

## Historical Perspective in the Assamese Oral Literature

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Assamese oral literature has enough potentiality to be used as an authentic additional source of information to know the past history of Assam. In fact from the very beginning of the writing of history dating back to the Greek tradition of Herodotus and they did folk literature and folk memories was used as a source of information.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years a new trend in the writing of history is also emerging in the shape of the subaltern group which has already contributed a lot by interpreting history from a different perspective. With the focus of attention on the "inferior rank" of the Indian society this group of historians attempted to "reject the academic elitism" for the "acknowledgement of the subaltern as the maker of his own history and the architect of his own destiny".<sup>2</sup> Oral traditions can help immensely to write history of the common people who are considered as the people of the inferior rank. In such cases where there is no written tradition or the sources of official documents and references are scanty, the folkloristic approach is a most effective device to be pursued. Historians of the African region depend on the oral tradition to write their past history. Criticizing the idea of one eminent British historian Professor Trevor Roper who describes Africa as sleeping for several centuries "forgotten of the world and by the world forgotten"<sup>3</sup> as dangerous, the eminent oral historian Kwame. Y. Daaku wrote interesting history on the people of Africa on the basis of the oral tradition and proved it to the scholars that every people has their own history irrespective of the primitiveness of livelihood. Considering the non-availability of official documents for reconstruction of history of the tribals and the ethnic groups D.D. Kosambi observe that "The tribal groups of Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and majority of them of Tibeto-Burma origin – driven into the dense tropical forest of the central and north eastern India by historical compulsion, have not been the subject of written histories of India".<sup>4</sup> But the renowned folklorist P. J. Handoo is very much optimistic to bring this tribals and ethnic groups to the purview of historical analysis. In his opinion the reconstruction history of such groups of people is possible "with the help of oral tradition".<sup>5</sup>

Assamese oral tradition are laden with the vast store of information about the historical past of Assam. How accurate, interesting and exhaustive are the descriptions of the political events and other historical facts; can be assumed from the analysis of a few Assamese folk songs which are popularly termed in Assamese as "Git". These forms of Assamese gits can invariably termed as "Ballads". A modest attempt is made to evaluate the historical importance of the following ballads. These are : 1) Borphukanar Git, 2) Jaymati Kunwarir Git 3) Chikan Gosair Git 4) Gauri Nath Singhar Git 5) Maniram Dewanar Git 6) Gits of the peasant movement and 7) Gandhi Git as all these ballads depicts different historical events under different political context; an item wise analysis of the ballads are furnished as follows :-

**Badan Borphukanar Git** : S. K. Bhuyan collected and edited this ballad. This ballad describes the historical events and the conflict between Purnanda Buragohain and Badan Chandra Borphukan. This personal struggle for power resulted in the invasion of the Burmese at the instance of Badan Borphukan. It is indeed astonishing to note that the village folk singer surpasses the professional historian of the complicated political events with the words and style used by the folk in their day to day life of interaction. This ballad draw the attention of famous historian Edward Gait who observed that "this ballad presents a popular version of historical events, and its narration follows closely actual events. Borphukanar Git is remarkable for its dramatic interest; descriptive quality, vivid characterization and racy humour"<sup>6</sup>. However the folk singer seems to be over sympathetic and partial in his description of the difficulties faced by the family of Borphukan as it sung as :

*"Kau cries the crow*

*Failing to see him the wife started weeping,*

*I no longer put on my bungles.*

*From today are empty my bed and pillow*

*Whose debt have I incurred*

*I shall put of my gold neck less*

*How far you went away.*

*I rub off my vermillion spot*

*I made them catch some fish*

*Without you I am a widow now"<sup>7</sup>*

**Jaymati Kunwarir Git** : Jaymati Kunwari a classic example of dedication to the cause of the nation. Her character is still revered and imitated by the average Assamese women. *Joymoti Kunwarir git* is very vivid description of her supreme sacrifice for the cause of the nation and for her husband. She embraced the death of a heroine at the hands of the chaudang as a result of the torture meted out to her to get the information from her about of her husband Gadadhar Singha. In the words of the folk poet this chapter of history is written with golden letters.

*“With gold and silver,  
In the name of Joymati  
Buranji written with golden letters”<sup>8</sup>*

Lamenting the inhuman attitude of lara Raja, alias Sulikpha (1679 to 1681), who ordered to torture Joymoti; in a Bihu git it sings.

*“what you are oh lara Raja ?  
Have no heart.  
Inflict Punishment on the living body.  
Tied in the Kotkara three  
Let her to whip  
Keeping defame to the time”<sup>9</sup>*

**Chikan Gosair Git** : The special significance in *the Chikan Gosair Git* can be discerned from the fact it gives a clear picture about the diplomatic move of Swargadev Rajeswar singha who made “*Silikha tolia Mahanta* or Dihing alias the Chikan Gosain the interior of the palace and conferred him the ligira title with the direction to come to the palace”.<sup>10</sup> This move was taken to counter balance the growing power of Astabhuj, the Mahanta of the Mayamara sect.

*“So many Mahantas of Rupees twenty,  
It not considered safe-full by the king.  
The most luxurious is our chikan Gosain  
Is welcomed by offering elephant”*

**Gaurinath Singhar Git** : Adverse comment on the personality of Swargadev Gaurinath Singha are there in almost all the books of Assam history. Commenting on his character Gait observes that “he never moved out without a body of executioners ready to carry out his sanguinary orders”<sup>11</sup> G. Barua gives another example of his cruel nature, a woman

who was spinning cotton, oiled the wheel to silence the sound when the saw that the king went through the way nearby her. Anticipating that the women might remove his voice ordered to kill her".<sup>12</sup>

The Gaurinath Singhar Git, i.e. The creation of the folk poet is an elaboration of this aspect of the personality of Gaourinath Singha as it describes.

*"Without asking or inquiry the  
Swargadev god  
Beheaded one everyday  
Or  
Most of all the swargadev god degraded  
Bringing the daughter of shondhar Hari"*<sup>13</sup>

That he had the distorted taste in things can be assumed from the following stanza

"Pieces of brinjals have the pieces of knob, leaving aside milk, curd, swargudev eat, the rotten of the puthi fish".<sup>14</sup>

**Maniram Dewanar Git :** Maniram Dewan was the martyr of the first war of independence of India of 1857. Undoubtedly, his execution cast a shadow of gloom in the political horizon of Assam. The common Assamese folk mourned his death in a heart rendering tune in words such as these:

*"In the early night cried the dove (ghuguri kapau)  
In the late night cried the owl,  
Maniram Dewan was hanged at Jorhat cool become the Rangpur  
District".*

In spite of the widespread mourning of the execution of Maniram it is relevant to mention that the early political career and his role towards the people as *Tahshildar* and *Sheristadar* at Jorhat was not at all conducive and popular to the masses. Elaborating the early political career of Maniram Dewan H.K.Barpujari observes "By dint of his merit and unshaken fidelity. Maniram rose to the zenith of power and influence. He showed little sympathy with the anti - British movement of the period".<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps people disliked his earlier political career, therefore with the mourning of his execution an echo of an objective analysis of the conviction is also found to be heard in the tune of the folk songs such as :-

*“Better you killed Maniram,  
But why you killed Pealy”?*

**Ballads on the Peasant uprising :** Some popular folk songs on the peasant struggle known in the popular terms such as “*Phulaguri Dhawa*” and “*Patharughatar Ran*” are very exhaustive, systematic in approach. The “*Phulaguri Dhawa*” was an event of the year 1861. The English equivalent of the term Dhawa is “battle”. But it is important to note here that there was no such event as Dhawa or battle there in Phulaguri between the peasants and the British administration. There was only a protest of the peasants against the imposition of several taxes on them. Another peasant’s protest occurred in Patharughat in the year 1894. This peasant’s protest of Patharughat against the increment of the land revenue and its subsequent result is very aptly described in the “Dalipuran”. Two fragments of the Dalipuran described the increment of the land revenue as such :-

*Have you heard oh girl,  
That revenue is increased.  
If cannot be paid,  
Will be arrested by sending piyada (Messenger)*

Cruel countermeasures of the Britishers to suppress this protest found its expression in the Dalipuran as such :-

*“How many injured and how many killed,  
Who laughs or who weeps there is no count”.*

**Gandhi Git :** We all are familiar with the evaluation of Mahatma Gandhi as a leader of national emancipation. But it is very interesting to know Gandhi in the perception of the peasants. D.G. Tendulkar writes on the Mahatma’s tour of “Mass conversion to the new creed” in 1921 as follows – Remarkable scenes were witnessed in a Bihar village when Gandhi and his party were stranded in the train, an old woman came seeking out Gandhi-

“Sire, I am now one hundred and four, she said and my eye sight has grown dim. I have visited the various holy places. In my own home I have dedicated two temples just as we had Ram and Krishna as avatars, so also Mahatma Gandhi has appeared as avatar, I hear until I have seen him death will not appear”.<sup>16</sup>

As the common people considered Gandhi as avatar or incarnation of God they were afraid to oppose him or his creed. In the same way in the Assamese folk song on Gandhi such a tendency to imply the image of the incarnation of Lord Krishna is given as such :-

*See, Mahatma Gandhi on the top of the Kadam tree,  
Behind the Gopis are dancing playfully.*

Emphasizing on the principle of non-violence as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi, the Assamese folk poet sings :-

*To get Swaraj – with heart and soul,  
Give up contempt and violence.*

Conception of the swadeshi movement of Mahatma Gandhi to the common people also finds its expression amongst the folk as such :-

*Pat and Muga as such foreign cloths,  
Do not keep them in your boxes –  
Hand them over to Phukan and to Nabin,  
They are burning them in their yards.*

As in case of the other parts of India where there were no end of the peoples enthusiasm to see this pious soul bearing all sorts of trouble; so also the Assamese folk had no end of their enquiry to know the arrival time of Gandhi to their place so that they can feast their eyes with his darshan :-

*This fellow says, that fellow says,  
Let's have a look at Gandhi  
Friend let us have a look at Gandhi  
If I stand on the railway embankment  
I can have a glimpse of Gandhi  
Let our eye full of Gandhi.<sup>17</sup>*

Thus it can assumed that diverse oral tradition makes the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people meaningful and attractive which also keeps alive our historical past and heritage. Objective analysis of these folk traditions may be precious assets for the historians. Delving the past historical perspective through the feelings and the way of the expression of the people may add additional taste to the study of history amongst the new generation. It may also create interest among the young mind in the study of history if some ballads such as Badan Barphukanar Giṭ, Dali Puran etc. are introduced in the High School level.

### Notes and Reference

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