



Bargīt

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Abstract:

Those who are familiar with Assam know its inexhaustible store-house of musical resources. The vast range of lyrics in Assamese culture and literature include both oral and literary songs. Since time immemorial, lyrics or musical compositions associated with various rituals and festivity of the people, living in various parts of this region, still awaits due exposure. Apart from all such musical composition Bargīts, originated in the hands of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in medieval Assam, is a class apart itself. The great fore-runner of neo-vaishnavite movement Sankardeva awakened people of Assam at a time when an engulfing social stratification and prevalence of sense of intolerances vitiated fabric of Assamese society. In doing so he evolved his own cultural warfare. Bargīts, are one of such strong cultural instrument of Sankardeva for attainment of his goal of monotheism aiming at eradicating vices that vitiate Assamese society. This paper attempts to make discussion on Bargīts, a kind of noble song originated in medieval Assam, which retains its perennial appeal intact to win heart of listeners till.

Keywords: Bargīts, Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, neo-vaishnavite, monotheism.

Introduction:

The songs that deal with metaphysical questions regarding life, death, salvation, soul and supreme soul etc. may be termed as devotional songs. It includes a great variety of songs representing different sects of beliefs of the people living in this part of the country since past. Songs like kāmrupī lokagīt, gowālparīyā lokagīt, dehbicār gīt, tokārī gīt, āinām, manasār gīt, śītalār gīt, gonsānūr gū, jaganāthar nām, jikir etc. are taken under this classification. But, many a time, a distinct demarcating line to be drawn between some institutional folk-songs and devotional folk-songs become too feeble to distinguish them from each other.

Apart from other literary works of the Vaishnava period (1450-1600), the Bargīt, which is a special genre of devotional songs initiated by Sankardeva, were a literary product of perennial appeal. They were one of the most important literary tools of Sankardeva by which he brought “a new meaning and depth to social and cultural life”¹ of the people of

1. Birinchi Kumar Barua, *History of Assamese Literature*, p.21

Assam. Sankardeva introduced it as a part of an all-Indian campaign, launched to spread the doctrines of Vaishnavism by saints like Swami Ramananda and his disciple Goswami Tulsi Das, Kabir Das, Guru Nanak, Sri Ballabhacharya, Sudras, Miara Bai, Tukaram, Caitanyadev etc. who too took resort to songs for the purpose. Therefore, in such a context of country-wide upsurge of Vaishnavism, the Bargīts of Sankardeva were “the echo of an all-Indian wave of spiritual movement.”²

A total number of 240 Bargīts composed by Sankardeva happened to be consumed by fire accidentally in the house of one of his disciples, Kamala Gayan by name. The saint was disheartened by it and later persuaded Madhavadeva to compose a fresh set of such devotional songs called Bargīt.

The term Bargīt which is a compound word like that of a set of other such Assamese words e.g. barkāh, barphukan, barsabhā, barmainā etc. first came to appear in Kathā Guru Carit.³ The word bar in Assamese implies big or senior to bestow a special grade or status to a person or a thing of the same class. Therefore, the reasons behind calling a gīt of Sankardeva or Madhavadeva a Bargīt is, due to its innate novel features which make it a particular genre of songs in Assamese literature. And, it is noteworthy that it was not the creators themselves but the followers and the devotees of the two saints, who found a new life being inspired by the doctrines of the saints--- called those songs Bargīt. The specialized scholars on Sankardeva and his works, justifying the term, have mainly recognized dignity of thought, musicality and the particular language i.e. Brajabuli, as to be the very criteria of a Bargīt. The following citation aptly enlightens exceptionality of a Bargīt from the rest of such compositions in Assamese literature.

Poetry, music and religion all combined, the Bargeetas or Vaishnava spiritual lyrics constitute a distinct form of musical composition; in them, poetry and religion melt into music and all combined flow ultimately into the multitudinous sea of all-beautiful. They raise us to a level of experience where art and religion mingle for unique spiritual transport. ⁴

Bargīt enjoys an exclusive place in the whole arena of Assamese lyrical poetry, upgrading its status near to the “Noble Numbers”⁵ of Herrick, “the songs of Vidyapati and the rhythm of Joydev” ⁶. Kaliram Medhi calls them songs celestial. Written in Brajabuli, which

2. Banikanta Kakati, *Purani Asamiya Sahitya*, p.61(trans.)

3. These are a series of biographical writings on the lives of the great Vaishnavite saints of Assam e.g. Sankardeva, Madhavadeva authored by various devotees of the saints. They were written on the leaves of a tree called *Sanchi*.

4. Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature*, p.p.62-63

5. Banikanta Kakati, *Purani Asamiya Sahitya*, p.57

6. Hem Barua, *op.cit.*, p.43 (qv.)

was the language of the folk of Bṛndāvana, a sacred place having its association with Lord Krishna's activities, gives Bargīt an extra dignity with "sanctified spirituality in the mind of the people."⁷ Sankardeva's mastery in handling Brajabuli, with a rich play of various figures of speech in it, makes his Bargīt a peerless asset in Assamese literature. Moreover, regarding their exceptionality in thematic concern, from other contemporary work of such kind, Maheswar Neog observes thus:

They are free from Sṛṅgāra rasa or sentiment of conjugal love. This would look strange when we compare these poems with the vast mass of Vaiṣṇava lyrics with that sentiments predominating, composed by the Maithilī poet Vidyāpati, Rāmānanda Rāya of Orissa, Yaśōrāja-Khān, Gōbindadasa, Jñānadāsa and other Bengal poets. It is related in one biography how śāṅkardeva while travelling outside Assam happened to hear some minstrel singing songs of amorous of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and in disapproval of the sentiment thereof asked Mādhavdeva to compose something with more propriety.⁸

Spiritual intensity conveyed through a Bargīt enralls its listeners to awake them from their grossness of mundane life giving realization that the world is an illusion and the life a desert. In such a situation, the only path for a human soul, to be blessed with divine bliss, is to absorb in thought of God through prayers.

Conclusion:

Apart from the two great Vaishnavite saints, there developed a tradition of such compositions by some other poets of the post- Sankardeva's time. Maheswar Neog called those songs "Later imitations of bargīts".⁹ Some of the notable followers of this trend were namely Sri Gopladeva, RamcaranThakur, Daityari Thakur, Jadumanideva, Lakshminath Ata etc. who too composed a set of such devotional songs, with a sincere attempt to promote and continue Vaishnavite ideology. But the critics are divided into two groups in the question of calling their lyrical composition Bargīt. On the other hand, despite acknowledging "a ring of sincerity"¹⁰ in their songs, Maheswar Neog compares those creations of the poets with imitation pearls only. In contrast to it, Dilipkumar Datta, apprehending a break in the tradition of Bargīt, which might affect in the flow of Vaishnavism in its bigger Assamese society, forwarded his view in favor of bestowing status of Bargīt to those songs of the successors of the two saints too. In this connection, he even cites an example referring to

7. Ibid,p.63

8. Maheswar Neog, *The Bhakti Cycle of Assamese Lyrics: Bargits and After*, Bargit of Mahapurush Shree Shree Shankardeva, Bhupendra Kumar Barma & Tara Kanto Jha (ed.),p.7

9. Ibid, p.15

10. Ibid.

one of the Lakshminath Bezbaroa's lyrical compositions i.e. prem prem buli jagate ghurilo/gharate āchile prem..., a panegyric meant for Sankardeva and comments that the same may be considered as a Bargīt.¹¹ But, despite its thematic grandiosity, the discussed panegyric does not fulfill some other important characteristics of a Bargīt, which are essential in respect of their classical design of music and language. On the other hand, Nabin Chandra Sarma emphatically states that "songs composed other than in Brajabuli can never be a Bargīt".¹² Hence, to sum up, in this regard, the following words deserve mention:

Like Shakespeare's aesthetic dwindling in the hands of Dryden, the art of the Bargeetas steadily declined in the hands of subsequent composers; except those in the hands of Ramacharana Thakura, Gopaladeva and a few others, it became a pale imitation in the hands of these backlights of talent. In some of the songs of the post-Sankara era, Brajabuli was discarded for Assamese; even this could not give the Vaishnava lyric artistic polish and spiritual beauty.¹³

¹¹ . Dilipkumar Datta, *Bhupen Hazarika's Git Aru Jiban-Rath*, p.p..28-29 (passim)

¹². Nabin Chandra Sarma, *Puraṇi Asamīyā Sāhityar Suvās*.p.164. (trans.)

¹³ Hem Barua, op.cit., p.66