'Ulaai Ada Aideu' to 'Aaja Baby Aaja': Wedding Songs in Assam

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A decade ago, hearing the tunes of Indian rapper-singers Badshah or Honey Singh in weddings in Assam was not that common even though their music was ubiquitous and familiar across the country. In many parts of Northeast India, songs from Bollywood/Bhojpuri/Bangla films did the trick well upto the 2000s. They still continue to be in vogue but not all weddings have extravagant dances or discos. Hearing loud bass or electro funk music or even rap music is rare and odd.

During my childhood, there was no separate day allocated for what is called a 'sangeet' in a wedding. This pre-wedding ceremony, largely borrowed from the northern belt of India (Punjab and Uttar Pradesh) consists of the womenfolk of the household gathering around the bride and singing songs and dancing. In earlier days, this used to be a continuation of the engagement ceremony where some traditional wedding songs were sung by elderly women. It was supposed to add fun and reminiscences to the meeting of the newly to-be-weds, discussing their stories, and so on.

But as the trickling effect of pop music and YouTube-based funk rap started, they gave the former music deck guys a run for their money. They altered the changing landscape of weddings in Assam where some older melodies are struggling to survive, be significant, and even circulate. These songs, locally

called *biya naam* (in Assamese) or wedding songs, formed an integral part of weddings, both human and those for animals. I refer to animals here because frog weddings have a separate category of songs attributed to them! It is still a living practice in some remote villages where a male and female frog are dressed for the occasion. Neighbours participate in the *pani tula* rite for them. They sing, *O megh devota, bhekulir biya, jhor jhor koi boruxun diya* (O rain god, it's the frogs' wedding, do pour the rain).

Oral and Written Lyrics

Biya naam with its folk origins can be defined as lyric poetry with the melody originating anonymously. But it is incorrect to say that 'folk' means uncouth as these lyrics had to be edited and made suitable for singing at social functions like weddings. I am reminded of Elwin (1946, p.1) who stated, 'A great many of these songs are the possession of the people as a whole; nobody knows when they are composed. But at the same time gifted individuals do arise in the peasant communities. It isn't easy to clearly categorise *biya naam* because it encompasses the middle road between scriptural knowledge, folk beliefs, mnemonics, domestic wisdom, sexuality, motherhood, and wedding rituals as practised by different communities.

There is a pre-dominance of Indo-Aryan myths and beliefs in most of the *biya naam* that were written down, but in oral form these songs are in danger of being lost. In the regions of Eastern Assam, they are called *jora naam* and on the Western side, they are known as *khisa geet*. They embody *sringar rasa, karun rasa,* and *hasya rasa*. Like other regions in India, for example, Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh, these songs also carry lessons in domesticity and what Narayan (1993) calls, 'principles of patrilineality, hypergamy, and village exogamy.' (476-509)

Hiranmayee Das Gogoi in *The Musicological Literature of Assam*[1] categorises three kinds of *biya naam* in Assam. She writes, 'One is for the universal ceremony, marriage. Here, all the *aayati* (singers) flourishes every step of the ceremony and give advices, make fun, pour the emotions and make the ceremony culturally rich. Other two kinds of *biya naam* are singing on the occasion of the first maturation period of a girl child and the other one is in the marriage ceremony of a frog. A frog marriage ceremony is celebrated when there is drought in an

[1] http://repository.kln.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/123456789/11481/61-66.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. Accessed on 20 November, 2020

area. As mentioned earlier, this wedding isn't simply a ritual of laughter or what is commonly known as *dhemali geet*. It is more about man-animal ties that have broken down and in a sense, have been severed. However, these frog melodies are nowhere to be found among the neo-generation globalised music numbers.

As Assam is primarily an agrarian state, during *sot-bohag* (Spring time), two frogs from a pond are made to tie the knot to invoke the rain god to drench the barren fields. Without the rains, the crops will fail. The song goes:[2]

Suwa pani kahuli bhekuli
Suwa biyakhon patise
Suwa raaize beri beri sai hey Ram, Ram
Suwa chondra ahise, xurjya ahise
Suwa ahise sorogor tora.
Suwa bayu devotaak, suwa meghe nomuwaley
Suwa xaat din boruxun di Ram, Ram.

(Look O' these frogs from the water
are getting married
Look the people here are hooked, Ram, Ram
The sun and the moon
And even the stars from the skies have arrived
the wind God
and the clouds have descended too
It has been raining for seven days now, Ram, Ram).

—The Ramchandra Refrain

One might be intrigued to know the transitions and repetitions of musical tonality while *biya naam* is sung. For instance, *Hori he* and *Ram, Ram* are used as prefixes and suffixes in most of these songs. The groom is compared to Lord Krishna and Lord Rama alternately in these songs and the bride to Rukmini and Sita among other heroines from folk legends like Behula.[3] The folk diffusion here is interesting—the gods are tameable and even taunted like one would taunt humans in such social gatherings.

Taunting is a form of address in these functions that is meant to tease within the socially constructed rules of politeness (s*obhyota*). Politeness is largely

[2] Lyrics taken from www.xahitya.org, 'Xahityar Xorapat: Bobita Sarma.'
[3] 'Behula Lakhindar: The Most Popular Snake Folktale', available at: https://ichcourier.unesco-ichcap.org/article/behula-lakhinder-the-most-popular-snake-folktale/

related to one's social, economic, and cultural standing and it is mostly the bourgeois mannerisms that are kept in mind even as the boundaries of politeness are tampered with. As Anderson and Kilduff (2009) write, '…since teasing and taunting do not explicitly indicate competence or cooperation, high-status individuals' behaviors in these interactions can be attributed, at least partially, to a desire to conform to group expectations, rather than status motives related to appearing competent.'

One such song 'Phoolat Poril Pokhila' speaks of the bride's acceptance of vermillion from the groom's side in the *juron* ceremony (a pre-wedding ritual, in which primarily women exchange gifts, do the forehead parting, feasting, and showcasing the ornaments and clothes gifted by the groom's family). To call the bride to appear in front of the relatives in public, the *ayotis* (elderly women) sing *Ulai aha aideu* as a prefix. This is a call for the matrimonial initiation rites to begin.

Aji kio aaideu xomajote bohila
O xunor khola aaji kiya baru khirot xendur lola
Ram shrihori aaji xiror xendur
Jibonor logori
Maa ulai suwahi deuta ulai suwahi.

(The butterfly has fallen on the flowers
On this auspicious day you are amidst all of us
And you wear vermillion on your forehead
O Lord Rama, Shri Hori, now your vermillion
Is your life's companion
Come and see for yourself O mother, O father).

Teasing can also take the form of engagement of both the families. It can ease out awkwardness and create a friendly atmosphere. During the old days when marriages were arranged between families, these rituals played the role of a moderator. Within this celebratory space, jokes on the groom and bride and their families were cracked and the rigid social hierarchy was relaxed, if only temporarily. While some tease and poke at the weaknesses of the other side, there is also a hint of sexual beginnings.

Opoka bilahi Dora ghoror lora bur bor solahi
Xeibur loraai kinu dhon ghotibo
Jep luruki jail he khabo.

(O ripe tomato, the men from the groom's side are very talkative
We doubt if they can make good money
Instead they might pick pockets and go to jail).

O mone tora,
Koina ghoriya suwali bur
Ghora mukhiya
Eibur suwali kinu ghor dhoribo
Sana subaute he din bur jabo.

(O mone tora,
The women from the bride's side
Have horse-like faces
Wonder if these girls can be good housekeepers
They'll spend most of their time chewing chickpeas instead).

Bahore lekesi dora
ghoror suwali buror much bhangim thekesi.

(The women from the groom's side
have faces like premature bamboos,
we will smash those easily).

Uttar kusiya doraai bokaat nidiye bhori
Amar aideuk kenekoi furey eri
Haal babo goili dora kenekoi jabi eri

Logote loi jabi gamosa luwa kori
Moh saribo goili dora kenekoi jabi eri
Logote loi jabi loru dhora kori.

(The groom from Uttar kusiya doesn't even get down in mud
How can he leave our bride for even a moment?
How shall he go to the fields?
Probably she'll have to carry his *gamosa* by the side,
How shall he plough without our bride
Probably she'll have to accompany as the buffalo-beating stick).

Dodd (1991) writes about wedding songs as markers of normative values and ideas: 'They are also generally normative and inform members of that particular culture of what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false.' In another popular *biya naam* lyric, we have a glimpse of the social exchange that happens vis-a-vis ornaments. In her paper "Biya-Geet and its Societal Reflections: Exploring Social and Institutional Practices of Assam through its Folk Wedding Songs[4]", Daisy Barman aptly notes, 'It is compulsory for the bride's family to send enough *joutuk* (gifts) with their daughter to save themselves from societal embarrassment. The notion of *stridhan* in Hindu scriptures is usually used to explain the phenomenon of *joutuk*. However, the absolute ownership over the materials she brings from her parental home to her conjugal home is questionable.'

[4] Mehta and Senrung (2019) eds. *Exploring Philosophy, Culture and Environmental Sustainability*, Krishi Sanskriti Publication.

The bride is advised to keep her ancestral ornaments aside and adorn herself with ornaments sent by the groom. As these songs are sung, the older ornaments are removed from the bride by the elderly women during the *juron* while bells and conch shells are blown. These lyrics are mostly a mix of happiness and sorrow:

Maaror olonkar thua kati kori
Deutaror olonkar thua he
Rame di pothaise
Bisitra olonkar
Hate jure kori lua he.

(It is now time to keep your maternal ornaments aside,
Keep aside the ancestral pieces my dear,
Rama himself has sent a new set of ornaments
Bow with folded hands and accept them).

There are also allusions to the bride's impatience and craving for Lord Rama himself. She is torn apart between her love for the river, her ancestral home, and her groom-to-be. This song is sung while the bride is about to sit on the mat before the rituals are performed:

Pitar kandise O nodir kul,
Senehor aai mor Onodir kul,
Tumar obihone Onodir kul,
Jamey kene kori Onodir kul
Raamor karone Sita byakool.

(O riverbank, my father and my mother weep today
I'm lost without you, my dear
how shall I reach the river bank?
you know Sita is desperate for Rama's love).

While going with the groom to the bride's house, these melodies are also sung by women from the groom's family. During the time of welcoming the groom (*dora adora*), the following melody is sung:

Dhulot sapor morai ulaley Ramchandra
Durga aaik nomoskar kori
Aaji xubhaxyone sumatra korise
Anibo Rukminik hori.

(With the beating of the drum, Ramchandra begins his journey
He bows down before goddess Durga
For the time is lucky and auspicious today
He's gonna steal Rukmini and get her home).

Banana brides, globally say: 'Cheese!'

Apart from the coupling references from Puranic myths and legends like Ram-Sita, Usha-Anirudha, and Krishna-Rukmini, there is also the banana tree which performs an ecological role for the bride. This is especially true for (mostly caste-based) rituals during pre-nuptial ceremonies/customs in Assam. Locally known as *tuloni biya* or *puspita*, this is a debatable archaic custom with Brahmanical prejudices and treating women as commodities. The bride is considered married to a banana tree and as she is bathed, the women participating in this ritual sings:

Aideu deutaakey dora bisarile
Napale aaideu dora
Barir kole puli nuwale dhuwale
Takey pati lole dora.

(My dear, your father had searched far and wide,
He couldn't find you a match, my dear
So he washed and readied the banana tree in his courtyard
You are now married to it).

Phrases like *olop boyokhote konya hola* are also used as a refrain. The lyrics below talk of a woman's body's transition from childhood to puberty and say that with adulthood coming, it is time to control oneself and follow the rules that come with this change:

Ritumonti hola jouban kalot
Pahori peluwa saisab kalok

Sonamoi soisob kaal atori gol
Joubonar niyom bur palibor hol.

(My dear, let go of your childhood days
Now that puberty is here
Those golden days are no more
And it is time to abide by the rules of youth).

It must be kept in mind that as one moves from one geographical location to another, the content and musicality of the *biya naam* changes leading to a lot of variations. Some variations have evolved orally with changes in customary rites. Some like the wavering ululations have remained, though they have been sidelined by the loud deck system music. Choral repetitions and extempore lyrics also remain a distinctive feature of the *biya naam*.

Even folk instruments like the *dhol* (drum), *banhi* (flute), *taal* (cymbals), and *khol* (a terracotta two-sided drum) are used in inter-cultural or inter-racial marriages to showcase 'traditional' Assamese-ness. It is also often seen that due to the loudness of tech-music there is a submerging of folk sounds and people barely pay attention to the lyrics. As such, it makes little to no difference whether a 'Badshah' track is being played or *biya naam* or any other modern song. While modern day weddings have altered the bride's role and given her more space to articulate herself via dancing and expressing her desires (performatively and otherwise), little thought is given to the disappearance of *biya naam* from this scenario.

Nature imageries and agrarian metaphors have also been lost in this process of acculturation. It is rare to hear lyrics like the one given below, for example. It is sung when the bride's hair is parted with the help of oil. There is an allegory to Sita's father, King Janak, ploughing the field where mustard seeds see a rich harvest in a short period of time:

Xunar nangolkhoni rupore faal
Jaak moharajaai jurise haal
Baley moiyaley saah hol maati
Tatey mari goley xoriyoh saati
Pelaley xoriyoh hator pasi
Gojile xoriyoh prithibi dhaki
Epati xoriyoh dupaati hol
Sautey xoriyoh tulibor hol.

(The golden plough with its silver opening
Had been ploughed by none other than the Maharaja
Among the muddy fields he had sown all the mustard seeds
Very soon it is harvest time and they have covered the earth
It is time to pluck the mustard seeds).

Going Glocal: Biya naam remixes

Although reflecting on *biya naam* in the times of globalisation, commercialisation, profit making, and mass communication can lead us to believe that individual lived experiences have been removed from these songs, but the reality is much more complex. In a lot of intercultural, inter-racial, inter-religious, and intercommunity marriages, the addition of a cosmopolitan musical atmosphere sends a message of communal harmony and togetherness.

There is another argument in favour of remixed wedding songs as the reality of the times we live in where millennial weddings are no longer 'rooted' because life itself is away from these 'roots.' Lockhead (2007) notes that the abstractions of post-modern thought in the time of globalisation takes away the focus from real individual realities. She writes, 'The particularities of lived experiences are subsumed into abstractions and generalities in a conceptual move that replicates the universalizing tendencies of modern thought.'

As the interpolation and mixing of *biya naam* with modern songs and popular hit songs continues, it is noteworthy that lyrics which have a context of their own lose their story once they remain mere ululations. For example, a common and popular *biya naam*, 'Lai Hale Jale' (The Mustard Greens Sway Beautifully) becomes a prelude and is reiterated at the end in the Zubeen Garg version. The rest of the song is completely different and has nothing to do with the *biya naam* genre.

Another version by Pronami Sarmah who remixes it with Hindi songs (again randomly selected) does little to the musicality or even the context. Some conch shell and beats play along randomly. There is also Assam's first all-girl rock band *Hurricane Girls* who sing a rock version of *biya naam* using modern instruments like the guitar and drums to create something new.

In his 2013 article 'Striking the Right Notes,' journalist Sushanta Talukdar writes, 'The band members believe that Assam being a land of colourful tribes and communities is a huge repository of folk music which can be made popular across the globe through innovative style of presentation and their USP is fusion

of rock music elements in presentation of Assamese folk music.' It seems that the boundaries between 'pure' forms of music and globally infused (hence popularly considered 'impure') music are not only getting blurred but every intervention in folk music is making the *biya naam* genre more porous. This evolution tells us that neither 'aideu' nor Badshah's 'baby'—both signifying the new bride – are as black and white anymore.

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