

## EXPLORING ASPECTS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY (BHARATIYA DARSAN) THROUGH SONGS OF ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

*The minds and philosophical orientations of all those human dwellers in this land between the Himalayas on the up and the Indian Ocean on the down were and are incessantly influenced, reformed, and developed by various indigenous philosophical ideas born and grown in this land called India or Bharat. The influences of these philosophical ideas and developments are reflected in the daily actions and conversations of ordinary people. The influence of philosophy is also noteworthy in the folk songs prevalent in any society of any part of India, a country that is full of different ethnic groups. Preachers also resorted to songs to preach Indian philosophy and religion over various periods of history. Sankardev, the saint scholar from Assam had composed several Bargeet, which were of very high standards and contained different aspects of Indian philosophy, to spread the Neo-Vaishnavism in that region. Again, various aspects of Indian philosophy can be observed in the folk songs prevalent in the folklore of Assam. This article attempts to briefly discuss the reflection of Indian philosophy or Bharatiya Darsan in the songs of Assam, especially in Bargeet, Kamrupiya Lokageet, Gowalpariya Lokageet and Jikir songs.*

**Keywords:** Indian Philosophy, Bharatiya Darsan, Assamese Lokageet, Bargeet, Kamrupiya Lokageet, Gowalpariya Lokageet, Jikir

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The literature that has flowed orally in society from very old times is called folk literature or *Lokasahitya*. Hence folk literature is called oral literature too. Assamese folk society is enriched with various kinds of *Lokasahitya*. The folk songs or *Lokageet* are part of that. Songs always attract common masses because of their musicality and lyrical clarity. Hence, we have seen time and again that songs are used by leaders to spread any kind of people's movements be it religious and philosophical movements or the movement of Independence. The highly spiritual songs which are called **Bargeet** played a significant role in spreading the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. These songs were the creations of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev who were the cultural, religious and philosophical Gurus (teachers) of the highest order for modern Assam. There was an interesting tale of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic preacher Azan Fakir who was immensely influenced by **Bargeet** as well as Indian philosophy and composed the songs called *Jikir* to reflect on those influences. This research paper attempts to make a preliminary discussion on how different aspects of Indian philosophy are expressed in **Bargeet** as well as *Kamrupiya Lokageet*, *Gowalpariya Lokageet* and the *Jikir* songs of Assam, as there has been not much discussion on the matter to date.

A thematic analysis of the narrative research method is used while exploring the songs and deducing the views and explanations expressed in this research paper.

### 2. PHILOSOPHICAL ESSENCE IN BARGEET

The contributions of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev towards Assamese society and culture were colossal and unique. Being a religious preacher, saint-scholar, social and religious reformer, a great singer & musician, dancer, actor-performer, poet, dramatist, translator and painter simultaneously, to date he was the greatest Assamese polymath in the truest sense of the word. To put it simply he was the architect who shaped up almost all the elements of Assamese literature and culture and he is aptly called the maker of Assamese identity, literature and culture. He had established the neo-Vaishnavite or *Ekasarana dharma* in Assam by imbibing great cultural values in it and by doing so he had united and organized the Assamese society and social lives. Most of the Indian religious scriptures including Vedas and Upanishads were available only in Sanskrit at that time and hence the common people were not able to read and understand those great books due to the language barrier.

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Therefore, Sankardev translated many Sanskrit scriptures as well as wrote original books by extracting the summary and values from those religious and philosophical books so that the common mass could understand the essence of those philosophies.

His main purpose in preaching religious philosophy was to provide common people with knowledge and inner happiness. With that idea in mind Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and his greatest disciple, Mahapurush Madhavdev composed many verses, which are called *Ghosa* or *Pada* in Assamese and many plays or *Natak* too. But they wrote those verses and plays not in the exact local language of Assam but in an artificial dialect named *Brajavali* (Brôzawôli) which was mostly created by Sankardev himself by using a mixture of Maithili and Assamese.<sup>1</sup> Because the name suggests that the language is from Brajdhama which is Krishna's land and hence it was more appealing for people to take it as their *Bhakti's (Naam)* medium towards the one and only God, Krishna.

“There is only one God, and that one only needs to be worshipped and none else (*Eka Dewa, Eka Sewa, Eka Bine Naai Keo*)” – this was the main motto or essence of the *Ekasarana Naam dharma* of Sankardev. To preach *Ekasarana Naam dharma* in Assam Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev composed some very highly spiritual songs apart from many verses and plays. In each of those songs, one particular Raga (*Ragam*) was inserted but not necessarily any particular *Taal* (musical meter). These songs are called ***Bargeet*** which literally means the “Songs of Highest Order”. But this name for the songs was not coined by the two Mahapurush. They were simply called *Geet* initially. It was their disciples later who termed those songs as ***Bargeet***, in a way to convey respect to these songs as of greatest values.

From the review of the subject matters, we can see that in ***Bargeet***, Indian concepts of spirituality, the essence of Vedanta, and supreme emotional devotional attachment (*Bhakti*) are reflected. Shri Krishna's childhood activities (*Baal Leela*) like his mischievousness, playfulness, cleverness etc. and the gopis' love and *bhakti* towards Gopal Krishna (the cowherd Krishna), the friendship, love and *bhakti* of Uddhava towards Krishna, the emptiness of Vrindavan and the sorrows of people there, after Krishna left them are also depicted with great measures in ***Bargeet***.

Though the subject matters of ***Bargeet*** were derived from various Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata, they don't contain the *rasas* like *Kāruṇyam*, *Bībhatsam* and *Raudram*. There are minimal reflections of *Veeram*, *Bhayānakam* and *Bībhatsam rasas* also in them. The *Adbhutam rasa* is present in the descriptions of the amazing beauty of Krishna and a glimpse of *Sringarah rasa* can be found in the descriptions of the love of the gopis' towards Krishna. It should be noteworthy that there is no special status given to Radha in Assam's Vaishnava faith, she is just like any other cowherd woman of *Brajdhama (Brijbhoomi)*. But even the love and desires of gopis towards Krishna are also depicted mostly as *Bhakti* in these great literary works. Hence instead of full *Sringarah rasa*, there is just a glimpse of *Sringarah rasa* present in ***Bargeet***. In short in ***Bargeet*** most of the *Rasas* were diverted towards *Bhakti rasa*<sup>2</sup> (which is the essence of *Śāntam rasa*). As per the Indian philosophy the common people are attached to various kinds of *Maya* (illusions) which are earthly and materialistic attachments like attraction between male and female, parents' love towards children, attachment towards money and property etc; but the ***Bargeet*** by its *Bhakti rasa*, which is the essence of *Śāntam*, remind people to try to be free of these *Maya* and be attached only to the one and only *Paramatman* or *Bhagavan*.

## 2.1 *Iswar* is Everywhere and Omnipresent

Mankind can devote themselves to *Bhakti* and *Mukti* only through the grace of almighty *Bhagawanta (Iswar)*. But people indulging in materialistic pleasures can't understand that and they get involved in violence of various kinds. All things that are present in this world like all living beings, all the creatures including the minute ants, all the rivers and mountains, and the water streams are all manifestations of that one and only *Bhagawanta (Iswar)*. But human beings kill others and also each other for their selfish gains to fulfill their basic desires. As like space is spread everywhere and is

<sup>1</sup> P 257 Neog, Maheshwar. “Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam” Motilal Banarasisdass, Delhi

<sup>2</sup> P 10 Mahanta Bapchandra (ed.) “Bargeet”, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Students Stores, Guwahati

present everywhere, same way *Bhagawanta (Iswar)* is also present in every physical entity in the form of Atman (soul). So, if we do violence (*Himsha*) against any living being then it's like doing violence towards *Iswar*. This is the essence of Indian *Vaishnava* or *Vaishnavite* philosophy and it's well depicted in the *Bargeet* by the great Assamese Gurus. Sankardev thus wrote as follows:

*Narayan kahe bhakati karon tera.  
Meri pamaru mana Madhava ghana ghana  
Ghatuka paap nachoda*<sup>3</sup>

It means that - "Oh Narayan, how should I devote to you/ My sinful mind is calling Madhava, again and again, / But still, I can't get rid of devastating sins." (*Madhava* is a reference to Lord here)

And hence at last the poet has prayed for *Iswar's* blessings so that Ram's *naam* or prayer never leaves him because it's the *Bhagawanta's (Iswar)* prayer or *naam* alone that can make the human being free from sins and crimes.

## 2.2 Human beings are Incarcerated or Enslaved in the Maya (illusion) of Six Vices or Enemies (*Shada-ripu*)

In the *Bargeet* titled '*Gopale ki gati koile*' (What has *Gopala* done), the bard has compared this material world (*sansara*) to that of a dense forest full of illusions i.e., *Maya* and further said that he is like a wild deer trapped in that jungle of illusions. And as the trapped deer goes into the cruel hands of the hunter (*vyadh*), the same way the *Kaal* (time demon) in the form of a *Vyadh* is always chasing all of us, human beings. On the other hand, the vices called *Kama* (Lust or desire) and *Krodha* (Anger) in the form of two dangerous dogs and the vices called *Lobha* (Greed) and *Moha* (Delusion) in the form of two ferocious tigers are making us feel the mayhem of *Naraka* (Hell) in this living world itself. Day by day these traps are growing stronger and stronger. With that our thinking capabilities and conscientiousness are diminishing. And hence to get rid of these vices or enemies the poet Sankardev is submitting himself to *Bhagawanta (Iswar)* and prays like follows:

*Palaita nedekho sandhi, dine dine drirha bandi  
Bhoila manda manar yuguti.  
Tuwa Hari lagon gor, mor maya pasha chour  
Sankara karaya kakuti.*<sup>4</sup>

It means that - "I don't see any escape route, but getting garishly trapped day by day/ And my mind's power is diminishing/ I submit myself to your feet O Hari, please make me free from this manacle of delusions"

Thus, the concept of six vices or enemies (*Shada-ripu*) of Indian philosophy is well described in the *Bargeet*.

## 2.3 Always Remembering Rama-Naam (Prayer of Rama)

In the *Bargeet* titled '*Man meri Rama charanahi lagu*' (I devote my mind to the feet of Rama), the poet is saying to fully devote and dedicate one's mind to Rama (In Sankardev's philosophical interpretation Rama and Krishna are the same). The poet further says that day by day we are losing our lifetime and the *Kaal* (personification of time demon in Indian religious philosophy) in the form of a giant python-like serpent is gulping us. This materialistic world is just a trading place for consuming desires. But still, due to eternal ignorance, the mind is thinking that these earthly desires and accomplishments are the highest form of happiness. Hence the poet reiterates that:

*Mana janiya Sankare kohe  
Dekha ram bina gati nohe.*<sup>5</sup>

It means - "Sankar says that o mind; know it for sure/ there is no way other than Rama".

<sup>3</sup> P 67 Mahanta Bapchandra (ed.) "Bargeet", 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Students Stores, Guwahati

<sup>4</sup> P 74, ibid

<sup>5</sup> P 82, ibid

In Sankardev's philosophical interpretation Rama and Krishna are one and the same. And hence according to him the devotion to that single *Iswar*, Krishna or Rama is enough for *mukti* or *moksh* (salvation) of the human soul.

## 2.4 Earnest Invocation to *Iswar* to Show the Right Path towards the Ultimate Truth

In some *Bargeet*, it is said that all the material things like money, properties and even one's life and youth and family members are all short-lived or unstable or temporary things.

*Athira dhana-jana jiwana-youwana*  
*Athira ehū sanshara.*  
*Putra pariwara sabahi asara*  
*Karabo kaheri sara.*<sup>6</sup>

This means – “Money and property are all momentary, even momentary are life and youth/ Temporary is this world/ Children and spouse are all momentary too/ How can someone take them as ultimate truth or essence?”

As Sankardev's philosophy goes, it's said that even the soul or atman inside one's body is unstable; it is like a drop of water atop a lotus leaf. At what moment the drop of water may fall down from the lotus leaf is very uncertain, and not known. Same way at what time someone's soul or *Chitta* leaves the body no one can know for sure. Still, people don't get anxious thinking of that and live and consume material pleasures thinking of those as eternal. Hence Sankardev prayed to *Iswar* to give him the right knowledge and wisdom and take him towards the ultimate truth or *Paramtattwa*.

Hence, we found from the above discussions that the essence of that part of Indian philosophy where we find the concept of *Nirguna Parambrahmma* is very much available in the *Bargeet*.

## 3. PHILOSOPHICAL ESSENCE IN ASSAMESE LOKAGEET

Every human being possesses some philosophical culture or dimensions in their minds though its extent varies from person to person. Already it's discussed above that *Bargeet* are full of philosophical contents. There was a wave of permanent *Bhakti rasa* in Assamese society flown by and through Sankadeva's neo-Vaishnava or neo-Vaishnavite movement. For almost every Assamese person, there are cultural and philosophical influences from Shankar-Madhav and aptly both of them are considered the cultural and philosophical Gurus of Assam by all communities irrespective of even personal religious beliefs. Hence at the time of Sankardev and after his departure also a lot of influences of his neo-Vaishnava *Ekasarana* philosophy can be seen in the *Lokageet* or folksongs of Assam. In many kinds of folksongs or folk-based songs, like the *Kamrupiya Lokageet*, *Gowalpariya Lokageet*, *Jikir*, *Deh-bicharar geet* (highly spiritual folksongs), one can observe Sankadeva's neo-Vaishnava influence and philosophical undertone.

The folksongs, which are sung in the *Kamrupiya* language variant of the Assamese language, are called *Kamrupiya Lokageet* and the ones sung in the *Gowalpariya* language variant of the Assamese language are called *Gowalpariya Lokageet*. These songs have no known authors as such and they are part of the oral song traditions of Assam. The subject matters of *Kamrupiya Lokageet* are derived from various Purana and Ramayana, Mahabharata and other theological and philosophical scriptures and also from the day-to-day social lives of Assam dwellers. These songs hence carry all kinds of common emotions of masses like their happiness, sorrows, love-life etc. and as well the spiritual *Bhakti rasa's* greatness. The *Gowalpariya Lokageet* mainly focus on the life struggle of common people, the way of life, the happiness and sorrows of folks etc. There are a few of them though where spiritual sentiments are included.

On the other hand, Assamese *Jikir* are composed by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Islamic Sufi preacher Azan Fakir (he came to Assam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE from Baghdad) which are Islamic prayer songs but

<sup>6</sup> P 75, ibid

they were very much influenced by the conceptual philosophies of *Bargeet*. Though Azan Fakir whose real name was Shah Milan used the Quranic concept of Allah as the supreme lord in his songs still one can make out the influence of Shankar-Madhav's philosophy in these songs. A point to be noted is the way Assamese *Jikir* are sung, there is no other example of such Islamic prayers in any other part of the world, let alone the Arab world where Islam originated. So it can be stated with care that Azan Fakir was deeply influenced by the oriental philosophies of India and that too of Sankardev and he fully transformed himself into a local Assam dweller and spread Islam through a benevolent means in Assam. The undertone of the *Jikir* was also the belief in one and only God and the unstableness of materialistic things including one's body. Azan Fakir also used Sankardev's concepts of *Kirtan* (*Naam* or prayer songs), *Srawan* (Listening to prayer songs) and *Shmaran* (remembering the supreme *Iswar* always through those prayers) to make people follow their religions.

We can find the concepts of transitory or unstableness of life and the materialistic world, the Eternity of soul or *Chitta* or Atman, and the sense of renunciation in *Kamrupiya Lokageet*, *Gowalpariya Lokageet*, *Jikir* and *Deha-bicharar geet*. The forms and expressions may differ in each kind of folksong or folk-based song but the summary unites them and they all reflect the highly spiritual values of Indian religious and social philosophies.

### 3.1 Devote Yourself to the Prayer of *Iswar* by Renouncing This Unstable World (*Shanshar*)

Men come to this earthly world for a few days by taking human shapes. From the day of birth, a human gets tangled in various relationships like father-mother, brother-sister, spouse-children etc. All of these are a web of delusions and illusions. After death, the body gets decomposed in the graveyard or the pyre when cremated.

Hence in the *Kamrupiya Lokageet*, the unknown folk poet is singing advising to detach oneself from all kinds of illusions and devote only to the *Harinaam* (prayer of Hari means *Iswar*) by meditating on one's ultimate soul.

*Micha maya jale bandi hoili toi  
Shanshar pakate pari  
Sabako tejiya chittako bhabiya  
Mukhe bola hari hari.*<sup>7</sup>

It means – “You got tangled in a fake web of illusions (*maya*)/ In the course of your living (*shanshar*)/ Renounce everything and only meditate to the soul/ And take Hari's naam in your speech.”

In the same tone in *Gowalpariya Lokageet*, the bard has compared the body to an earthen pot and the *sansar* to a trap. Hence one needs not to have any pride in this unstable body. The song goes like this:

*Manav deha matire bhanda  
Bhangile hoibe khander khanda  
Bhangile deha jora nibena*<sup>8</sup>

It means – “The human body is a clay-pot/ It breaks into pieces when broken/ and can never unite again once broken.”

After one's death money, property, conflicts and all such things become meaningless and no one, not even the beloved one can give company in death. As like in *Bargeet*, even in *Gowalpariya Lokageet* life is compared to the drop of water on a Taro (अरबी) leaf which may anytime fall down. After the paddy crop is reaped only the stubble is left in the field. The stubble is like a waste. Similarly, after the live soul left the body, the body becomes waste, it becomes a corpse. After the soul or life left the

<sup>7</sup> P 289, Pathak Tarani, Kamrupi Lokageet 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Chandra Prakash, Guwahati

<sup>8</sup> P 137, Goswami Loknath, Asamiya Lokageet Sambhar, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati

body the relatives and family members cry but the dead body is destroyed though they loved that body when it was alive.

Hence the folk bard is singing as follows:

*Tui jivan chadiya gaila re  
Jiwan kandiba bap-bhai.  
Soshan ghate shonar deha  
Puriya karibe chai jivan re.*<sup>9</sup>

Hence at the time of death, only Govinda or *Iswar*'s name is one's partner.

This type of analysis can be seen in *Deha-bicharar geet* (a kind of highly spiritual folksong not attributed to any particular author) also. In these songs also life is compared to a drop of water on a Taro (अरबी) leaf (*Kachupaat*) which may anytime fall down and families bonding as well as materialistic properties are also described as transitory or meaningless.

*Dhan dhan buli dhanake xachilo bahudin khaba pam buli  
Dhan rabo pari deha jabo chali jen kachupatar pani.  
Dhan dhan buli moi dhan xachilo dhanei nachaibo firi  
Putra putra buli khalo habathuri xio xonge najai chali*<sup>10</sup>.

It means – “I have collected lots of wealth thinking I'll live for long/ Wealth will stay idle, the body will get destroyed as if the life is like a drop of water on a Taro leaf/ I have saved lots of wealth but wealth is not seeing me while dying/ I have harped for children so much but he is also not accompanying me at the time of death.

We can see such kind of expressions in *Jikir* also. An example is as follows:

*Dhane dhane kari banda o dhanake ghatili  
Parame yatane kari  
Dhane thakil pari deha gole chali  
Lagat gol chapara doli*<sup>11</sup>

It means – “You have collected lots of wealth with a lot of care, O man/ But wealth stayed idle and the body went to the graveyard with only the soil accompanying”

### 3.2 Para-Brahman in One's inside

Human beings search for *Iswar* in various holy places but actually, *Iswar* is present in our own, as soul or atman; still, they don't understand that. Only self-meditation and self-awareness can take men on the path of *Iswar* or the Almighty. This philosophy is beautifully depicted in *Kamrupiya Lokageet* by the unknown bard.

*“Ganga, Yamuna shnanilo yatane  
Gaya Kashi tirhtha koilu  
Hiyar Iswar hiyate achile  
Korobat bichari moilu.”*<sup>12</sup>

It means – “I took bath with care in Ganga, Yamuna/ I visited the holy shrines of Kashi and Gaya/ But the inner *Iswar* was inside me/ and I was searching elsewhere!”

Actually, *Atman* and *Paramatman* are connected to each other; but people forget that as they are trapped in materialistic things and activities. These kinds of highly spiritual philosophies are also present in these folk songs.

*Jiwa atma param atma ami duyoy bhai.  
Akarane bandi holo china chini nai.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> P 139, Goswami Loknath, Asamiya Lokageet Sambhar, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati

<sup>10</sup> P 179, Goswami Loknath, Asamiya Lokageet Sambhar, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati

<sup>11</sup> P 161 IBID

<sup>12</sup> P 314, Pathak Tarani, Kamrupi Lokageet 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Chandra Prakash, Guwahati

It means – “The *Atman* or soul and the *Paramatman* or supreme soul are like brothers/ But I’m tangled in nonsense and hence couldn’t see this connection.”

The same kinds of philosophies are expressed in *Jikir* also.

### 3.3 Earnest Invocation to *Iswar*

The almighty, kind *Iswar* is truly amazing and great. Hence the folk poet has prayed to *Iswar* to give him shelter in *Iswar*’s feet and save him from all the earthly traps and tangles by forgiving him for his sins. It says like this:

*Guru moke daya nachariba  
Prabhu moke charane rakhiba  
Moi bor Pataki papi guru charane rakhiba.*<sup>14</sup>

### 3.4 The Message of Unity

The main motto of Indian philosophy is *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Karuna* (compassion). And where there are non-violence and compassion, there are also unity and brotherhood. And hence this philosophy is profoundly present in Assam’s *Lokageet* and spiritual songs.

The *fakir* who came from distant Baghdad was so impressed with this kind of philosophy in India that he wrote in *Jikir* like below.

*Mor manat bhed bhab nai o Allah  
Mor manat bhed bhab nai o Allah  
Hindu ki muchalman eke Allar forman  
Mor manat eketi bhab.*<sup>15</sup>

This means – “I’ve no separate feelings, O Almighty/ I’ve no separate feelings, O Almighty/ Be it Hindu or be it Muslim, all are Almighty’s children/ I have the feeling of unity”. This type of description of unity is hard to find in any other country of the world where Islam is preached. It’s the Indian philosophy which amazed Shah Milan and he became an Assamese by choice by adopting the Assamese language and culture by heart somewhere around 500 years ago. Everybody is made up of five elements (*Panchabhut* or *Panchatatwa*) and the body gets decomposed to these elements after death. Only the soul or atman is eternal and we all are the same. This is the true essence of Indian philosophy or *Bharatiya Darsan* and this is well reflected in the songs of Assam be it spiritually highly valued songs like *Bargeet* or the folksongs or the songs like *Jikir*.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Music (*Sangeet*), *Raga*, *Taal* and Tune (*Sur*) help the audience to understand and internalize the essence of songs. Hence the great spiritual leaders of Assam used music and poetry as tools to spread the Indian philosophies among the common masses considering these philosophies are very high in spiritual values. The author of this paper has tried to give just a glimpse of that by giving examples of a few songs from Assam. There is scope for further exploration of this subject in the coming future.

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<sup>13</sup> P 177, Goswami Loknath, *Asamiya Lokageet Sambhar*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati

<sup>14</sup> P 298, Pathak Tarani, *Kamrupi Lokageet* 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Chandra Prakash, Guwahati

<sup>15</sup> P 160, Goswami Loknath, *Asamiya Lokageet Sambhar*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati