni* tradition the bride and the groom receive ceremonial baths. First the mother applies oil, curd and a paste of *maah-halodhi* (urad lentils and turmeric) to the bride and groom followed by other elder ladies to the family. Then the water is poured over them to wash away the pastes. It is a beautiful tradition of Assam related to wedding ceremony. The traditional attire of Assamese bride is *chador mekhela* which is made of Muga or Silk. The bride also wears gold jewelry in her neck which is called as *junbiri*. Other hand it is a tradition of Assamese Hindu women to take the *Xendur* on their forehead from the day of marriage. These beautiful traditions of Assamese society are reflected in this song.

d) Songs Related to Legendary women

There are lots of historical women figures in Assam. These historical characters of Assamese women are very gracefully presented in various Assamese modern songs. For example we can take the name of Jaymoti, who was accorded the honorific Mohiyokhi on account of her heroic endurance of torture until the end only for the nation. She was very beautifully presented in Assamese modern songs. Other popular historical figures such as Kanaklata Boruah, Bhugeshari Phukanoni are also reflected in modern music. Here few lines are mentioned as and example:

Jaysagoror bukur majot
Uthe sokulure dhol,
Moloyai tule hiyavonga xur
Korun binoni rol,
Jaya nai jaya nai
Axomi aair senehor jee
Xoti jaymoti nai.
Tezor tupal,sokulu ulal
Nayanor pahi phalli,
Kolizar saki jalile dipali
Bukur agoni jail,
Paritw xajile smritir deol
Premor xurobhi dhali,
Swamiku torile,dexoku rakhile
Nijokei boli dile.

This is an evergreen Assamese modern song composed by renowned Assamese artist Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha. This heart touching song is associated with popular Assamese historical women figure Jaymoti. Jaymoti is herself an epoch making episode in the history of Assam. She sacrificed her life not only for the save of her husband, but also for the nation.

Changing Representation of Women in Assamese Modern Songs

The Assamese modern songs mentioned above offer a vivid and realistic portrayal of the lives of Assamese women, reflecting their everyday experiences, domestic responsibilities, and the socio cultural norms that have historically shaped their existence. As cultural text, these songs serve not only as artistic expressions but also as valuable repositories of social memory, capturing the positions and role of women within Assamese society across different periods.

However, the representation of women in Assamese modern songs has undergone a significant transformation in response to changing social realities, the growing influence of globalization and western cultural practices, and the evolving aspirations and sensibilities of women themselves. In earlier compositions, women were predominantly depicted as embodiments of beauty, love, tenderness, sacrifice, and as custodians of familial and social traditions. Their identities were largely framed within conventional social roles and cultural expectations.

In contrast, contemporary Assamese songs increasingly portray women as autonomous individuals possessing agency, independent thought, self-confidence, and an awareness of their rights. The thematic focus has expanded to encompass women's educational achievements, professional engagements, personal aspirations and meaningful contributions to society. Such representations reflect broader shifts in reimagining traditions and the emergence of new discourses surrounding women's empowerment and selfhood.

Nevertheless, this transformation is not without complexities. Alongside progressive portrayals, certain contemporary songs also reflect changing patterns of dress, lifestyle, and every day practices in ways that occasionally reinforce stereotypical or reductive perceptions of women. Consequently, the representations of women in Assamese modern songs emergence as a dynamic and contested cultural space, simultaneously negotiating traditions and modernity, continuity and change, empowerment and objections. Through these evolving portrayals, Assamese modern songs provide important insights into the changing status and identity of women within contemporary Assamese society.

Though contemporary Assamese modern song continues to numerous meaningful compositions that preserve and articulate Assamese cultural traditions with sensitivity and aesthetic depth, the forces of globalization, western cultural influence, and market-driven commercialization have simultaneously contributed to the emergence of songs of comparatively lower artistic and cultural value. A close examination of songs centered on women reveals a noticeable shift in their representation when compared to earlier compositions. These songs not only reflect the evolving nature of Assamese society and tradition but also capture significant transformation in women's lifestyles, modes of dress, daily practices, and social conduct. While some compositions portray women as active participants in a changing social landscape, others tend to emphasize physical appearance and bodily beauty in a manner that borders of commodifications and objectifications. Such

representations mark a departure from the more nuanced and culturally rooted depictions found in earlier Assamese songs.

A few excerpts from these contemporary songs are presented below to illustrate these changing trends in the portrayal of women:

1. *Disco bhonti nanasiba*

Beya lage,

Take kolu,tumi beya palai sage.

Bihu nasile je eman morom lage

Xomoniyai tumar kotha xudhi thake.

Aiye ghorot nidile oi jaan

Schoolnu oi jabole

Collegeot porhibole

Tumar dore bilati mem

English manuh hobole.

This is a modern Assamese song which became hit in Assam towards the end of 2016. The lyricist and singer of this song is Kusum Koilash. Through this song we have seen that Assamese women whereas related with traditional Bihu dance in past time with attired traditional *mekhela chador*, but in present era they like to go Disco wearing the western dresses. Other hand in earlier Assamese modern songs, women were often confined to domestic responsibilities, contemporary representation depict women as educated and their acquisition of proficiency in English and to becoming akin to a “western lady”. These are the changes of Assamese women in contemporary time which are presented in this song.

2. *Bati bhorai sira khabi bahor sungar doi*

Biya pati juti lobi jaror dinot oi

Suwali aanibi kokai topina dangor sai..

This song is one of the most popular songs of Assamese language. In this song, women are primarily represented through the lens of traditional gender expectations and male desire. The lyrics frequently describe women in terms of their physical appearance, modesty, and suitability as prospective brides.

3. *Turuk turuk bhekuliye*

Mute buli nokobi

Nador pani nekhang,

Rua kota najanung ,nokoru kheti

Gaonor dekaloi najang

The above-mentioned song highlights the perception that many contemporary Assamese women are no longer familiar with agricultural work. In the traditional agrarian culture of Assam, participation in agricultural activities has long been regarded as essential skills. Through this depiction, the song reflects broader socio-cultural transformations brought about by modernization, urbanization and changing lifestyle aspiration, which have gradually distanced new generations from traditional agricultural practices.

Conclusion

The forgoing discussion reveals that women occupy an indispensable and distinguished place within Assamese tradition. Numerous Assamese modern songs centered on women vividly portray this cultural heritage, reflecting the lifestyle of Assamese women as well as diverse responsibilities and duties. Moreover, Assamese women have traditionally embodied the spirit of self-reliance. Whether in the household or in the agricultural fields, they share responsibilities alongside men and play a vital role in strengthening the economic foundation of their families. The elegant attire of Assamese women and the rich cultural ethos of Assam are eloquently represented in Assamese modern songs.

However, with the passage of time and the emergence of changing social realities, the attire, lifestyle, preferences, and aspiration of Assamese women have undergone significant transformation. These evolving dimensions of womanhood have likewise found expression in contemporary songs.

At the same time, factors such as the pursuit of commercial popularity, the influence of a patriarchal societal structure, globalization, and the growing impact of western culture have contributed to the portrayal of women in Assamese modern songs in ways that differ from earlier representations.

Although change is an inevitable and natural aspect of every society, the preservation of cultural identity remains equally essential. Safeguarding a society's unique traditions and cultural distinctiveness is crucial for ensuring the continuity and vitality of its heritage across generations.

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