

**TRANSMUTATIONS OF *BORGEET*: BETWEEN  
DEVOTION AND PERFORMANCE**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation titled 'Transmutations of *Borgeet*: Between Devotion and Performance' submitted by **Dipanjali Deka** at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University or Institution.



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This is to certify that the dissertation titled '**Transmutations of Borgeet: Between Devotion and Performance**' submitted by **Dipanjali Deka** at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies** is her own work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University or Institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**TRANSMUTATIONS OF *BORGEET*:  
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## Introduction

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*Things standing shall fall and the moving ever shall stay.*

~~~~~ **Basavanna**

The Indian Bhakti movement which came into being around seventh century AD in Tamil Nadu and gradually took hold in the other regions of the subcontinent, had poetry and music as the predominant modes of expression. Bhakti is not a monolithic phenomenon as it varies from one region to another according to their socio-political and cultural contexts. The musical expression also differs in different contexts, depending on its employment of local languages, metres and rhythms. Music being a powerful mode of Bhakti, different modes of relations with God can be established and different sentiments evoked through music. If Meera in Rajasthan composed poems looking at Krishna as her lover-husband, Akka Mahadevi's Kannada *vacana* reveal a similar love for Siva. Tukaram composed *abhang* in Maharashtra for Lord Vitthala and Caitanya endorsed the Radha-Krishna love in his brand of Vaisnavism in Bengal.

Despite a widespread span of the phenomenon across different regions, one cannot however rest assured that in the academic circles enough light has been thrown on all the corners. As Birendranath Datta rightly points out, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569 AD) and his brand of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam in 15<sup>th</sup> century has been conveniently left out<sup>1</sup>, either neglected totally or overshadowed by Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534 AD) of neighbouring Bengal<sup>2</sup>. Naturally the performance practices related to it also remained

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<sup>1</sup> Birendranath Datta, "Rediscovering Sankardeva : A Challenging But Rewarding Journey"(paper presented at the 'Workshop on Bhakti Traditions in India from 6<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century' organized by Sahitya Akademi in Association with Sahapedia, Guwahati, Assam, May 26, 2016).

<sup>22</sup>Most scholars have owed Assam's Vaisnavism to Caitanya Mahaprabhu's Gaudiya Vaisnavism in Bengal, while Caitanya was born 36 years later than Sankardeva, by the time of which Sankardeva had stuck deep roots in Assam. According to *Katha Guru Carita*, in 1546 during his second pilgrimage, Sankardeva and his disciples met Caitanya at Nadiya-Gopinatha(Nuddea).(*The Creative Force Behind the Sankardeva Renaissance, Bhakti and Other Aspects of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement*(Guwahati: Maheswar Nirmala Neog Publication, 2011),



visually and aurally distant to many, until recent times. For example, *Sattriya* dance has recently been in focus because of the status of the ‘8<sup>th</sup> Classical Dance’ conferred on it<sup>3</sup>. *Ankiya Nat* is still struggling to find its name amongst the dramatic practices of India, and *Borgeet*- the music genre, is hardly known to many outside its regional realm. *Borgeet*, emanating from Assamese Vaisnavite tradition pioneered by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569 AD) is a song genre created by the saint-poet-philosophers Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596 AD). Thinking through the musical expression of *Borgeet*, this dissertation attempts to understand the relationship between bhakti and music.

In *Borgeet*, *dasya bhakti* (servant-master love) and *vatsalya bhakti* (mother-child love or parental love) remain the predominant sentiments prescribed by Sankardeva. There is a conspicuous absence of *sringara bhakti* (love of the beloved), the core of Gaudiya Vaisnavism of Bengal. This dissertation will examine what socio-political conditions led to such prescriptions such as the denial of *sringara*. It also attempts to explore the two basic sentiments (*dasya* and *vatsalya*) in relation to the musicality of the form. Rhythmic and melodic texture, tonality, *alamkaras* (melodic embellishments), *laya* (tempo), *tala*-system and so on will be analysed along with lyrical aspects of compositions.

Traditionally *Borgeet* was practised in and around the *sattra* (monastery spaces) within the congregation of *bhaktas* (devotees), where the audience is Lord Krishna himself. One of the most interesting aspects of the evolution of *Borgeet* is the shift that occurred in the twentieth century in which the practice has moved out of the *sattras* into other spaces. With this shift, audiences and modes of circulation have radically transformed and the once devotional expression became a public performance. This dissertation also intends to look at how these changes are reflected in the aesthetics and performance of *Borgeet*.

## **Borgeet**

‘Bor’ means ‘noble’ or ‘senior’ and ‘Geet’ means song. *Borgeet*, translated as “noble songs”<sup>4</sup>, “great songs”<sup>5</sup>, “celestial songs” or “holy songs”<sup>6</sup>, are prayer songs addressed to Lord

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240.) But according to Lakshminath Bezbarua, he never totally let himself get influenced by the Radha-Krishna love cult of Caitanya. See : Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Sri Sri Sankardeva* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir , 2004), 111.

<sup>3</sup> In 2000, *Sattriya* has been enlisted by Sangeet Natak Akademi as the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian classical dance, amongst others, namely-Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Manipuri, Odissi and Mohiniyattam.

<sup>4</sup> Banikanta Kakati , “Preface” to *Borgeet Somikhya* by Girikanta Goswami (Nagaon: Nityanshu Prakashan, 2009).s

<sup>5</sup> Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vasinava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008).

Vishnu or Krishna, composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.<sup>7</sup> The *Katha Guru Carita*<sup>8</sup> mentions that there are 240 Borgeet said to have been composed by Sankardeva, out of which only 34 remain today<sup>9</sup>. After that, Madhavdeva is said to have composed Borgeet himself. In total that are 191 Borgeet said to be available today. Other music of the Neo-Vaishnavite Order which the *Carita Puthis* (biographies) talk of, are *Ankiya Geet* (songs of the dramas), *Kirtan-Ghosa* (narrative songs), *Nama-Ghosa* (devotional couplets), *Bhatima* (singing glories of God Visnu or Krishna, Guru or king) and so on. Their disciples later composed similar songs but they were not given the status of Borgeet, and were just called Geet instead. The Borgeet is the first song that is sung usually in the daily services in the monasteries, only after which the Ghosa or Kirtana is sung.

The history of music of a Pre-Sankardeva period gives details of *Charya Geet* or *Charya Pada*, which were composed from 8th- 12th century by Buddhist poets<sup>10</sup>. Lyrically and philosophically, they were similar to the content of Borgeet, since both tend to reflect that the mind needs to be controlled for people to free themselves from the illusions of the world. The name of the raga used to be mentioned at the top of the song of Charya Pada, and this trend is seen even in Borgeet. In Borgeet the refrain is called *dhruv* which is repeated after every *pada* (verse), which again is a pattern also seen in Charya Geet. It perhaps throws light on the continuity and influence of other music on Sankardeva. However, Charya Geet along with its devotional lyrics also have themes praising the nature, which is completely absent in Borgeet. There have been influences of local indigenous forms like Bihu, Charya Geet and others on Sankardeva's music and other arts, while Sankardeva's rhythm and melodic passages have also found their way into other forms like Bihu and devotional Lokageet, Kamarupi or Goalpariya<sup>11</sup>. But largely, while most other music were based on

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<sup>6</sup> Kaliram Medhi called them 'Great Songs' or 'Celestial Songs' and Historian Devendranath Bezbaruah mentioned them as 'Holy Songs'. See : Girikanta Goswami, *Bargit Samikshya* (Nagaon: Nityanshu Prakashan, 2009), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Many have even tried to draw a comparison between the *bada khyal* of the Hindustani Classical music and say that just as the Bada khyal has a certain seniority over the *chota khyal*, Borgeet has a seniority over other existing music of Assam, by virtue of its spiritual nature. (Keshabananda Devagoswami, *Borgeet: Parampara Aaru Poribeshon Paddhati* (Guwahati: Lawters' Book Stall, 1997), 10).

<sup>8</sup> The *Katha Guru Carita* gives biographical accounts of all the Gurus of the movement starting from Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.

<sup>9</sup> As the manuscript got lost in a fire in a devotee's place in Barpeta, during Sankardeva's lifetime itself.

<sup>10</sup> A branch of Tantric Buddhism, Sahajana Buddhism developed in Nepal, Tibet, Bengal, Kamarupa and Kalinga. The Buddhist siddhas wrote a lot number of religious books in this period. Twenty-four Buddhist Siddhacharyas wrote the *Charyapada* or *Charyageets*. Satyendranath Sarma, *Asamiya Sahityor Itibritto*, (Guwahati: Bani Prakash Mandir, 1965), 40-50.

<sup>11</sup> Discussed during conversation with Hari Prasad Saikia, Bhogpur Sattrajuli, 25 November 2015.

*laukik bhava* (within the worldly realm), Borgeet extensively was meant for *alaukik bhava* (beyond the worldly realm)<sup>12</sup>. Some Manasa (Devi) poets like Mankara, Durgabara, and Narayanadeva were famous contemporaries of Sankaradeva. Mankara's songs were folk songs in nature depicting the society of Kamarupa through them. The songs of Mankara and Durgabara were heard in worship at Kamakhya temple in Nilachal hills of Guwahati till recent times<sup>13</sup>. The songs of Durgabar<sup>14</sup> tend more towards a folk nature whereas borgeet compositions were more 'classical'<sup>15</sup> in nature.

Sankardeva and Madhavdeva used the following ragas in their Borgeet and Ankiya Geet : *Ahir, Asowari, Kalyana, Kamoda, Kedara, Kau, Gauri, Toor, Toor-Vasanta, Toor-Bhatiyali, Dhanasri, Nata-Mallara, Poorvi, Varadi, Basanta, Belowar, Bhatiyali, Bhupali, Mallara, Nata, Mallar, Mahur-Dhanasri, Ramgiri, Lalit, Syam, Syamagouda, Sri, Sringandhara, Srigauri, Sareng, Sindhura, Suhai* and so on. In this list, Kau alone seems to be an unfamiliar name to the student of Indian music. However, the names that sound similar to the ragas in Hindustani Classical music are in practice not the same. Sankardeva even devised different talas for the compositions, which include-- *Ektala, Kharman, Bisom, Chutkala, Domani, Dharamyati, Bishom, Paritala, Rupaka* and *Rasaka* tala. Some amount of difference in the practice of these talas is seen from one sattra circle to another. However, the tala is necessary to be maintained only when one individual or a group of individuals perform in congregations. When an individual Vaisnava pours out his in a domestic temple, he does not generally submit to the control of rhythmic beats.<sup>16</sup>In earlier times, Rabab was used during Borgeet performances but now it is almost obsolete.<sup>17</sup>Nowadays in Sattras only the *khol* (percussion), *tal* (cymbals) and sometimes flute are played. However, in public stages today, singers take the liberty of using various other instruments like *tanpura* (a 4-stringed instrument) and violin, which are traditionally not associated with Borgeet but are included in an attempt to beautify the performance.

<sup>12</sup> Kakati , "Preface" to *Borgeet Somikhya* , 9.

<sup>13</sup>Whether now its heard or not, nobody can say. In Mangaldai's some regions, Durgabari Geet might be heard. See Maheswar Neog, *Svararekhat Bargit* (Assam: Assam Sangit Natak Academy, 1958), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Two works of Durgabar are known, they are *Manasa Kavya* and *Giti-Ramayana*.

<sup>15</sup> By the fundamental Indian understanding of Classical as Raga-based music.

<sup>16</sup> Neog, *Early History*, 278.

<sup>17</sup> Neog mentions that this instrument now is found only in Rampur in India and some parts of Afghanistan.

## Historical Background of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*

In 15<sup>th</sup> century Assam, Vaisnavism was not new to the region, but it took a revolutionary shape of cultural renaissance only through the intervention of Sankardeva. It became a chief medium for his propagation of the philosophical tenet of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. This is a philosophy which called for the unified devotion of one God Vishnu or Krishna, shunning the worship of all other gods and goddesses and because of which he was constantly in battle of arguments with Brahman controversialists of the capital.<sup>18</sup> He faced “hostility of brahmin priesthood which found that its authority was being challenged by the new-fangled creed which placed Brahman and the pariah alike on the same footing and opened the portals of sacred knowledge to the common man by rendering religious texts to local language and minimised the importance of ritualism by extolling the kirtana form of worship, discarding the worship of many gods and goddesses in favour of a rigid monotheism.”<sup>19</sup> The opposition vilely abused the ears of the monarchs against the religious rebel and he was on numerous occasions made to stand for trial. He was constantly on the run escaping from hostility and violence meted away by the authority. On one such occasion his son-in-law Hari was even beheaded, the incident of which filled him with disgust and made him move westward to Koch Behar under king Naranarayana<sup>20</sup>. The history of Vaisnavism in Assam is one full of conflicts and persecutions, both religious and political at the same time.

Coming to the religious practices of the time, Siva and Sakti worship were vibrantly in vogue. While Siva worship among the common people had been associated with alcohol and flesh, the new worship of Sakti introduced the element of sex into the religious pattern of the land<sup>21</sup>. *Yogini Tantra* characterises the local religion of ancient Assam as being of *Kirata*<sup>22</sup> origin where there was an absence of asceticism, celibacy, protracted vows; it enjoined fish and flesh eating, free association with women and sexual intercourse after puberty.<sup>23</sup> *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*<sup>24</sup> are the chief scriptures of Saktism in Assam

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<sup>18</sup> Maheswar Neog, *The Creative Force Behind the Sankardeva Renaissance, Bhakti and Other Aspects of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement* (Guwahati: Maheswar Nirmala Neog Publication, 2011), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Praphulladatta Goswami, *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2003), 3.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Aboriginal’ tribes as mentioned by Banikanta Kakti in *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*.

<sup>23</sup> Banikanta Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* (Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1989), 46.

<sup>24</sup> Although Neog says that Saktism as a sect was most powerful in Kamarupa by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when its chief scripture *Kalika Purana* was written..But when *Yogini tantra* came up by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, much of the

which belong to the *Vamacara* ‘left-hand’ school and enjoin blood sacrifices and esoteric practices. This was something that engaged serious attention of Sankardeva.<sup>25</sup> It is even said that human sacrifices were made during rituals for Goddess Kamakhya. Kamakhya, where the *yoni* (genital organ) of the Devi, the symbol of fertility is worshipped also involved a lot of esoteric sexual practices. How much of the ancient practices were vibrantly practised in the medieval times cannot be said with certainty, but there was definitely an ‘excess’<sup>26</sup> of ‘sex, meat and wine’ which thrived in the Saivite and Sakti ritualistic practices, which Sankardeva was alleged to have fought against. He converted many strong Devi worshippers into his fold and one of them is his most famous disciple Madhavdeva. Madhavdeva who tried to argue for Saktism quoted the verses of *sastras* to defend the path of *pravriti marga* (activism) while Sankara expounded the path of *nivritti marga* (detachment). The quote on which Madhavdeva finally gave in was when Sankardeva said:

As the branches, leaves, foliage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water at the root ...and limbs of body nourished by the food in the stomach ...so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of *Acyuta*.<sup>27</sup>

So for Sankardeva, to worship Vishnu is to propitiate one and All.

### **Creative Arts and Literature as Tools for Social reformism**

Sankardeva is not only seen as a spiritual leader and social reformer of Assam but also as a “leader of a great literary and cultural renaissance”<sup>28</sup> in Assam. For Sankardeva, his creative expressions through which he attracted the masses, were not just a means for entertainment for the masses but also “the path of sublimation and salvation”<sup>29</sup>. They were “not the means

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‘left hand’ **excesses** were toned down. To read more, see : Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vasinava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>28</sup> Bhaba Chandra Chaliha, “Sankardeva’s Literary Contributions: A Short Survey” in *Srimanta Sankardeva Bharata Barise* , ed. Bharat Chandra Kalita , Hemanta Dhing Mazumdar (Kamrup : Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti, 2005 ), 33.

<sup>29</sup> Birendranath Datta, “Rediscovering Sankardeva.”

to an end but also the end themselves”<sup>30</sup>, and were “dedications to divinity – acts of piety and even worship”<sup>31</sup>.

### *Literature and music*

Sankardeva with his chief disciple Madhavdeva and a host of other followers like Ananta Kandali, Rama Saraswati, Gopaladeva, Ramacharana Thakur, Daityari Thakura and so on, built a rich literary tradition by composing thousands of verses, original and translation, *kavyas*, doctrinal treatises, songs and dramas. Sankardeva wrote in three languages- Assamese, Sanskrit and Brajavali. For his Borgeet lyrics and Ankiya Nat (one-act drama) texts, he used Brajavali, which is a mixture of Maithili and Assamese, while his *Bhakti Ratnakara* is a doctrinal treatise in Sanskrit. It is “a collection of 564 slokas from more than 20 sources of which the main source is again Bhagavata Purana”<sup>3233</sup>. It has 38 chapters which can be grouped into four principles, the worshipful deity (*Deva*), the celebration of the deity’s and attributes (*Nama*), the spiritual preachers (*Guru*) and the devotees (*Bhakta*) of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma philosophy as propagated by Sankardeva. Again, Sankardeva is said to have rendered eight out of the twelve books of Bhagavata Purana, in Assamese, and because of which he was criticized by the old priesthood for rendering the sacred text in vernacular and not High Sanskrit. So, the linguistic revolution associated with the Bhakti movement which started with the Alvars of the South, where the vernaculars of the masses took over the Sanskrit of the elite, seemed to have been reflected even in Assam. While Kirtan Ghosa is credited to Sankardeva, Nama Ghosa is a monumental work with thousand verses credited to Madhavdeva. Both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva composed Bhatimas and Borgeet, which were panegyrics of God, kings and in the case of Madhavdeva, Guru, as he composed Guru-Bhatima in praise of Sankardeva.

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

<sup>32</sup> Bhaba Chandra Chaliha, “Sankardeva’s Literary Contributions: A Short Survey”, 40.

<sup>33</sup> “In Sanskrit literature one gets a sense of the beginning of a shift toward bhakti in the *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 300 A.D.), while the *Bhagavata Purana* (c. tenth century A.D.) is among the most important textual statements on bhakti in a later, fully elaborated form”. Norman Cutter, *Songs of Experience : The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987),1.

## *Drama and Dance*

Ankiya Nat are the one-act dramas which Sankardeva created. He is said to have written six plays, namely, *Patni Prasada*, *Kaliya Damana*, *Keli Gopala*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Parijata Harana* and *Rama Vijaya*, the plots of which are all taken from Bhagavata Purana, except in case of Rama-Vijaya where the story is taken from Ramayana. The Ankiya Nat written by Sankardeva, as Arshiya Sethi says, “heralded a new and complete language of theatre”. It did “not break away from previous theatrical and performance traditions, but was itself a dexterous and creative combination of poetry, multi lingual skills, music, dance drama and related crafts.”<sup>34</sup> His principle disciple Madhavdeva wrote a series of plays called *Jhumura*. The language of his plays is also Brajavali like that of Sankardeva, but his language is simpler with more usage of Assamese words, “having a special appeal for the common people”<sup>35</sup>. Some of the plays credited to him are *arjuna-bhanjana* (breaking down of the Arjuna trees), *cor-dhara* (capture of the thief), *pimpara-gucowa* (removal of the ants), *bhumiletowa* (rolling on the ground), *bhojana-behar* (pastoral picnic). While Sankardeva’s words reflect a sense of *karuna* (sorrowful emotion) and *dasya* (servant-master sentiment) in its deep philosophical content, Madhavdeva’s plays are full of *hasya* (mirth) and *vatsalya* (filial sentiment), even though both ultimately consider themselves servants of the Lord, thus making *dasya* their primary goal. There is a tradition in many sattras (monasteries) for the Sattradhikar (Head of the sattras) to create a new *bhaona* (dramatic piece) “as part of his duties because of which many works got added to the collection of the Sattras over the centuries”<sup>36</sup>. Although Sattriya dance has traditionally been part of the Ankiya Nat and have been performed only by male monks until the last century, it has come out recently from the confines of the sattras and have been performed by male and female alike since. Similarly, Ankiya Nat was performed only by males inside the sattras, and even the female roles were taken up by males. But outside of the sattras in various societies the female roles are being performed by females, letting the Nat take up a co-ed aesthetics in recent times.

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<sup>34</sup> Arshiya Sethi, Creativity in Sattriya, Accessed on 10 July 2016, <http://www.sankaradeva.com/blogs/187>.

<sup>35</sup> Karabi Deka Hazarika, *Madhavdeva, His Life, Art and Thought* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2007), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Sethi, *ibid*.

## Women and Femininity in Assamese Vaisnavism

The role of women in Bhakti movement has been intriguing in different quarters. Meera has been a rebellious devotee of Lord Krishna, taking *sarana* (coming into the fold of a faith) of a lower-caste Haridas, dancing in *ghungroo* in the temple and leaving her own husband in search for her lover Krishna. Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka and Lal Ded in Kashmir, in their devotion for Siva, rebelled against the chaste norms of modesty by foregoing their clothing in public. Andal in her Visnu Bhakti is said to have been given the status of Sri in Tamil Nadu. While Meera is considered a deviant example of womanhood (hence *Meera Baawri*), Andal with her eventual marriage-myth with Vishnu is considered a “role model of beauty and purity for young girls and women” with even “her songs printed on marriage invitation cards”<sup>37</sup>.

Being a woman and being feminine are however not the same in the discourse of Bhakti. The conventional idea of ‘femininity’ is attached with softness and emotionality as opposed to a rationale, macho notion of ‘masculinity’. By those norms, Akka and Meera must have somewhere gone beyond the traditional norms of a ‘feminine’ woman, and Andal must have remained still within the boundary of norms. Ramanuja, another exponent of Tamil Srivaisnavism, was once asked “Who is the right person to teach and learn Andal’s *Tirupavvai*?” to which he answered: “only those who have breasts can receive it and enjoy it. Even among women, only Andal can teach it and only Andal can receive it”<sup>38</sup>.

Here, we see how the breasts have not merely been referred as a physical attribute but as a “symbol of compassion, of the heart: a heart that swells with bhakti.....men can make themselves fit for bhakti only if they develop a feminine swell of intense devotion in their heart”.<sup>39</sup> This gender subversion is seen in Kabir when he takes the voice of a woman in his *Kamabhavana*<sup>40</sup> songs, crossing the boundary of gender in his emotive relation with Rama. Caitanya too considered the feminine emotion of Radha’s erotic love (*sringara*) to look at Krishna as a lover. However, none of this means a larger change in status quo of women in

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<sup>37</sup> Alka Tyagi, *Andal and Akka Mahadevi: Femininity to Divinity* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworlds, 2014), 113.

<sup>38</sup> Tyagi, 174.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Kamabhavana* (sexual desire-the agitation of love) is one strand of poem by Kabir, the other two being *Ramabhavana* (spiritual restlessness) and *Samajbhavana* (outrage towards injustice).



any of these societies, as Kabir too for instance “exhibits the *sanskar* of condemnation for woman”<sup>41</sup> in many of his songs,<sup>42</sup> even while taking the form of a woman in many others.

Another interesting angle is the relegation of the female goddess from the discourse of Bhakti, which has been taken over dominantly by a binary understanding of Vaisnavism and Saivism as the only kind of Bhakti streams, which many speculate is a mistaken theorization of the early Indologists’ writings. Interestingly, in Assam, despite there being an overarching presence of Sankari Vaisnavism, the older form of Sakti Goddess worship is vibrant still in many quarters. One can almost see an admixture of Sankari, Saivite and Sakti elements of worship in many households. However, looking for a certain mainstream figure like a Meera or an Akka or a Lal Ded in this space is disappointing. Such rebelliousness of a woman bhakta or such intricate notions of femininity is not seen in the Vaisnavite Bhakti scene of Assam. Aai Padmapriya, who is the daughter of Gopaladev Ata, one of the chief apostles of Madhavdeva in Bhabanipur, started composing songs of devotional nature which “reflected her love for Sankardeva’s teachings”<sup>43</sup>.

But as Tapati Kashyap commiserates with the usual condolatory voice: Aai Padmapriya “could have easily gained positions as *pundit*, but during those days women were not given the same position as men.”<sup>44</sup> Despite being considered the first women poetess, Padmapriya is hardly known to anybody in the Vaisnavite circle today. This omission demands a larger speculation into the nuances of the marginalization of women in the creative realm. Sankardeva is known to have taken many women into his fold. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, countering the feminist attacks on the women’s marginalization in Sankardeva, even argues that the “instance of making a woman named Radhika alias Yogamaya the leader of the volunteer-force at Tembuwani for construction of the dam” is an important example of Sankardeva according honour to women<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Purushottam Agrawal, “The Erotic to The Divine: Kabir’s Notion of Love and Femininity” in *Poetics and Politics of Sufism & Bhakti in South Asia: Love, Loss and Liberation* by Kavita Panjabi (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011) , 56.

<sup>42</sup> Kabir says: he who associates with a woman, whether his own or another’s, is going to hell; All fires are one; so do not burn your hand in it. See Agrawal , “*The Erotic to The Divine*”,71.

<sup>43</sup> Tapati Baruah Kashyap , *Female Voice in Assamese Poetry* (Guwahati: Bhabani Books, 2012), 44.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, *Srimanta Sankardeva as a Feminist*, Accessed on 25 July 2016 from [www.tributetosankaradeva.org/](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/)



Image 1: The entrance to the Barpeta Sattr Naamghar restricted to females. (Taken on 28 September 2014)

However, if the space was big enough to foster a creative Bhakti woman-voice, remains a question. No women poet, if any, got a chance to rise as high as Sankardeva or Madhavdeva did, most likely because of the marginalization of the women figure from the physical space of the sattr and from the aesthetic space of the creative practices. There are many critical voices coming up in recent times. Moushumi Pathak has taken a cynical tone on the role of women in Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, as failing to do much for women as it had done for the inclusion of all caste and ethnicity under its fold, to the extent that women are not even allowed in many *kewaliya* (celibate) sattras, like Patbausi<sup>46</sup>. The degree of allowance of women in the space within the sattr differs, with women allowed inside the *naamghar* (prayer-hall) in some sattras in Majuli, say for instance, but restricted completely from the naamghar of the Barpeta sattr (Image 1). Despite these variations, the sattr space as one with largely a male-dominated hierarchy is obvious. There

<sup>46</sup>Moushumi Pathak, "Women under the Umbrella of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam," in *Srimanta Sankardeva Bharata Barise*, ed. Dr. Bharat Ch. Kalita, Hemanta Dhing Mazumdar (Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti: Kamrup, 2005), 237-242. The sattras that Madhavdeva built were mostly all celibate sattras as he was himself a celibate, while Sankardeva was not. Sankardeva was married thrice in his lifetime, although much under societal pressure the second and third time.

is no role in the organizational hierarchy also that is reserved for women. In Kannada Virasaivism, nearly 60 out of 300 saints are women and in comparison to such a space, the exclusion of the women *bhaktin* in the fold of Assamese Vaisnavism is evident. The reason quoted - pollution of the woman's body through the process of childbirth and menstruation, are commonly seen in many other parts of India as well. This marginalization is fought against by some, as reflected in newer regulations in policy to allow women in the naamghar of Barpeta Sattrā<sup>47</sup>, but at the same time it is also absorbed as the 'traditional' norm by many, as seen in the voices of Barpeta women themselves<sup>48</sup>.

### **Bhava, Bhakti and Borgeet**

As opposed to western theories on emotions, the Indian aesthetic theory of *bhava* and *rasa* as described by Bharata in *Natyashastra*, is quite elaborate. In *Natya*, 8 rasas are recognized, viz., *Sringara*, *Hasya*, *Karuna*, *Raudra*, *Vira*, *Bhayanaka*, *Bibhatsa* and *Adbhuta*. *Rasa* is described as the cumulative result of *vibhava* (stimulus), *anubhava* (involuntary reaction) and *vyabichari bhava* (voluntary reaction).<sup>49</sup> Abhinavagupta in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, however, added a 9th rasa called the *Santa* rasa to the list. *Santa*, in common definition means peace or tranquillity, and it gradually began to be associated as the rasa for the bhakti bhava.

For Borgeet, a lot has been said in the context of bhakti, although bhava and rasa have been used almost synonymously in most writings. Baapchandra Mahanta has laid out a broad understanding of the rasas in Borgeet, on the basis of the writings of Carita Puthis (biographies of the saints). He says that the Borgeet's main rasa is bhakti rasa, which is a condition of santa. Vatsalya rasa and daysa rasa are only ways to reach that bhakti rasa. With respect to Madhavdeva's Borgeet, there is mention of six rasas in the Carita Puthis---*viraha*, *virakti*, *chor*, *chaturi*, *leela*, *paramartha*<sup>50</sup>. But the main rasa being *bhakti*, rest all are intermediate ways (*gauno* rasas—subordinate rasas) to reach that ultimate bhakti. Referring

<sup>47</sup> Teresa Rehman, "Prayers answered : Women enter Vaishnavite monastery", 20 may 2010. Accessed on 15 July 2016. <http://indiatogether.org/vaishnav-women> .

<sup>48</sup> Bashisht Sarma, BurhaSattradhikar (Head) of Barpeta Sattrā, narrated the time when litterateur Kanaksen Deka asked him to create history by letting the womenfolk enter, and he replied that he did not want to create history but to follow tradition. Although he would not pull out a woman if she wants to enter, Sarma revelled on the fact that the women in Barpeta themselves refrained from entering by their own accord. (Bashisht Sarma, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Barpeta Sattrā, 26 September 2015.)

<sup>49</sup> For a complete discussion on Rasas, see: Kapila Vatsyayan, "Rasa" in *Bharata: The Natyashastra* (New Delhi:Sahitya Akademi, 2001 ), 55.

<sup>50</sup> Baapchandra Mahanta, *Borgeet* (Guwahati, Student Stores: 2014), 9.

to the Navarasa theory, Mahanta says that karuna (grief), bibhatsa (disgust) and raudra (anger) rasa are never seen in Borgeet : vira (heroicism), bhayanaka (fear) and hasya (laughter) are minimally seen, but sringara (love) and adbhuta (surprise) are clearly seen according to Mahanta. In the love of the gopis, sringara is seen and in the description of the marvels and glory of Krishna, adbhuta is seen according to Mahanta. In the descriptions of Krishna stealing *makhan* (curd) or him losing his ornaments, there is some amount of hasya rasa as well. But no matter how many different bhavas one goes through, all the bhavas are inclined towards that one basis of bhakti bhava, Mahanta says.<sup>51</sup>

Madhavdeva's songs mostly centre on the childish pranks of Krishna, and majority of Sankardeva's lyrics point to the futility of the world, urging upon the necessity of repetition of god's names and meditation on the supreme being within the hearts. Sankardeva weeps under the pressure of worldly attachments which sting him like venomous serpents. The worldly objects are an illusion and an impediment to devotion and the only way is to take recourse to Rama-Nama for which one needs to ultimately surrender at the feet of Rama<sup>52</sup>. So while Madhavdeva's compositions are said to evoke vatsalya bhakti bhava which is a mother-child or parental love, the predominant bhava in Sankardeva's Borgeet is said to be dasya bhakti bhava, which is the love that a servant has for his master.

Despite mention here and there about the reflection of sringara in Borgeet, the common and dominant viewpoint amongst traditionalists, musicians and scholars alike about sringara, is its *absence* in Borgeet. Sringara is the most common emotion that is seen in performance practices, and also it makes its appearance in so many bhakti contexts. In that case, it becomes worth analysing as to what kind of socio-political conditions of Assam led to such prescriptions as the denial of sringara in Borgeet.

With respect to connecting music and bhavas, Matanga Muni in *Brihaddesi* (9<sup>th</sup> c. AD), connects different swaras with bhavas. One sees similar associations made by scholar Girikanta Goswami between the ragas prescribed by Sankardeva and various rasas evoked by them. The rasa names here are not only from the nine rasas list though. Girikanta says that for *binay* and bhakti rasa *Asowari* raga is used, karuna rasa can be evoked by *Kedar* and *Dhansri* ragas, *heer* rasa by *Shri* , *gambhirjya* by raga *Nat Mallar* , bhakti rasa by raga *gauri* and raga

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Neog, Early History, 178.

*Suhai*, adbhut by raga *Basanta* and *madhura* rasa by raga *Bhairabi*<sup>53</sup>. To be able to conduct a study of whether these associations work as claimed, is in itself a challenging aesthetico-musicological area of study. But my work will not go too deep into these classifications, which are many and sometimes also inconsistent. I shall conduct my speculations for now with the broader understanding of the *dasya bhava* and *vatsalya bhava*, which are commonly associated with Sankardeva and Madhavdeva respectively.

### **Literature Survey and Research Questions**

The works of Maheswar Neog are helpful in understanding a socio-political-cultural background of the Vaisnavite movement in Assam and the biographical accounts of the two saints and others as well. Various editions of Kirtan Ghosa, Nama Ghosa, Katha Guru Carita and Bhakti Ratnakara, are available, which are my reference points for any detail on the philosophical tenets as well for the literature, dramatic and musical works by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Baapchandra Mahanta has dealt extensively with the history, form as well as the philosophical interpretations of Borgeet, which are important point of references for me in my musico-philosophical analysis. Parinita Goswami's interesting formal analysis sets me thinking in interesting directions regarding the relation of swara (notes) and emotions (bhava). Pabitra Pran Goswami has done an extensive work on putting down the *sworolipi* (notation) and tala (rhythm) details of many Borgeet. Keshabananda Devagoswami has done extensive work on the tradition and style of performance of Borgeet. Karabi Deka Hazarika's work has given due space to the works of Madhavdeva, and translations of Borgeet are available by Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, who has also written on *Aharya* of Ankiya Nat. Even in the Internet web-world, there are ample amount of materials available on various aspects of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and their institutional practices.

The existing works are very important in having given details of the musicological aspects of Borgeet. But in Borgeet as well as in the works on bhakti in general, one mostly observes that the deeper nuances of the connection between music and bhakti are not discussed. Even in trying to explore that relation, the analysis is limited to the poetic components. Thus, there is a dire need of a work which can take into account not only the lyrical components but also the musical elements in order to look at bhakti in Borgeet. Such a

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<sup>53</sup> Girikanta Goswami, *Bargit Somikshya* (Nagaon: Nityanshu Prakashan, 2009), 21.

thesis should work around the socio-political context and the philosophy within which Borgeet emerges. In my dissertation, I shall attempt to take a leap from the existing works and take upon the above task. Here are some of the research questions that channelize my work.

1. What are the implications of the emotive prescriptions of the composers on the musical aesthetics of Borgeet and how can we talk of these elements in keeping with their philosophical tenets?
2. Is there a way to interrogate musically the ‘poignancy’ and ‘sublimity’ that people relate with Borgeet? How does the specific context of Assam mould the kind of Bhakti that manifests in this music?
3. In reading the specificity of Borgeet, it becomes important to reiterate that Assamese Vaisnavism evolved mainly in response to Saktism and Tantrism. Maheswar Neog speculates that the negation of Radha or Rukmini or any erotic strain in the lyrics of Borgeet is due to an avoidance of the Sakti feminine energy. Basing my study at that historical moment, I want to intervene and critically analyse the prescribed musicality to understand this binary? In this, I will try to engage with a larger question of whether there can be any such gendered binary at all in the musical aspects of a composition.
4. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the musical environment undergoes a radical change with the change of its context, Keshabananda Devagoswami’s critiques of the modern performances are extremely interesting. My intervention would be to see what aesthetic and musical change comes along with this change of context, and what happens to the relation between music and bhakti?

## **Methods and Methodology**

In terms of methods of investigation, my primary research would entail interviewing traditional musicians from the sattras in order to look at the form in its ritualistic context. Across 500 and more existing sattras in Assam, there are broadly 3 styles (*xoili* or *thul*) of Borgeet which come from three major sattras, Barpeta sattras, Kamalabari sattras and Bordowa sattras. My primary materials have broadly been collected from personal interactions in and around these 3 sattras, as well as from singers, teachers and professionals in other spaces like

music schools and All India Radio (AIR). The primary materials would also include first hand recordings of performances in some cases. The secondary research materials come from audio-visual records, journals, libraries, reports, records from AIR or personal collections.

The ancient musicological treatise Brihaddesi by Matanga (9<sup>th</sup> c. AD) is an important standard reference for looking at the relation of swara and bhava in Indian music. In my work, it is important to collate all the local musicological works to look at the relation between ‘swara and bhava’ and ‘raga and bhava’ in the case of Borgeet. However, this is traditional musicology so far, and what I intend to do in my thesis is collate all these musicological details with the poetic imagery and philosophical intent of Borgeet. Linda Heiss (2009) reads Kabir through Kumar Gandharva and attempts to understand from the practitioners, a *nirguna* (attributeless) musicality which may define nirguna poetry. She works around the common phrases like ‘*jhini*’, ‘*nyara*’ and ‘*shunya*’ through a particular musical throw of the voice (*phenk*), which may articulate the ‘formless’ and ‘boundless’ essence in the poetry. In my work I have to go a step ahead in my framework, as I need to not only relate the poetry and music, but also have to look at it in the light of the modes of bhakti that the composers prescribe.

Susan McClary’s work on Western music has extensively dealt with the idea of ‘fabrication of sexuality’ concerned with the arousing and channelling of desire in music. Collating this with the existing arguments on the socially regulated body and mind of the bhakta (devotee), I want to critically engage with them all and develop my own conceptual framework to examine music, gender, sexuality and aesthetic in case of Borgeet.

## **Chapter Plan**

In Chapter 1, *Krishna Without Radha: Negation of Sringara in Borgeet*, I would try to contextualize the oft-repeated arguments of ‘absence of sringara’ and ‘erasure of femininity’ in Borgeet, in the historical moment of Neo-Vaisnavism in 15<sup>th</sup> century. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva refrained from erotic love of Krishna and the *gopis*, which their contemporary poets like Chandidas and Vidyapati would portray in their work. Rose Rosengard Subotnik asserts that ideological values contribute fundamentally to the understanding of musical utterance and aesthetic judgment. Then, can we agree with Neog’s speculation that the absence of any erotic strain in the lyrics of Borgeet is in keeping with that ideological

decision of Sankardeva to keep away from the Sakti? It becomes necessary to locate Borgeet within the interstices of the Vaisnavite conflict with the Sakti and Tantric principles of the times. Neog even goes on to suggest that the absence of any feminine *Raginis* in the prescribed list might also be a reflection of the same rejection. Could such a decision really have affected musicality? Can we look at the incorporation of *dasya* against the negation of *madhura* (erotic love) in Borgeet? The poetic metaphors of *dasya bhava* and *vatsalya bhava* would differ from that of *madhura bhava*. Can we look for such differences even in the musical embellishments? Is there a marginalization of feminine aesthetic energy that takes place in the process of training and dissemination of Borgeet in the Sattra? Building on the framework of McClary and Subotnik, I would build my argument to read the relation between the social body of the Bhakta and the musical body.

Chapter 2, *Reading Bhakti in Musicality of Borgeet*, would look into the relation between poetry and music (*pada* and *swara*) in Borgeet, in order to explore the *dasya* (servant-master) or *vatsalya* (parental) form of Bhakti. All renditions of Borgeet are supposed to begin by an *alap*<sup>54</sup> - elaboration of the Raga. In doing this, it is necessary to do the *alap* with phrases of God's names like Hari and Rama, and not simply using *swaras* (notes) or their *Aakar* (elaboration through the vowels 'aa'). This repetition of the God's names seems to me as a musical manifestation of the philosophy of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma, where chanting the names of God is part of the Bhakti path. Apart from this simple manifestation, what other detailed manifestations can we read in the music of Borgeet to read Bhakti sentiments? Parinita Goswami argues that in *Borgeet*, there is a dominant usage of a particular *swara* (note) like *Komal Nishadh* (flat Ni) and a rare usage of *Teevra Madhyam*, the limited freedom for improvisation within the composition and limited freedom for taking a pause within the time cycle of the *tala*. Sankardeva is known to have prescribed the raga in which to sing a particular song. What does it mean to fix a particular raga for a particular composition or to use a particular *swara* frequently? Lyrically, the songs are replete with images and phrases like 'lotus feet of Rama', 'poisoned venom of worldly pleasures', 'in the age of Kali, Hari's name is the supreme religion', which reflect the philosophy and the emotions of the poets. But musically, what facilitates the *dasya* or *vatsalya* emotion—the sustenance in the *vilambit laya* (slow tempo), the devout appeal in the *meend* (gliding from one note to another) or a certain kind of *alamkara* or embellishment of the notes? Later also building on Linda Heiss's

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<sup>54</sup> In the beginning of a rendition in Indian Classical music, the Raga is elaborated with the characteristic notes, without any rhythm.



framework of looking at nirguna poetry through music, I would collate the lyrical, musicological as well aesthetic prescriptions of the composers in order to understand the *saguna* aspect of Borgeet.

*In Chapter 3, “When Devotion becomes Performance?”* would be the question I would begin with to understand the various contextual changes happening in recent times. Over the years, Borgeet has gained not only an increasing listenership but also a range of performers from different spaces, who are not from the sattrā set up. However, the sattrā musicians also participate equally in this effort to globalize the form. This chapter will try to analyse the variety of musical performances in these recent times in non-ritualistic platforms of competitions, auditions, studios and so on, where there are obvious negotiations that take place. I shall analyse the changing relationship between performers, audience, space and dissemination. What happens when bhakti becomes a ‘performance’? Is there a disjunction from its own subjectivity? It becomes important here to look at the changing relation from ‘Bhakta with God’ (devotion) to ‘Performer with spectator’ (performance). With the mediatised dissemination, the agency remains not in the musicians’ hands entirely and one needs to look at the question of emotive experiences and community association in such contexts? When a singer has to adapt the rendition to the time-format of AIR, how is the aesthetic and emotion getting negotiated? When Ashwini Bhide Deshpande sings *Alo moi ki kohobo Dukho*, how does her Hindustani classical musical training impact a form which has a certain regional stylistic specificity attached to it? Largely, in all of this, how do I again read that relation between the performer, music and aesthetic of bhakti? And can there be a static definition of bhakti? Most material for this chapter will come from the interviews and interactions of contemporary performers from both sattrā and other spaces. There will also be musical analyses of the renditions in various contexts, in order to explore the new aesthetic.

## Chapter 1

### Krishna Without Radha: Negation of *Sringara* in *Borgeet*

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*In vain I wait for a sight of my dark Lord*

*He knows not the sorrow of women I look for soft words*

*But you pour acid into my open wound—*

*Bring me the yellow silk*

*The Lord wraps around his waist and fan me with it*

*Cool the burning of my heart. ....<sup>55</sup>*

This is the climax of a poem by Andal, the speciality of whose songs is the use of erotic and bridal<sup>56</sup> imagery in a highly passionate vocabulary to express longing for union with Krishna and surrender to him. One can see a strong sense of *sringara* imagery in the poem. *Sringara*, as Ashok Ranade says, is the “increasing sentiment of love” and “desire for union between male and female”<sup>57</sup>. The desire for such *sringara* gets reflected in erotic and amorous imageries of love. In case of *bhakti*, the desire is for a sexual union of the female devotee with the male Lord himself. However, in *bhakti*, this boundary of ‘male and female’ *sringara* is broken by some male *bhaktas*. Kabir for one, in his *kamabhavana*<sup>58</sup> poems writes in the voice of the woman to connect with the Lord.

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<sup>55</sup> Alka Tyagi, *Andal and Akka Mahadevi: Femininity to Divinity* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworlds, 2014), 112-113.

<sup>56</sup> Most of the Alvar saints, regardless of their gender, superimposed on themselves a feminine consciousness in order to feel and express the love of a bride and this is called “bridal mysticism” which is at the centre of Tamil Srivaisnavism. See : Alka Tyagi, *Andal and Akka Mahadevi* , 174.

<sup>57</sup> Ranade quotes *Sahitya Darpana* when he uses this characteristic definition of *sringara*. See: Ashok D. Ranade, “Shringara and Music:Vaisnava Ethos,” in *Perspectives in Music, Ideas and Theories* (New Delhi ; Chicago : Promilla & Co.; Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2008), 165.

<sup>58</sup> *Kamabhavana*(sexual desire-the agitation of love) , *Ramabhavana*(spiritualrestlessness) and *Samajbhavana*(outrage towards injustice) are three strands of thoughts in Kabir’s poems.

*I cannot come to you, I cannot call you*

*Burning like this, the pain of separation from you will take my life*

*Kabir says, let this distressed woman die, or else show yourself*

*I can't bear to burn like this twenty-four hours a day.*<sup>59</sup>

The 'erotic speech' by Kabir comes from a female position in this case. Amidst such examples of *sringara*-evoking expressions in the pan-Indian *Bhakti* scene, it becomes interesting to explore why the Borgeet compositions by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva of Assam, remains conspicuously without an erotic sense of love between the devotee and the devoted. It is said that Sankardeva *proscribed* the *sringara* conception of love for the Lord. There is an anecdote saying that Sankardeva was so mesmerized by a song of Krishna and Radha amour he heard once during his pilgrimage, that he asked his disciple Madhavdeva to compose something similar, but cautioned him to not use the *bhava* of a lover pining for Krishna<sup>60</sup>. Maheswar Neog, in his reading of Borgeet states that the lyrics of Borgeet are "free from the erotic element of Radha-Krishna lyrics flooding Northern India at that time,"<sup>61</sup> "that it has a masculine character like the *dhrupad gayaki*"<sup>62</sup> and that "there is no lightness like the *khyal* music"<sup>63</sup>. He even goes on to claim that "much stress has been laid upon the fact that in the Vaisnava music in Assam, *raginis*<sup>64</sup> or 'female melodies' are absent; and this is again ascribed in some quarters to another remote fact that no female principle is to be

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<sup>59</sup> Purushottam Agrawal , "The Erotic to The Divine : Kabir's Notion of Love and Femininity" in *Poetics and Politics of Sufism & Bhakti in South Asia: Love, Loss and Liberation* , ed. by Kavita Panjabi (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011) , 65.

<sup>60</sup> Maheswar Neog, *The Creative Force Behind the Sankardeva Renaissance, Bhakti and Other Aspects of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement* (Guwahati: Maheswar Nirmala Neog Publication, 2011), 254.

<sup>61</sup> Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vasinava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008), 278.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. *Dhrupad* is said to be the oldest genre of Indian Classical music and is often said to have originated from the Vedas. Minimally impacted by the Persian genre of *Khyal* it retains a distinct characteristic style of its own. Unlike the *khyal* and *thumri* genre which had been sung both by males and females, *Dhrupad* had mostly remained under the hands of the male performers, till very recently. Hence, it has attained a certain 'masculine' touch to its characteristic style of rendition in a deep-throated voice.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. *Khyal* (literally meaning 'imagination') is a genre in Hindustani Classical music of Northern India where much emphasis is laid on the improvisatory elaboration of the *swaras* (notes) of the *Raga*. With respect to *Dhrupad*, *Khyal* is a comparatively newer genre which came into prominence much later than *Dhrupad*.

<sup>64</sup> The *raga-ragini* system represents the male-female principle in music. Amongst various criteria, one is that "Ragas are rendered in slow movement and are serious in mood", while "raginis are light-hearted and fast in pace". Perhaps because of this kind of gendered distinction it finds resonance even in the discourse of Borgeet.

worshipped in Sankara's system of religion"<sup>65</sup>. In Borgeet, *dasya bhakti* (servant-master love) and *vatsalya bhakti* (mother-child / parental love) remain the predominant sentiments prescribed by Sankardev while there is a complete absence of *sringara bhakti* (love of the beloved), which is the core of Gaudiya Vaisnavism in the neighbouring state of Bengal. Gaudiya Vaisnavism is even said to have affected Assamese Vaisnavism in a lot of other ways, but this. This difference seems obvious and thus also worth exploring.

In the discourse of Borgeet, what becomes necessary is a strong contextualization of these perceptions of 'absence of femininity', 'absence of eroticism and *sringara*', 'presence of masculinity' and so on, in its inception in 15<sup>th</sup> century Assam. Placing the Vaisnavism of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva within the context of erstwhile Sakti and Saivite practices of the times, their musical materials need to be analyzed. Also, what do the oft-repeated terms like 'erotic', 'femininity', 'masculinity' and '*sringara*' even mean in the context of the Assamese perception, needs a thorough exploration.

## I.

### Taming of the '*Excess*' Energy

*Excess*, in common parlance, means something that is 'in lack of moderation', is an 'outrageous or immoderate behaviour' or 'an amount of something that is more than desirable'. The term excess has been used by scholars such as Banikanta Kakati and Maheswar Neog to describe the ritualistic Sakti practices of ancient and medieval Assam<sup>66</sup>. There was an excess of 'sex, meat and wine' they say, involved in the esoteric ritualistic practices of Sakta Goddess worship especially, be it Kamakhya, Manasa or Tripura. *Vamacara* (left-handed) practices were in vogue including worship with the five M's: *Matsya* (fish), *Mamsa* (flesh), *Madya* (liquor), *Mithun* (sexual intercourse) and *Masha* (cereals). In a very critical tone, Kakati has called the land of erstwhile Assam "infested" with the *Vamacaric* tantric philosophy of 'sex and plate'. He further says that "amongst the religious rites, the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>66</sup> Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vasinava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008) & Banikanta Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* (Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1989).

noises of drums and cymbals, night on virgin worship and the lewd dances of temple-women.”<sup>67</sup> The Yogini Tantra, which is one of the chief scriptures followed in Saktism and Tantrism apart from Kalika Purana, enjoins the Sakta devotee “to contemplate the mental image of a girl of sixteen shining like the newly risen sun, all naked.”<sup>68</sup> The devotee would attempt “to become identical with *TripuraSundari*” and “habituate himself to think that he is a woman” as the followers of the Sakti school believe that “god is a woman and it ought to be the aim of all to become a woman”<sup>69</sup>.

In order to understand Neo-Vaisnavism of Assam, one needs to understand that it arose in a context antithetical to all such Sakti and Tantric practices. According to Kakati, it was difficult for Sankardeva to bring in Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma asking for absolute surrender to one god Vishnu, “in a land where every woman was looked upon as a miniature incarnation of the Devi.”<sup>70</sup> Amidst turbulent political battles of power amongst the Bhuyans, Ahoms, Koch, Chutiyas and Kacharis, the religious battle of the in-vogue Sakta-Saivite-Tantric practices with the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva became conflicting forces, giving rise to much chaos and noise. The power of the kingship worked in collaboration with the Brahminical priesthood, which Sankardeva tried to break. He protested against the ritualistic animal and human sacrifices that were prevalent in Devi worship, because of which he was made to stand in trial many a time, in front of the monarchical authority. His **ideology** was to contain all the excessive ritualistic beliefs as well as the esoteric sexuality that was related to the worship of all other gods and goddesses.

To replace these, Sankardeva brought about a *sattvika*<sup>71</sup> quality of worship. He believed that God should easily be reachable to the common man and not through elaborate rituals and practices which only the elite can afford. The *rajas* redness of the sacrifice-blood and the clothing of the Devi priests, were replaced by the whiteness of the ascetics. Mamsa and Madya were forbidden for a sattvik style of food. Even though Sankardeva himself had to marry thrice, he upheld a monastic life of bhakti, thus disqualifying active sexuality for

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<sup>67</sup> Kakati, *Mother Goddess*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 49. Here, Banikanta Kakati refers to R.G. Bhandarkar’s *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>71</sup> *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are three *gunas* (qualities) in Samkhya philosophy. Broadly, Sattva stands for balance, transparency, harmony and purity, stillness. Rajas stands for passion, dynamics and self-centredness in-between stillness and restlessness. Tamas stands for imbalance, chaos, dullness, dark lethargic and static.

pleasure as well. These later took on an organized form of living style in the *sattras*, where unmarried *bhaktas* (monks) co-habit.

What basically is seen is that there is a sense of an attempt of ‘taming’ the ‘immoderate’ lifestyle of an individual and of the society at large, a taming which seems to be containing the excesses of the other *order*. From elaborate esoteric ritualistic processes to simple procedures of reaching God through daily *prasangas* (recital prayers) and simple modes of remembrance and love, Sankardeva simplified devotion for the common people. The ‘noise’ arising from the socio-political violence, and from the ritualistic excesses of the worship of multiple Gods and Goddesses, was what he attempted to tame down through his *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* which called for devotion for a single God, Vishnu or Krishna. With this perspective in place, one can even look at the rhythm, words, melody and overall energy of the ritual and musical practices associated with both kinds of orders, one the Sakta and another the Vaisnavite practices that Sankardeva brought about. The intention of this exercise is to see the notion of ‘taming down’ percolate down to the musical energies of the practices of Sankardeva.

### **Manasa Devi Worship and *Deodhani* Dance**

Amongst many Goddesses who are worshipped and with whose worship esoteric practices are involved, one is the Goddess Manasa, the serpent Goddess. She is said to be appeased to cure serpent bite. In worshipping this Goddess, the *Suknani Ojapali*<sup>72</sup> recites from the *Manasa Kavya*, narrating the story of Beula who danced in ecstasy to satiate Goddess Manasa to save her husband Lakhindar from death by serpent bite. The *Ojapali* is also accompanied by the *Deodhani* ritual dance. A *Deodha* covers his or her face with red vermillion, smears oil that makes the red shine, and slowly starts the dance carrying sharp weapons in their hands. With dishevelled hair, she will at one point even move her head around in ecstasy. The *joydhol* is a big drum accompanying the dance, which starts playing in *drut laya* (fast tempo) when the dancer, overpowered by the spirit of the deity, gets faster.<sup>73</sup>

(Image 1)

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<sup>72</sup> *Ojapali* is a type of dance-drama form of Assam. There is one chief singer *Oja* and a number of *palis* who repeat the refrain playing cymbals, after the *Oja*. There are Vaisnav *Ojapalis* as well as Sakta *Ojapali*. *Suknani* is a type of Sakta *Ojapali* where the Goddess Manasa is appeased.

<sup>73</sup> Dilip Ranjan Barthakur, *The Music and Musical Instruments of North Eastern India*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 2003), 94.

The Deodhani dancer even plays an oracle, giving prophecies of the society, its people, the ones in power and the State, which basically gives a sense of the transformative power of this ecstatic possession. This gives an idea of how, as Hugh B. Urban suggests, “Assamese Tantra centers around the unleashing and harnessing of power (Sakti) in all its forms-social, political, and spiritual alike, by becoming such a powerful medium as a prophet for the Ruler”. At the end, the Deodha dancer may even lose consciousness in ecstasy. Overall, the dance has a lot of *udatta* (heightened, acute pitch and accent) energy, ecstasy, trance-like moments and may be even loss of consciousness.



Image 1: Still from the Documentary “*Lyrics with Body and Soul*”<sup>74</sup>, showing Deodhani Nritya being performed during Manasa Puja.

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<sup>74</sup> “Ojapali –Lalit Chandra Nath—Part 3”, Youtube Video. 18: 35. Posted [December 1 , 2012]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZHg5FCFY3o>.

## Call for Consciousness in Sankardeva

Sankardeva, on the other hand, is all about coming to senses and of the control of mind. Despite the proximity to Caitanya's Vaisnavism, where Caitanya is believed to have "moaned, trembled, and fainted from uncontrollable emotion during performances of kirtan he led in his hometown of *Nabadwip*"<sup>75</sup>, Sankardeva's ethos does not resemble such an ecstasy. In a tangential note, in Sufi tradition<sup>76</sup> too, the musical rhythms may translate into abandonment of the self, becoming an act of losing oneself through music, sometimes even resulting in vigorous shaking of the body and losing of consciousness. Sankardeva's practices however are far from offering such outlets.

Sankardeva's Borgeet compositions also refer to the harnessing of the senses and the control of the mind. Supposedly one of the first Borgeet by him, *Mono Meri Ramo Soronohi Laagu* is a call to the mind to free oneself of all worldly illusions and mundane involvement, and come down at Rama's feet.

O mind, Rest in Rama's feet

Look! Death is approaching

O mind, the python of time is swallowing

This is how death comes, bit by bit

O mind, body's fall is for sure

Praise Rama and give up Maya.

( translation : H.S. Shiva Prakash )

Through the lyrics of this Borgeet, one can notice the significance laid on the control of the mind for a consciousness. To imagine this Borgeet being sung by a bhakta early in the morning in the prasanga, seated in an extremely austere position in the naamghar (prayer-

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<sup>75</sup> Pika Ghosh, "Krishna's Dance and Devotion in The Temples of Seventeenth-Century Bengal" in *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India*, ed. Pallabi Chakravorty and Scott Kugle (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2009), 69.

<sup>76</sup> Sufism as the mystical dimension of Islam, is often seen as a parallel tradition of Bhakti.



hall) of the sattra, the ethos of surrender to Rama is aptly reflected. The non-ecstatic body of the bhakta would appear different from the ecstatic dancers of the Deodhani dance. The comparison is not to be misunderstood as simply of one vocal form (Borgeet) with a dance form (Deodhani), but principally a comparison of the energies in both kinds of practices.

### **Taming of Ecstatic Energy in Musicality**

Apart from the lyrics in Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, musically too there is a sense of taming down of the ecstasy and intensity. Instead of the *joydhol* and *bordhol* which complements the energy of the Deodhani like dances, the khol is used by Sankardeva which has a significantly milder sonic texture. It tames down the energy and intensity of the dances as well as the music it accompanies. It complements the aesthetic of devotion towards the deity where the idea is not to appease or satiate a Goddess who may be enraged, but to devote oneself to Narayana who is the ultimate refuge from all the illusions around him. Here the energy is not *tandava*-like but more *lasya*-like. One can see this temperamental change in various ways. In the reduction of the laya of the music from *drut* (fast) to *madhya* (medium) and *vilambit* (slow) , one can see the high energy come down to a mild one. In Sankardeva, the melody again is a combination of swaras constantly flowing like a river, and not jumping like fire, which is another reflection of the difference in musical energy.

### **Distancing from Sexuality and the ‘female’ principle**

For Sankardeva, consciousness does not only come from trying to mediate on Rama’s feet. With the meditation on drawing in one kind of energy, one also has to focus on the removal of other energies. In order to remove any ecstatic energy, one has to mediate on removal of unwanted thoughts. For that one needs to disentangle oneself from the ‘false’ priorities that one normally exercises as part of bhakti. For example, the Borgeet *Ojha Sojha Pantha Naheri* translates into a critique of the scholars and pundits who perform crores of rituals, failing to see the easy way out to reach Hari.

It further says,

Chanting, penance, pilgrimage visit to Gaya Kashi

Thus squandered your life,

Learnt yoga effort thoughts with attachment

But no salvation without devotion.

(translation: Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti)<sup>77</sup>

This would remind the reader not only of the path of detachment that Sankardeva called to embark upon, but also the path of ritualistic activism he was disapproving of, thus referring to the brahmanic ritualistic hegemony around him. Excessive ritualistic practices which were common in Sakta and Saivite worship practices were futile in the eyes of Sankardeva if one does not see that Bhakti is the end to all means. To attain the blessing of the Lord, is to elevate oneself from the false importance laid on rituals and scriptures. These are just outward ‘excesses’ in the path of devotion, as the real bhakti can only lie in the heart of the devotee.

In another composition *Gopale ki goti koile*, there is a sense of urgency in the call of Sankardeva. There is a sense of *bhayanaka bhava* (fear) in the description of the metaphors which compare the worldly desires with devilish attacks of animals. *Maya* (illusions) follows him like a deer. Greed and illusion follow him like a tiger. The dog of *Kama* (lust) and *Krodh* (anger) is eating him alive. These are images signifying the peak of all these dangers which pose imminent threat to Sankardeva. These images are not only a subjective reflection of the bhakta Sankardeva who is not able to let go off the greed and lust of life, but also a larger reflection of what he thinks is eating the society around him. Among other fears, *Kama*, understood as lustful sexuality, is acting as a poison which he is strongly against. This fear of sexual attachment is seen in numerous other compositions. This could clearly be a reflection on what his antagonistic position is, on the active use of sex in the tantric practices of the times. Through his compositions critiquing these sensory pleasures we get a sense of him trying to tame the sexual energy (*Kama*) which he perhaps sees as root of many evils. In

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<sup>77</sup> Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti , *Great Songs: English Rendering of Srimanta Sankaradeva's Bargit* (Nagaon : Society for Srimanta Sankaradeva, 2012), 25-26.

another composition, *koise norohori tarana upaya*, there is specific mention of the attachment with the other sex (woman) that he sees as dangerous.

*Niramila bisha bimbū kamini lohe tasu parala meri e mana mohe*

I created the poisonous fruit of attachment for women

And my mind fell into its attachment

(translation: Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti)<sup>78</sup>

This reflects a sense of distancing from the female principle in his devotion, may be with a fear of polluting his energy towards God. One needs to be careful to understand that this is not a fear of the ‘feminine’, as one still doesn’t understand what Sankardeva exactly could mean as ‘feminine’. His fear is specifically of the ‘female’ as a social body, which can arouse desire for attachments in the male bhakta. His fear is of sexuality (Kama), that proximity with the female body can bring in. Ideologically, his move is to tame the esoteric Sakti excesses of the times which include the ‘sexual excesses’ related to the worship of the Devi. This taming down translates into his gradual distancing from a female attachment in his own bhakti, for fear of a dissolution of his own bhakti of the Lord.

Rose Rosengard Subotnik asserts that “ideological values contribute inevitably and fundamentally to the structural definition of human utterance, even musical utterance, as well as to the understanding and judgment of utterance, even aesthetic judgment.”<sup>79</sup> The relation between the musical utterance and the ideological values in case of Sankardeva’s Vaisnavite Bhakti reflects the validity of this argument. It is a process through which one can look at Sankardeva’s ideology of being antithetic towards Sakti practices getting converted into his musical utterances. The conviction of a single-minded devotion towards Vishnu contributes to Sankardeva’s rejection of the worship of other Gods and Goddesses. This leads further to shaping of all his philosophical ideas, writings, thoughts and messages to the people. These ideological convictions at the level of ideas also consequently design the energies of all his practices, including his rhythms and musical utterances. Keeping this contextual framework of the ideology and energy in mind, one can go into a deeper study of the musical works of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.

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<sup>78</sup> Borkakoti, *Great Songs*, 29-30.

<sup>79</sup> Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 9.

## II.

### **Krishna Without Radha: Containment of the Erotic/ Sringara**

Radha's glances dart from side to side.  
Her restless body and clothes are heavy with dust.  
Her glistening smile shines again and again.  
Shy, she raises her skirt to her lips.  
Startled, she stirs and once again is calm,  
As now she enters the ways of love.  
Sometimes she gazes at her blossoming breasts  
Hiding them quickly, then forgetting they are there.  
Childhood and girlhood melt in one  
And new and old are both forgotten.  
Says Vidyapati: O Lord of life,  
Do you not know the signs of youth?<sup>80</sup>

In the above poem by the Maithili poet Vidyapati (1352-1448), he showers his poetic attention on Radha.

The swelling of her breasts at Krishna's approach, the stirring of passion within her loins, the mark of Krishna's nails on her tender flesh – and similarly the nuances of every mood – her bashfulness, her uncertainty about her ability to please Krishna, her anxiety at the separation—are the true subjects of Vidyapati's poems.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "Vidyapati", Sarojanand Jha, Accessed on 09-05-2016, 11:37, <http://www.mithilatimes.com/vidyapati/>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Vidyapati's contribution is considered important in the influences of his love poems on the Vaisnava poetry of Bengal and in the spread in the language of Brajavali, the language which we also know Sankardeva is known to have brought into Assam through inculcation in his works.

Let us now look at the lyrics of the Borgeet *Aaju gopinath pekholu* by the Assamese Vaisnava poet Madhavdeva:

*While grazing the cattle by the Yamuna,*

*We saw Krishna with our eyes today.*

*His dark body is brightened by the yellow dress he wears*

*His divine beauty lures crores of Kamadeva even.*

*Neck adorned with necklaces*

*Ears, with beautiful ear-rings.*

*There is peacock feather shining brightly on his head*

*Flowers stand beautifully in pairs too.*

*The feet are adorned with small anklets*

*Which tinkle in rhythm, says Madhob.*<sup>82</sup>

In the above poem by Madhavdeva, he glorifies each and every detail of Krishna's body. From the feather on Krishna's head to the anklets on his feet, from the poise of his waist to the beauty of his necklace, everything is captured to mesmerize the mind's eye. As opposed to Vidyapati's songs where the focus is on description of Radha's body and her desirous state, Madhavdeva in his Borgeet focuses on Krishna's body and his divine beauty. The object of devotion is Krishna here. The emotion to be attached is solely with Krishna. The glorification is solely of the One.

While majority of Sankardeva's Borgeet have a more philosophical bent, bringing out the *dasya bhava* of the devotee, Madhavdeva's compositions incline towards expressing the *chaturti rasa* and the *vatsyala bhava* related with child Krishna's stories.

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<sup>82</sup> From the compilation by: Baapchandra Mahanta , *Borgeet* (Guwahati, Student Stores: 2014), 169.  
( free translation)

Say, the Borgeet below:

Look O *Gowalini*<sup>83</sup>, Says Gopala

Look how your sons have thrown dirt on me.

Never have I addressed them with a *Toi*<sup>84</sup>

And have always shared whatever I find to eat.

I borrow milk and curd and even that I share with them

Even then your sons have thrown dirt on me.

I will take your son to my mother now

Why should I get thrashing for somebody else's fault.

Now but you all know well the ways of my mother, says Krishna sadly.

Hearing this, the Gowalins melted down

They brushed away the dirt from his clothes.

Sat him down with sweet words, milk and curd.

Krishna mixed them all, and ate with gladness

Says Madhobo, such is the *chaturali* of Krishna!<sup>85</sup>

In this composition wherein the trickster Krishna's mischief with Gopinis and Yasodha is portrayed in the most delightful way, the listener is left with a feeling of motherly love for the child Krishna's *chaturali* (childish mischief). Sankardeva's Borgeet reflects a sense of looking up in prayer to a Master Lord Narayana, while Madhavdeva's compositions reveal another *avatara* (manifestation) of the same God. Neither of these two bhavas however, gives the devotee a chance to look at him as an equal. The servant–master evoking

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<sup>83</sup> Gowalini refers to the milkmaid companions in the stories of Krishna, from whom he steals milk and curd.

<sup>84</sup> *Toi* is a pronoun used for someone who is younger or addressed with less respect.

<sup>85</sup> Text retrieved from Baapchandra Mahanta's *Borgeet*, 175. (free translation)

dasya bhava will bring the devotee to his feet, and the vatsalya bhava will bring the devotee to admire the immaculate best of the little child form.

### **Little Radha with Little Krishna**

As opposed to popular belief that Radha or Rukmini is completely absent from Borgeet, Radha actually does figure in a few Borgeet, although the number is limited<sup>86</sup>. Interestingly, the depiction doesn't focus on the *rati* (love) bhava of Radha-Krishna love. It evokes a vatsalya bhava that one feels for the lovable acts of children, through the description of Krishna's tricks with Radha, who is one of the gopis. Neither of them is shown as an adult. Radha is just another gopi of the whole lot who Krishna is forever in trickery with. Karabi Deka Hazarika has even suggested it being "a relation of a sister with her naughty and quarrelsome brother"<sup>87</sup>. This is a small unknown set of compositions called the *bhuson haran geet* (songs of the stealing of ornaments) which depict the mischievousness between child Radha<sup>88</sup> and Krishna.

The absence of Radha or Rukmini as the lovers, is however not to be taken as an innocuous miss. The female figure is something which Sankardeva has consciously been avoiding, the inception of which one has already seen in the ideological distancing from the Sakti principles of the practices contemporary of Sankardeva. To not focus on the adult Krishna's mischiefs with adult Radha here, reflects more than simply the negation of the female figure of Radha. It reflects the negation of a certain kind of relation. If the other figure in the song imagery cannot be seen as a Daas or a mother-like figure, it will fall into a space where the relation may be of an 'illegitimate' lover of Krishna, and thus would bring in possibilities of erotic sexuality which may only prove distractions to one's understanding of bhakti. This relation thus is not to be coveted even in the imagination by a devotee, whose supreme goal is to liberate from all such worldly pleasures.

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<sup>86</sup> Baapchandra Mahanta's compilation lists some of these compositions. Example : *In Govindoko radha boloto vaani*, it is Radha's version of the stolen ornaments story. Here Madhava describes the *prema-chaturali* of child Krishna and child Radha. (*Borgeet* , 177)

<sup>87</sup> Karabi Deka Hazarika , *Madhavdeva, His Life, Art and Thought* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2007), 63.

<sup>88</sup> The presence of Radha in even a few songs, may be attributed to the influence of Caitanya's Gaudiya Vaisnavism in neighbouring Bengal where Radha is as important as Krishna.

## Negotiations With Sringara in *Raas Leela*

When we are talking of the absences of the erotic strain of emotion in Borgeet or in music by Sankardeva or Madhavdeva, it is interesting how some rare mentions of erotic love or sringara love have been negotiated with. For instance, *Hara Mohana* section of Kirtan Ghosa, which is comprised of 10 kirtanas with 98 verses based on Bhagavata Purana, is one of the best pieces of poetry by Sankardeva. It has highly erotic words that Hara addresses to Mohini and the erotic sentiment is shown in beautiful imagery. But at the end, Sankardeva strikes a note of warning, “the dire illusion created by woman is the most hideous of all illusions”<sup>89</sup>. This suggests that even though the devotee listener or singer is let a hint of the erotic sentiment of the world, it is only to suggest at the end that it simply distracts one from the path of bhakti; that bhakti is a larger goal and sringara rasa, as necessary as it is, is only a part of the worldly trap of life, which one has to surpass to reach the prime rasa, i.e., the bhakti rasa.

The most interesting examples come from *Keligopala Naat* which is performed during the Rasa Leela. The songs that are sung in this Naat are *Raas Geet* and some are also taken from the collection of Borgeet. In some of these songs (which are not Borgeet), there are very explicit mentions of erotic love between Krishna and the gopis. So explicit are these images that one practitioner, named Runumoni Saikia, who is in the chorus team in one of the groups who perform Raas Lila every year in Majuli, acknowledges that many a time she is even ‘ashamed’ to sing or teach these songs as they clearly talk of the breasts of the gopis and how they are touched by Krishna. In trying to find the text of some of these songs, I have come across a collection by Krishna Goswami, who is from the Bordowa sattra tradition.

The composition *Xoroto Xixeeni nixi dhovoli odhiko , Lohu lohu moloya powono tothi thiko*,<sup>90</sup> talks about a breezy moonlit autumn night in Brindavana, when Krishna sits playing the flute, and the Kama bhavana is aroused in the gopis, who have abandoned their households, husbands and sons in order to come to Krishna.<sup>91</sup> In Another Raas Geet, *Kexobe korotu keli gopini xonge ronge*,<sup>92</sup> on being asked by Krishna to return to their household, the gopis prayed to him to not separate them from him as they cannot bear the pang of *viraha*

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<sup>89</sup> Neog, *Early History*, 169.

<sup>90</sup> Krishna Goswami, *Kexobo Korotu Keli* (Majuli Samguri: Sattra, 2012), 38.

<sup>91</sup> free translation from Krishna Goswami’s compilation in Assamese.

<sup>92</sup> Goswami, *Kexobo Korotu Keli* , 43.



(separation). Krishna yields in and starts doing leela with them. He smiles sensuously at somebody or he kisses somebody on her cheek. He leaves his nail marks on the ‘high soft parts of their bodies’, meaning the breasts. The gopis thus relish this kama bhavana.

Interestingly, even these extremely bold erotic compositions are also negotiated with a similar idea. Hari Prasad Saikia of Bhogpur sattrā in Majuli articulates the understanding of sringara in a certain way. He calls sringara as the inevitable process by which the world runs. Even though Sankardeva starts from sringara, he takes it to the level of bhakti, as sringara is not the prime goal. Sringara only lies in the path from birth to death. Talking of the Raas Leela, Saikia says :

it is us looking at it as sringara, while it is spiritual actually. It is the gopis that are thinking that Krishna is looking at them with sringara. But Krishna is ‘*ananga keli*’ who leads them through this path to liberate them at the end.<sup>93</sup> (translated from Assamese)

What we see is that through music and dance, the idea is to move from a worldly sringara rasa towards a higher spiritual goal. In the description of Raas Krida, it is said that “*Sringara Roxe jara Aase rati Aako xuni houko nirmal moti*||” basically meaning that seeing Krishna’s RasaKrida with the gopis, the devotees need to take even sringara as a mode of education to reach the spiritual and to make a better society<sup>94</sup>.

That it is not a prayer song of Borgeet but meant for a role play in a Naat sets the ground for the understanding that these songs are meant to be vehicles for a bigger idea. A Naat or Sattriya dance is also presented as a prayer to God, but it is mostly performed for an audience, which is human. In order for the gopis to understand that sringara is a worldly emotion which is not the ultimate, the gopis are made to go through the pleasures of sringara for Krishna, for them to understand at the end that it is not all. Similarly, seeing the roles of gopis played by characters in a Naat like Keligopala, the audience is also expected to reach the same understanding.

However as opposed to the Raas Geet as shown above, a Borgeet is not meant for that same purpose. It is meant to be a prayer song. It is meant to provide the prayer which one

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<sup>93</sup> Hari Prasad Saikia, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Bhogpur Sattrā Majuli, 25 November 2015.

<sup>94</sup> Malavika Borgohain , “*Raas Krida*,” Axomiya Pratidin, Nov 22, 2015 , Accessed Nov 22, 2015.

would subjectively relate with. *Smarana* mode of bhakti asks one to recollect god's leela, that is why some Borgeet would be a bounty of pictures of Krishna's glory. *Kirtana* mode of bhakti suggests chanting god's names and glorifications, that is why through singing a Borgeet one would purify oneself. *Sravana* would be listening to oneself as well as others singing the lord's divinities. Thus, through a Borgeet one would go through several modes of bhakti, involving various sensory organs. Borgeet is a lesson on how life should be, and how one should leave all maya to surrender at the lord's feet as a servant. It is not a play of roles. It would not confuse the devotee with the intermediary sringara through interplay of different roles. It would directly intend to evoke the required bhakti bhava through the text and its meanings.

### Music and Cognition

Speaking of metaphors, Mark Johnsons argues that "metaphors are not mere figures of speech, rather are the fundamental means through which we as embodied being orient ourselves with respect to the world and thereby structure our discourses and our cognition"<sup>95</sup>. Susan McClary in her critical musicology on Western music, uses Johnson's argument to assert that music works like this metaphor in society, which orients our cognition, 'fabricates our sexuality' and is very often concerned with the arousing and channelling of desire<sup>96</sup>. I see a resonance of these ideas when Upendranath Sarma, speaking on Borgeet, says:

Sankardeva shunned the *madhura* conception for fear of its having an undesirable influence upon the conduct of the ignorant devotees. However passionately attached to the lord, the cry of a devotee is the cry of a servant to his master far removed from the cry of a loving woman to her adored one. The leitmotif of these cries as enshrined in Borgeet is a yearning to escape from the bondage of the flesh.<sup>97</sup>

Within this framework of music shaping the cognition, it is interesting to combine Rose Rosengard Subotnik's argument of ideological beliefs leading to human and musical utterance. One can look at Sankardeva's religious ideological and philosophical beliefs shaping his move away from any Sakti related energy, be it an image or food or color, as a "*fabrication of sexuality*". The fabrication of sexuality in this case happens at the level of

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<sup>95</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 23.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>97</sup> Upendranath Sarma, *The Poetry of Sankardeva* (Guwahati :Forum for Sankardeva Studies, 2000),18.

regulating the sexuality of the devotee at the level of thought itself. In Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, we see this regulative fabrication in the negation of a certain strand of erotic element in the lyrical aspect of Borgeet. We see the larger continuation of it still amidst the sattriya culture in the negotiations with the existing eroticism in the Raas songs. The code of conduct that Sarma suggests, keeps one's imagination away from an imagination of an engagement with a feminine energy, which may herald the possibility of erotic sexuality in the cognition. This leads the utterances within the Borgeet compositions or in other Vaishnavite music of Sankardeva's brand, to negate any female principle at all because it could require a bhakta to imagine how the desire of an erotic relation might seem like.

From the ideological removal of Sakti ritualistic excesses to the erasure of a female figure in the compositions, is a gradual movement in the process of regulation of the cognition so as to remove an erotic strand of imagination in the devotee. This fabrication of sexuality is a fabrication of an 'excess', which is not only reflected in the ritualistic simplicity of the lifestyle but also in the musical energy. From the taming down of a high tandava-like energy of the Sakta musical rhythm to a mild lasya-like energy of a Sankari rhythm, one can see a certain construction in the musicality too, which is again a reflection of the ideological belief shaping the musical utterance.

### III.

## **Femininity and Masculinity**

One can undoubtedly see the negation of erotic, erasure of a sringara strain, regulation of sexuality and even a fear of the 'female' principle in Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, which has been discussed with various examples. However, what I find interesting is that in the writings of present scholars, there is an attempt of rendering these erasures, a certain meaning of *masculinity*. SK Chatterjee, writing on Sankardeva and Caitanya, tries to render a moralistic touch of masculinity to Sankardeva's character when he says:

...the amoral and antisocial ideal of the figures of the *parakiya* (or another man's wife) has always had the risk of bringing in eroticism and even moral turpitude and this was carefully avoided by Sankardeva.<sup>98</sup>

..Sankardeva's *eka sarana nama dharma* or mahapurush sect as it is called agreed more with the robust and manly path favoured by Kabir and Nanak and later Tulsidas....it was the path of man's straightforward faith in his Master, without his assuming the nature of a woman.<sup>99</sup>

While taking Kabir's example for justifying his point, Chatterjee perhaps was not aware of the numerous compositions of Kabir wherein he does assume the voice of a woman. It is true however as Purushottam Agrawal points out, that this empathy did not change much of Kabir's social views on the woman, who he still considered an 'evil distraction'. But the assumption of Chatterjee that a male bhakta in his devotion has to come with a sense of moralistic manliness, is what I am contesting. This in fact is another kind of scholarly 'fabrication of manliness', which gets even better when Chatterjee further says:

The robust character of the Sankardeva Order came out in the form of devastating rebellion when the Vaisnavas of its Maomariya sub-sect rose as one against the State in the face of a menace to the honour of their guru and their faith. Like the Khalsa, the militant Sikh theocracy founded by Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708) which fought valiantly against the Mughals, the Maomariyas raised their crusade against the strong central Ahom power....<sup>100</sup>

In the same line of thought, Chatterjee suggests that Caitanya's Vaisnavism fell into 'degradation' after his death because of his inculcation of madhura rasa in his Krishna bhakti as Radha<sup>101</sup>. Even Lakshminath Bezbarua of Assam has used a judgmental binary in attributing the causes of Caitanya's 'degradation' coming from the factor that Caitanya's *prema* was eccentric, ecstatic and sentimentally excitable, as opposed to Sankardeva's mindful and reserved sobriety. Bezbarua has quoted the inclusion of Radha-Krishna prema bhava as a deviation in Caitanya, which is something Sankardeva avoided, as Radha was not looked at as a lover even in Bhagavata Purana, which was the biggest point of reference for

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<sup>98</sup> Maheswar Neog, *The Creative Force*, 282.

<sup>99</sup> Neog, *The Creative Force*, 283.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>101</sup> Maheswar Neog, *The Creative Force Behind the Sankardeva Renaissance, Bhakti and Other Aspects of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement* (Guwahati: Maheswar Nirmala Neog Publication, 2011), 307.

Sankardeva's tenets of bhakti.<sup>102</sup> It doesn't take a lot to see the kind of binary fabricated here. A 'moral bhakti' is the one where it is as 'masculine' as the ones portrayed by manly-Kabir, Nanak and Sankardeva, whereas its fate is an immoral degradation if it is 'feminine' and based on madhura-love as that of Caitanya. Interestingly, Maheswar Neog, who is one of the most important figures to have produced the largest gamut of work on Vaisnavism in Assam, follows a similar trajectory in building the iconicity of Sankardeva as a 'heroic-manly' and 'masculine' figure. Although he did not go ahead to give a moralistic touch of male-masculinity touch as Chatterjee, he did color a certain kind of macho strength to his character when he writes:

His eyes lotus-like large and extremely charming; his complexion is like the light of the moon. His gait looks like the lovely pace of an elephant. His voice is deep like thunder....with excellent health and physical strength in youth, he took by the horns of a bull.<sup>103</sup>

What is needed at this point is a complication of this binary of man-masculinity and female-femininity in the context of Bhakti and especially in the case of Assamese Vaisnavism.

### **Lasya Femininity in the Male Bhakta of the Sattra**

*Tandava* is generally seen as a vigorous/masculine energy, and *lasya* as a soft/ feminine energy. The conception basically offers a balance of cosmic energies — male/female, yin/yang — in their exposition<sup>104</sup>. The *tandava* aspect is characterised by sharp, forceful movements that aim to capture the essence of the underlying *bhava* (sentiment). The *lasya* elements are represented by movements that are soft and fluid, and seem to merge into one another in a graceful blur with no sharp edges<sup>105</sup>. According to myth, after the demon '*Tripurasur*' was killed by Lord Siva, he danced in rage i.e. *Tandava*. Then to pacify and please him, Goddess Uma performed a soft and *Sringarik* dance, which is called '*Lasya*'<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> Lakshminath Bezbarua, *Sri Sri Sankardeva* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2004), 111-115.

<sup>103</sup> Neog, *Early History*, 121.

<sup>104</sup> Vani B. Pahwa, "Tandava-Lasya: The Cosmic Fusion", *The Hindu*, March 12, 2016, Accessed on 5 July 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/vani-b-pahwa-on-tandavalasya-the-cosmic-fusion/article8341726.ece>

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> "Tandava and lasya", *Nad Sadhna*, accessed on 5 July 2016, <http://www.nadsadhna.com/pages/IndianMusic/Dance.asp?About=Tandav>

There is a general inclination to associate tandava with masculine, siva-like, vigorous energy, and lasya as feminine, sakti-like, soft energy.

In our case of comparison however, this equation is reversed. The earlier *udatta* tandava like energy of the Sakta practices in Assam which one sees in the example of Deodhani, is associated with a female energy, as it is for the propitiation of a female goddess and it dances on the narrations and praises of a Devi. Sankardeva tamed down that energy and intensity by bringing down the intensity in various ways in his practices, making it mild and soft. It became less tandavic, more lasya-like. Despite the fact that the negation of the erotic femininity, or rather ‘female’ principle, happens at one level in the performance text, in the level of energy in the culture of Sankari practices, the energy becomes feminine and lasya like soft. The discussion on cognition and music takes us to a point to understand how Sankardeva’s erasure of erotic feminine imagination would keep away the bhaktas from a certain realm of imagination. However, if the body of the Bhakta was also always closed from such desires, remains a question. Even if it is not a desire for the erotic, the desire whatsoever for a female body, or for a feminine being, is something one cannot close with certain acts of cognitive regulation.

On asking Bhobananda Borbayan of Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā, about the role of ‘feminine’ inside the sattrā, he said something interesting and here I quote (translated from Assamese):

The child has some connection with femininity. If the sattrā’s small bhakta plays Siva, he will never look like the *mahatandava* of Siva. It looks like he is doing *komala-tandava*...they naturally get attracted by those selection of roles like that of the gopis and that automatically brings a certain amount of lasya gracefulness in their bodies...

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While Hari Prasad Saikia of Bhogpur sattrā, who is a Borbayan (one who trains in instrumentation), on being asked about the female roles being performed by men inside the sattrā Naat<sup>108</sup>, said (translated from Assamese):

The girls do not have to think since they don’t have to prove their ‘feminine identity’.

On the other hand the boys, who act female parts, have to think. But we see the boys

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<sup>107</sup> Bhobananda Borbayan, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Sankardeva Bhavan New Delhi, 8 August 2015.

<sup>108</sup> Plays like Keligopala, and in Parijat Haran all have female roles to play which in the performances of the sattrā are played by male bhaktas themselves

imbibe the femininity so well that even after the play, they walk and behave like the females. Even the girls nowadays don't walk like girls at all but these boys do it so well....in sattrra however, there is a problem..Since everything is so away from sringara, it becomes difficult to teach them certain things.. sringara abhinaya is very subtle..and even though Sankardeva has written such beautiful imageries of sringara in the songs and in the Naat , we are not able to inculcate them in the teaching , since the erotic is difficult to teach without an experience like that.<sup>109</sup>

In both the statements, we find the dichotomy of male/female as masculine/feminine getting dissolved. While there is a concern of male actors not able to internalize certain erotic feminine aspects of the female roles, there is also a claim that the idea of 'femininity' is understood better by many bhaktas, over prolonged acting of a certain female role. Clearly the idea of femininity that is understood by Saikia is the conventional soft, lasya like idea of a feminine. The body of the child monk is another reflection of the lasya feminine energy within the masculine environment of the male-dominated sattrra. The child monk has certain amount of femininity in the tenderness of his age, as Bhobananda Borbayan suggests. The idea of beauty pleases them a lot which is why they get attracted towards the softer manifestations in the role of the gopis. Amidst the claims of a macho-manly masculinity of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the male-dominated space of the sattrra has a nuanced sense of femininity, lasya and soft, is what one can see.

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<sup>109</sup> Hari Prasad Saikia, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Dakhinpaat Sattrra Majuli, 3 December 2016.



Image 2 : From Bordowa Sattrā, children (male) getting dressed up before a bhaona. (Taken on 15 September, 2015)



## Lasya Femininity in Madhavdeva's Borgeet

Apart from the more obvious physical manifestations of these energies in the body of the bhakta, there is a certain kind of lasya and femininity even within the prescribed execution of some compositions of Borgeet. While we know of Sankardeva's compositions as mostly dealing with the deeper questions of life, Madhavdeva is where the child Krishna is portrayed. The serious melodic structure and rhythmic and temporal pattern are related mostly to the compositions of Sankardeva where the bhava aspired to be evoked is dasya. Those compositions by Sankardeva and some even by Madhavdeva, evoke the grave emotions like karuna and sometimes even bhayanaka and vibhatsa in describing the dark sides of the world around us. These compositions ask the devotee to surrender as a servant to the feet of the Lord Rama, as he is the Ultimate rescuer.

However, the compositions which try to evoke vatsalya are mostly composed by Madhavdeva. They take on the prankster Krishna's tricks as subjects. No matter how constricted, there is even a dramatic space for a child *Radha* inside the text of these compositions, as we have seen. They focus on Krishna's marvels and trickery mostly. In order to capture the mood of the themes, the musical arrangements of these compositions are also light and easy. They don't demand the austerity of the dasya bhava compositions of Sankardeva, but are lighter like their content. They have a lasya like energy too. As we know, a adept handling of vilambit (slow), Madhya (medium) and drut (fast) tempo can stimulate profound pain, excitement etc. "As with swara movement and curvedness, laya also stimulates attention and attraction. Monotonous or uniform rhythm tends to induce quietude or soporificity while movement suggests activeness"<sup>110</sup>, and this is the kind of playful activeness Madhavdeva's compositions facilitate.

In most compositions of Madhavdeva, the long vilambit laya (slow tempo) talas are replaced by small Madhya laya (medium tempo) talas. Say for example, the composition *Aajju gopinath pekholu*<sup>111</sup> which describes the *saguna* image of the playful child Krishna is set in *patpari tala*<sup>112</sup>. Patpari is a short 4-matra tala.<sup>113</sup> With every quick return to the Sama(X), another cycle starts, making the flow more rhythmic and danceable. This rhythm

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<sup>110</sup> R. Sathyannarayana, *Karnataka Music As Aesthetic Form* (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2004), 42.

<sup>111</sup> For the English translation of the lyrics of the composition, refer to p11 of this chapter.

<sup>112</sup> In Barpeta tradition at least, it is performed on Patpari mostly.

<sup>113</sup> [Thei dhinthak            thenikhiti            takdheni]

(tala) and tempo (laya) facilitates a playful arrangement of the composition. These compositions do not have the ecstatic intensity like the deodhani music, but they also do not have the extreme austerity of the dasya bhava compositions. They lie in a middle ground where they allow for certain lightness. They allow an austere deeper understanding of bhakti but through the merrier side of Krishna's stories.

Thus even though on one level, there is an absence of a feminine presence in the lyrical and musical content, as well as in the physical absence of women within the sattra, the subtle reappearance and existence of 'feminine' takes place through the soft and light lasya energy that we see in the music and dance practices of the Sankari culture. Masculinity and femininity exist at the same time and so does tandava and lasya within the same body.

## Concluding Thoughts

In the discourse of Hindustani Classical music, the erotic as understood within the context of sringara rasa and the feminine has been delineated very specifically with respect to the 'semi-classical' or 'light-classical' form of 'thumri', as opposed to the Khyal or most importantly Dhrupad genre. It is based on the fact that there is "mild eroticism", "dramatic gesture" "evocative love poetry" in the singing of thumri. Historically too, thumri has been a genre mostly bound to the womenfolk, mostly 'baiji' and 'tawaif'<sup>114</sup>. In view of that so-called tainted association, it remains still a marginalized choice in the repertoire of many 'respectable' singers<sup>115</sup>. It is replete with musical embellishments which evoke an erotic impression, like the '*nakhra*' (coquettishness)<sup>116</sup> in the broken voice of Rasoolan Bai, or the *murkis* which are as light as feather. Today the understanding of erotic of this feminine form has become as interesting as it has become conspicuous to the connoisseur ear.

However, the obvious male-dominated, claimed to be 'non-erotic' nature of the sattra and its practices, led my curiosity to find an 'erotic' or sringara rasa which was consciously erased. The absence of an 'erotic' guided my curiosity to look for an erotic that 'could have been'. But the most important challenge was to *not* look for the erotic with the same

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<sup>114</sup> Thumri was said to have evolved out of the dance form of Kathak, probably somewhere around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and sung mostly by the courtesans of the court, who were called 'baiji' or 'tawaif'.

<sup>115</sup> It is only recently that thumri has become a popular choice in the repertoire of concerts. But till recent past, it was only kept as a last optional piece by singers in concerts.

<sup>116</sup> In thumri, breaking the voice is one of the ways of inducing a sense of such a seduction in the singing.

understanding as that of ‘thumri’. In a completely different cultural set up, the challenge was to look for its own definition of erotic and femininity.

In the context of Assam, a sense of erotic *sringara rasa* is to be found in the local indigenous forms like Bihu where the erotic themes of love-making are as openly discussed as the harvest of the season, making it a *loka-dharmi* genre related to the day to day desires and aspirations of human lives. Most importantly it is also to be found in the cult of Sakti which is the ‘other’ in this case. Erotic sexuality being understood as a distracting ‘excess’ in Neo-Vaisnavism, it could then be located perhaps in the esoteric ritualistic practices of the Devi cult. The dissociation from this nature of erotic is then desired in the form of a cognitive erasure of the entire thread of thought which may lead to the erotic desire – something which would be undesirable for the Vaisnava bhaktas. This dissociation is something one can see translated through the taming down of the energy of the Sakta rhythm. One can find the translation of this dissociation also in the moving away from the common discussion of erotic love, or themes producing *madhura bhava*, in the lyrics of Borgeet.

In the end however, one can see the traces of the feminine, *lasya* energy reappear even within the male-dominated *sattras* practices; not only in the body of the child monk and in the male body working the female role, but also in the mild texture and rhythmic lightness of the Madhavdeva’s compositions which evoke *vatsalya*. Femininity exists in the desire for an understanding of the female body, in the “liminal”<sup>117</sup> body state of the child bhakta, in the seeking of beauty of the feminine kind, as well as in the lighter musical energy of the *vatsalya* compositions of Madhavdeva.

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<sup>117</sup> “Liminality” is a “mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic ‘in-betweenness’ allows for norms to be suspended, challenged, played with and perhaps even transformed”. See: Joe McKenzie, ‘The Liminal Norm’ in *The Performance Studies Reader*, second edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 26-31. 27.

## Chapter 2

### Reading Bhakti in Musicality of Borgeet

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In 2001, Kabin Das, who is a musician from Barpeta, rendered a Vaisnav *malita*<sup>118</sup> in a seminar in Chennai, following which R. Venkataraman, a Carnatic classical musician and Veena player, walked up to him and told him his experience as a listener. Venkataraman expressed that even though he could not understand a single word of what Das sang, he felt as if the soul was crying, and that stirred his soul too!<sup>119</sup>

There are three things that came to my mind hearing this experience: one, that in musical experiences, there is something beyond the words and the cultural context that works for a listener. Due to this ‘something’ which seems to be universal, despite countless differences between cultures, music is said to transcend boundaries. Secondly, Parinita Goswami, a Borgeet musician from Assam made an observation that the *Komal Nishadh* and *Komal Gandhara* are two common occurrences in the melodies of Borgeet<sup>120</sup>. And thirdly, in the Classical Sanskrit text *Brihaddesi*, Matanga Muni has remarked that Komal Nishadh should evoke the *karuna rasa*<sup>121</sup> (emotion of sorrow or pathos). The connection that I am trying to make through all three remarks and Kabin Das’s experience, is not too difficult to comprehend. Apart from the text as the primary location of meaning, there can be meanings situated in musical elements too, because of which Venkataraman, a complete stranger to Kabin Das at that point of time, could find a meaningful emotion in his rendition. Performers like Goswami are struck by the occurrences and re-occurrences of certain elements in the musical passages they render, which encourages me to think of the possible meanings of sentimental value in the repeated tonal passages in music. Aestheticians like Matanga Muni have tried ages ago to make sense of some of those meanings by connecting *rasa* and *swara*.

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<sup>118</sup> ‘*hey pranonodhu krisno kriparo xagoro onu eko kora doya maya duro oo....*’ was the *malita* that Kabin Das sang. A *malita* is a piece of ballad.

<sup>119</sup> Kabin Das, interview by Dipanjali Deka, Barpeta, 28 September 2015.

<sup>120</sup> Parinita Goswami, “*Bargeet: Asam Ka Shastriya Sangeet*” in Devashruti, ed. Parinita Goswami and Dev Bharadwaj (Chandigarh: Kafla Inter-Continental, 2010), 229.

<sup>121</sup> **Matanga Muni**, *Brihaddesi*, ed. Prem Lata Sharma (New Delhi : Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts ; Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1992), 49 .

As a music researcher it fascinates me to locate such meanings of emotional arousals in music, beyond its text and cultural context.

Apart from the cultural historical way of looking at Borgeet bhakti, that we did in the previous chapter, another way is to look at bhakti as an emotion or sentiment that is evoked in the devotee in his/her relation with God. There is a relation that is built with a supreme God or divine, irrespective of whether that supreme is considered formless (*nirguna*) or in form (*saguna*), whether one looks at Krisna or Siva, or whether one looks at God as a lover or master or a friend. For almost all the bhaktas around, poetry and music, become predominant modes in the expression of this sentiment of love.

In the previous chapter, I try to reach these sentiments through the sociological framework, where the philosophical and aesthetic frameworks were used only as a distant reference points. In this chapter I shall prioritize the understanding of musical and lyrical elements through the philosophical tenets and aesthetic grounds of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Can all kinds of musical utterances reach a certain kind of bhava or only certain kind of musical elements facilitate certain sentiment arousal, remains the primary question. This chapter would be a musical interrogation of the 'poignancy' and 'sublimity' that is generally associated with Borgeet. Scholars have mostly given importance to the lyrical aspects while discussing Bhakti poetry and music. However, I argue that the perspectives can be enriched with engagements with the musical elements of swaras (notes), alamkaras (musical embellishments), laya (tempo) and tala (rhythm) also to look at Bhakti, keeping intact the lyrical, aesthetic as well as cultural understanding.

## I.

### ***Smarana, Kirtana, Padasevan through Borgeet***

While elaborating on the different ways of expressing bhakti<sup>122</sup>, Sankardeva elaborates the efficacy of listening to the names and activities of the supreme deity, Sri-Krishna. This

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<sup>122</sup> The nine modes of Bhakti : sravana(listening to the recital of the Name and Glories of Hari) , kirtana (recital of the Glories and Name of Hari),smarana(recalling of or meditation upon the Lord's Form) ,arcan(worship of the Lord's image with flowers, etc.),vandana(obeisance),padasevana(personal services) ,dasya(a servant's devotion to the Lord) ,sakhya(a friend's love to the Lord) and atmanivedana(self-surrender at the Lord's Feet).

efficacious mode is called *sravana*<sup>123</sup>. He talks of the efficacy of the chanting of god's names and activities through *kirtana*<sup>124</sup> and the efficacy of the recollection of or meditation upon the lord through *smarana* mode of *Bhakti*<sup>125</sup>. Of the nine kinds of *bhakti* mentioned in *Bhagavata Purana*, which is Sankardeva's most significant reference, *padasevan* is a mode which is manifested time and again in Sankardeva's works. *Padasevan* is the surrendering of the devotee at the feet of the Lord, which enables him to cross the rough sea of the world. In the rendering of the devotional poetry of Borgeet, one can see such modes of *bhakti* being undertaken.

In the repertoire of Borgeet, the number of compositions which talk of the feet of Lord Rama as the ultimate rescue for the devotee, is innumerable. Say for instance, *Pawe Pori Hori* (I beseech falling on thy feet) by Sankardeva is a soulful, devout call to the saviour Hari. It says that the mind is as fickle as the water on a lotus leaf from which the Feet of Rama appears as the recourse. Again in *Mono Meri Ramo soronohi laagu* (O my mind, rest in Rama's feet), Rama's lotus feet are sought, to escape from the mind which is the epicentre of all evils. These compositions, and many more, become a clear reflection of how the limbs of the Lord become the centre of devotion, reflecting the *dasya bhakti* of a servant for the master. In *Narayana sorone koroho gohari* (I pray at the feet of Narayana), Sankardeva prays at the feet of Narayana to be unbound from the entanglements of mundane pleasures. He curses the nose that seeks good smell, the palate seeking nice taste, ears running after pleasurable sounds, eyes seeking beauty and skin seeking sensual touch; because these sensory desires are hindrances in his worshipping the Lord.<sup>126</sup> In all the above compositions and many others as such, there is a sense that in order to control the mind, what goes into the mind through the sensory organs has to be controlled. It is ultimately the sensory organs which bring in the evils of desires, which corrupt the mind and make it fickle, distancing it from the Lotus feet of Lord.

Here the modes of *bhakti* endorsed by Sankardeva, *sravana*, *smarana* and *kirtana* can be seen as ways of disciplining the senses. The ears that run after various sounds should be made to listen to only the name of the Lord. The mouth that engages in mundane tastes and

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<sup>123</sup> As elaborated in Chapter 6 of the *Bhakti Ratnakara*. See: Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vasinava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008), 209.

<sup>124</sup> As elaborated in Chapter 7 of the *Bhakti Ratnakara*, *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> As elaborated in Chapter 8 of the *Bhakti Ratnakara*, *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, *Great Songs: English Rendering of Srimanta Sankardeva's Bargit* (Nagaon : Society for Srimanta Sankardeva, 2012), 10.

talks should be made to chant and recite only the glory of Rama. The mind that is evil and corrupt from all the preoccupations with mundane pleasures should be preoccupied with the remembrances of his *leela*. This is a reflection of how the modes of bhakti that Sankardeva prescribes in his Bhakti Ratnkara, find a way into the text of the Borgeet compositions. Through this, it also becomes a mode in itself by making possible sravana, smarana and kirtana for the devotee listener and singer. The songs themselves become a way of the purification of the senses and thus also of the mind. Since even for this purification to be possible the blessing of the Lord is needed, in all these songs there is a call to Hari for such a blessing.

However, apart from a manifestation of the *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* philosophy in the lyrics of Borgeet, we see expressions of the bhakti philosophy in the musical expressions as well. In order to start reading bhakti in the musicality, let us set out with the beginning of the structure of the rendition of Borgeet, i.e. the *Raga-Alap*. Alap as we mostly know from Hindustani Classical Music, is the beginning of the raga performance, which is the elaboration of the notes of the raga without any rhythm. As SK Saxena says, “alap brings out the spaciousness, repose and dignity that are implicit in a raga; even its power to elevate and encompass us in the way of a rarefied atmosphere”<sup>127</sup>.

Borgeet also has such an alap-*ansh*, which is called *Raga Diya* or *Raga Tana* in Assam. Raga Diya has 2-3 parts –some call them *ghor* and *tolani*, others call them *dharan charan ghuran*<sup>128</sup>. All renditions of Borgeet are supposed to begin by such an *alap-ansh* elaboration of the Raga. In Hindustani Classical music, the alap can be done with the plain swaras or in *aakar*, which is elaboration of the swaras (notes) through the vowels ‘aa’, and some musicians even employ the *nom tom hari antare tom* in Dhrupad. But in Borgeet it is necessary to do the alap with phrases of God’s names like ‘Hari’ and ‘Rama’, and not simply using swaras or their aakar. The ones in the Bordowa tradition start their alap with *Krisna Sankara Guru*, giving the same status to the Guru (spiritual preceptor), i.e. Sankardeva, as that of Lord Krishna. This repetition of the God’s names in the alap, which is the beginning of the rendition itself, seems to me as the beginning of the musical manifestation of the philosophy of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. Chanting the names of God is part of the bhakti

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<sup>127</sup> SK Saxena, *Hindustani Music and aesthetics: A Selective Study* (New Delhi : Sangeet Natak Akademi Hope India Publications,2009), 96.

<sup>128</sup> Parinita Goswami, “*Bargeet: Asam Ka Shastriya Sangeet*” in Devashruti, ed. Parinita Goswami and Dev Bharadwaj (Chandigarh: Kafla Inter-Continental, 2010), 227.

path and here the Rama-Nama chanting is not only to be there in the text or in the day-to-day ritualistic processes of the bhaktas in the sattras (monasteries), but the names are also musically manoeuvred to become a part of every bit of the musical structure of the renditions.

## II.

### ***‘Alamkarik’ Regulation of ‘Excess’***

Ornamentation or embellishment is something that increases “the potentiality for beauty by setting of a body part to better or more attractive appearance, by concealing plainness, inadequacy or blemish”<sup>129</sup>. We see ornamentation in everything, starting from textile and architecture to jewelleries and dance. Music is no exception either, and in Indian music, there are different ways how a piece can be ornamented. *Gamak, lahak, soot, meend, kampit, andolan* and so on are some ways through which not just individual swaras but the whole run of tonal passages can be beautified<sup>130</sup>. For evoking an emotion such as karuna in the listeners uniformly, singing or playing has to depend on exaggerated gamak techniques<sup>131</sup>, which can create an effect of crying. There could be other techniques for creation of other affects. Sathyanarayana talks in the context of Carnatic Music but we also see how in Classical and semi-classical Hindustani music forms there are such techniques. In semi-classical genres like *thumri* and *kajri, murkis, zamzama* and so on become significant melodic tools in embellishing the form. Through these tools, the journey from one note to another is done in a rapid succession making it difficult for the listener to pinpoint the exact locus of the journey made, but this journey embellishes the piece aurally. Thumri singers especially use a lot of such improvisatory ornamentation and voice modulation, which help evoke the erotic *nakhra* (coquettishness) that is present in the lyrics.

However, there is a difference in the way one needs to look at aesthetic embellishments in the context of Assamese music, especially Borgeet. There is a simplicity which is visible in every aspect of the life within a sattra (monastery). There is no sense of ‘excess’ even in the visual imagery on the walls of the sattra. B. Datta while describing the

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<sup>129</sup> R. Sathyanarayana, *Karnataka Music As Aesthetic Form* (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2004), 49.

<sup>130</sup> Sathyanarayana, *Karnataka Music*, 46.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 34.



artist Sankardeva who was as much a critic, mentions that according to Sankardeva, the fundamental rules for good art were: “avoidance of excess, application of restraint and concern for economy and balance”<sup>132</sup>. We find these aspects reflected in every aspect of the traditions of sattrā. It is connected to the overall notion of social aesthetics as in understood in general in sattrā. There is restraint in the lifestyle of the monk. Starting from the white clothes the bhaktas (monks) wear to the *sattvik* food they eat, to the life of abstinence from sex and wine that they live, everything has a sense of restraint and balance. Here, one needs to make a broader social connection with the removal of ‘esoteric excesses’ that Sankardeva’s Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma signifies. From its inception, it fought against the worship of multiple gods and goddesses and endorsed the worship of only one Lord Vishnu. It relinquished the requirement of rituals, yoga, sacrifices and any kind of practice which is an excess, and simplified the practice of devotion down. This restraint and regulation has an impact on the overall aesthetics of the cultures of the sattrā and also vice versa, that the prescribed aesthetics has an impact on the lives of the devotees. This lived experience, removed of excesses of any kind is seen in all the practices that they engage in, including music, dance and theatre.

One very important manifestation of this is the minimalistic nature of the ornamentation or alamkara in Borgeet. Girikanta Goswami discusses the poetics of Borgeet (*arthalamkara* and *shabdalamkara*) bringing out a linguistic study of the Brajavali language used in Borgeet. However, what I observe in this chapter are the melodic tools or alamkaras that are seen in the rendition of Borgeet commonly. In Borgeet singing, there is an utmost economy of flourishes, at par with the regulation of excesses in other aspects. Out of all kinds of alamkaras, the one kind that is most seen in Borgeet is like that of a *meend*, which is a glissando slide movement from one swara (note) to another. Each note in a meend movement is covered with much effort and emphasis.<sup>133</sup> In Borgeet, it is as if all the notes of a composition are connected by meend. Let me clarify at this moment that ‘Meend’ is a term I borrow from the Hindustani Classical music vocabulary to make one understand this point. Musicians would not use this term in Borgeet teaching and also there is not yet a local term for this feature. This conflict also appeared in my conversation with Krishna Goswami, a

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<sup>132</sup> Birendranath Datta, “Rediscovering Sankardeva : A Challenging But Rewarding Journey”(paper presented at the ‘Workshop on Bhakti Traditions in India from 6<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century’ organized by Sahitya Akademi in Association with Sahapedia, Guwahati, Assam, May 26, 2016).

<sup>133</sup> This appears in some Ragas even in Hindustani Classical singing, say for example in Raga *Kedar*, the movement from Sa to Ma is typically done with *Meend* kind of gliding.

music practitioner and teacher of Borgeet, who agreed that many features just come down orally without having a particular term. However, the idea that I am trying to portray is similar to that of a meend in which there is an effort taken to go through all the semi-tones and microtones from one note to another. This requires a certain amount of breath control which then calls for patience, balance and conservation of energy in making possible such musical movements. Its verbal and emotional dignity is conveyed by slow, elephantine movements and utmost economy of flourishes, decorations and physical gestures. It is almost as if one hopes to evoke the devotion and the sacred through the meditative attention to an effortful singing along with the ascetic restriction of the physicality. This kind of movement is different from a murki, wherein the movement from one note to another through a number of semitones may be so intricate and quick that an unskilled ear may fail to catch the flow. It is not economically flourished but instead done with a sense of luxury, unlike a meend (glide) or a meend-like movement in Borgeet.

In the singing of *Pawe Pori Hori*, one observes that the move from *pa* to *we* and *po* to *ri* and *ho* to *ri*, is a river like connection of notes and semitones, almost as an effort to go through all the musical spaces. Similarly, in *mono meri Ramo soronohi laagu*, the first word *mo-no* covers the distance from *Pancham* (Pa) to *Sadja* (Sa) with a similar glide. The whole song moves like a river, generating a feeling of pathos to the ears. This kind of *karuna* (sorrow) is different from the kind of *karuna* that Sathyanaryana talks about through the technique of *gamak*. This is less like a weeping, but more like a devout appeal of an exhausted devotee asking to be given a space in the Lord's feet. This is more of a helplessness of a devotee, which takes the form of a musical prayer for refuge.

Rupjyoti Ojah, who is a practitioner and teacher based in Guwahati, talks about a "ladder like movement"<sup>134</sup> of the notes in a Borgeet constantly moving up and down the scale and to and fro from one octave to another. Very rarely is this movement done rapidly. It is done with a slow, effortful and patient movement. In a way it gives a sense of the tortuous roads of worldly illusions which the text talks about in Borgeet. These roads are inevitable and venomous yet they have to be gone through. The ladder like movement of *alamkaras* make learning Borgeet very difficult, and it is also resonant of the difficulty that a human faces adhering to the path of *Bhakti*. This resonates what Hari Prasad Saikia of Majuli says about Sankardeva's *Vaisnavism*, that from the outset it seems like an easy journey but the

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<sup>134</sup> Rupjyoti Ojah, Interview By Dipanjali Deka, Jun 26 2015.

living and following of the Vaishnavite principles of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva is difficult at a deeper level. The more one delves into it, the more hurdles one finds. The learning of a Borgeet is something similar. It might look like a simple journey of swaras (notes) at the beginning, but once one starts learning/singing it, one realizes that it is not easy to remember the twists, swirls, turns and round-about paths in every small turn in a single verse.

In Brihaddesi, Matanga says that when in the melodic rendering the swaras move to and fro in mutual directions along with the last one (of the preceding phase forming the beginning of the succeeding phrase), or two by two, that is known as the *sancarin* (circulatory) *varna*<sup>135</sup>. We have no certain evidence of Sankardeva referring to this Classical Indian text of music, but this idea I find something similar to the way the swaras are treated in a Borgeet. A felt elevation in the upward *arohan* movement of swaras and dropping back into peaceful settling down in the downward *avarohan* is constantly played around in a *sancarin*. Many Borgeet compositions play around this *sancarin* kind of movement. The moment one thinks of settling down, there would be another move up to the *tara saptak* (highest octave) and back and forth again. Somehow it resonates well with the tension that is reflected in the text of Sankardeva as well. The tension repeatedly talks of the irrelevance of the worldly life and the pursuit of the devotee (Sankara himself here) to come down to the feet of Rama for *mukti* (salvation), who again fails because being a human he is pulled away back again by *maya*. In *Narayana kaahe bhokoti* by Sankardeva there is a sense of acceptance of the fact that Sankardeva as a subject is doing a sin in serving the hunger of the stomach by killing organisms, and since Narayana is there in almost all beings, it is a sin towards Narayana. The poet narrates one by one all these inevitable worldly sins in each verse. There is a poignant sense of realization of this inevitable cycle of violence for selfish reasons and that only the name of Narayana can be the sole rescue.<sup>136</sup> Now when we look at the movement of the swaras in the same composition (*Narayana Kaahe*) which is set in Raga Dhanasri in Paritala, we can look at them as a spiral movement of one long string with continuous, unbroken movement<sup>137</sup>. Since the tala is long with 14 *matras* (beats) in vilambit (slow tempo), the words cannot be consumed superficially, but have to be sustained and regulated according to the rhythm and the metre. The words and the breath are in an integral

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<sup>135</sup> **Matanga Muni**, *Brihaddesi*, ed. Prem Lata Sharma (New Delhi : Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts ; Motilal Banarsidass Publishers,1992) , 87.

<sup>136</sup> Baapchandra Mahanta, *Borgeet* (Guwahati, Student Stores: 2014), 68.

<sup>137</sup> “Borgeet Narayan Kaahe Bhokoti Koru.” Youtube Video, 6:37. Posted [September 12, 2012].  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ndwj0yDhfGo>.

relationship of letting each other thrive. So, the sancarin movement of the swaras with the meend (glide) treatment from one note to another is like musically establishing the truth of the inevitable tortuous cycle of life that one has to go through.

### III.

## Vilambit Laya Shapes the Aesthetics of Borgeet Bhakti

While reading the bhakti rasa of Borgeet with its musicality, another significant factor to be taken into account is the laya. Laya is fundamentally relating to the temporal aspect of music. “Rhythm is tala which is nothing but laya as measured and organized with the help of beats or matras and *vibhags* (segments); and that as an element of the art of music, laya may be said to have priority over rhythm”<sup>138</sup>. The physical attributes of rhythm (laya) like those of the musical note also have potential to express sthayibhavas (latent emotions) like *soka* (sorrow). A skilful treatment of vilambit (slow), madhya (medium) and drut (fast) tempo can suggest, stimulate or simulate profound pain, excitement etc. “as with swara movement and curvedness, laya also stimulates attention and attraction”<sup>139</sup>. Often one hears music listeners saying they experience pleasure, enthusiasm, repose, merriness or happiness. Music produces both “bodily and mental effects on listeners because of these physical attributes of swara and laya”<sup>140</sup>.

Expression of peace, poise, and tranquillity calls for the vilambit (slow) idiom and alacrity demands the gallop of drut (fast) taans<sup>141</sup>. Of sorrow as wan, perhaps a very proper vehicle is a gently drooping curve covering, say, swaras (notes) from the mandra saptak (lower octave); and to express intensity of yearning or lament one has to project the tara (upper octave) swaras.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Sathyanarayana, *Karnataka Music*, 107.

<sup>139</sup> A metrical rhythm (*chanda*) has many possibilities of expressing moods.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>141</sup> Usually understood as a quick elaboration of swaras (notes) in Hindustani Classical music.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* 294-5.

Numerous Borgeet compositions appropriately reflect this idea. The devout appeal that we vividly see in Borgeet is also because of the vilambit laya associated with the songs. Be it *Mono Meri Ramo Choronohu*, *Alo moi ki kohobo dukho*, or *Narayan Kaahe bhokoti*, they are full of pathos more so because the words are entwined in the vilambit (slow) tempo of the long talas. The meend (glide) that we talked about in detail is a feature which comes to its maximum glory in a vilambit laya. The effortful engagement of each word within each matra (beat) and conscious attainment of the sama (first beat of tala) is also manifested best in slow tempo. Thus, it is not a random happening that the bhava of bhakti of Borgeet is featuring best in this laya. Again, it becomes very important here to differentiate between the bhava of dasya that Sankardeva's compositions are replete with and the bhava of vatsalya that Madhavdeva's compositions are best examples of.

The compositions of Madhavdeva are mostly on the childish pranks of Krishna evoking the vatsalya bhava (mother-child love/ parental love). The lyrics are replete with the playfulness of Krishna's *leela*. That sense of urgency and critical addressing of the futility of worldly desires that we see in Sankardeva's lyrics, is replaced by the dramatic glorification of Krishna and his mischievous plays in Madhadeva. For instance, in *Aaju Gopinath Pekholu Aawe*, each detail is described to an extent that a lifelike image is formed in front of the eyes of the listener. The body of Krishna, his clothes, his poises, his jewellerys, his activities, everything is described in utmost detail. His dark body is covered by *peetavastra* (yellow clothes). His eyes look like red lotus. His forehead, covered with sandalwood *tilak* and his hair adorned with peacock feather, makes him so beautiful that it can even lure Kamadeva. Standing with arched eyebrow and eyes in a *tribhanga* (contrapposto) posture the music from his flute bewitches all around him. From his head to his toe, all the parts and their beauty have been described in much detail, leaving almost nothing to the imagination of the listener. The saguna essence that even Sankardeva refers to as important for Bhakti, is reflected in its utmost glory in the Borgeet of Madhavdeva.

Now musically also something different happens in these compositions. The long vilambit laya (slow tempo) talas are replaced by small madhya laya (medium tempo) talas. The above composition say for example is set in Patpari tala in Barpeta tradition.

Paritala is a short 4-matra<sup>143</sup> tala with the theka <sup>144</sup>:

[*Thei dhinthak thenikhiti takdheni*]

X

Here the sama (the first and generally the stressed beat of the tala, here represented by ‘X’) returns after every 4 matras (beats), making the composition almost a danceable number<sup>145</sup>. This rhythm (tala) and tempo (laya) makes possible a lighter and playful arrangement of the song. This composition mostly plays around in the madhya saptak (middle octave) leaving little pressure on voice but more focus on the lyrical beauty of the detailing. Each verse in the tonal passage, unleashes glorification of one small physical detail of Krishna. It is almost like a narrative epic poetry reading which opens up little by little to the audience.

However, in vilambit , madhya or drut kinds of laya manifestation, what one needs to see is that a different bhava is being detailed. The vilambit laya encapsulated in a long Paritala helps manifest best the dasya bhava which is mostly found in the compositions of Sankardeva. The meditative possibility of such an arrangement helps feature the devout appeal of the servant-like devotee to the Master divine, where one looks for rescue from all *maya*. On the other hand, the madhya or drut laya of short talas like Patpari help manifest the vatsalya bhava evoked most in compositions by Madhavdeva. They provide for a lighter kind of engagement with the text of the livelier subjects of child Krishna’s leela.

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<sup>143</sup> A matra in a tala is a measure of the duration between two normal divisions or segments.

<sup>144</sup> Theka is an arrangement of sound-syllables (bol) employed in percussions like *tabla* or *pakhwaj* and in this case *khol*, designed to reflect the structural features of the tala. Thei , dhinthak and so on are theka here and the marks X is a part of the matras.

<sup>145</sup> That way the compositions of Madhadeva are very dramatic and perhaps that is why they are even used for Ankiya Nat and Jhumura dance in Kamalabari Sattrā often.

## IV.

### **Rama's Feet: The Anchor of All Emotions and *Sama* of the *Santa Rasa***

The word *sama* in the subheading has multiple number of meanings in different contexts. In Sufism, *sama* refers to 'listening'. We are going to look at this word in two different settings now.

#### **a. Santa Rasa and Sama (Peace)**

Edwin Gerow while discussing the Santa Rasa by Abhinavagupta says:

..**santa rasa** is **tranquillity**, whose stable emotional basis (*sthayibhava*) is **peace (sama)**, ..... it is produced by conditional factors, such as ascetic practice, association with ascetics, etc... that it is portrayed through consequential factors (*anubhava*) such as the absence of desire and anger and that its transitory (affective states) ....its *vyabhichari bhava* are steadfastness (*dhrti*), reflection (*mati*) etc.<sup>146</sup>

The *anubhava* and *vyabhichari bhavas* both are reminders of the bhakta's life in the *sattra*. The restraint of sex, meat and wine is a major effort towards an ascetic life. This life is sought to be free of desire and anger that is to be attained, ultimately leading one towards **a state of tranquillity and peace (sama)**.

#### **b. Sama in music**

The *sama* in music is the first beat of a *tala*, which is the beginning of every cycle of the rhythm. As SK Saxena says, it is also the "aesthetic centre of the rhythmic cycle". Any pattern which completes itself (designedly) a little before the (standard) *sama* may be said to provide an instance of *anagat griha* — *anagat* here meaning that the proper *sama* has not yet arrived. Contrarily, a pattern which ends a little after the standard *sama* may be taken to provide a case of *ateet griha*----the word meaning; gone by, past<sup>147</sup>.

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<sup>146</sup> Edwin Gerow, "Abhinavagupta's Aesthetics as a Speculative Paradigm," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114(1994): 194.

<sup>147</sup> Saxena, *Hindustani Music and Aesthetics*, 125.

## Rama's Feet as the Embodiment of Sama

O mind, Rest in Rama's feet

Look! Death is approaching

O mind, the python of time is swallowing

This is how death comes, bit by bit

O mind, body's fall is for sure

Praise Rama and give up Maya.

( translation : H.S. Shiva Prakash )

Replete with a self-negating emotion of a devotee praying for complete surrender at the feet of the Master, this is believed to be the first Borgeet composed by Sankardeva. Here too the 'Lotus feet of Rama' appears, being one of the most consistent motifs in most number of Borgeets by Sankardeva. This reflects *dasya bhava* and the *padasevan* mode of *bhakti* that Sankardeva prescribes, the emotion of a servant for his master. However, I want to look more deeply at the idea of the Lotus feet as the site of refuge of the devotee. One need not look at the repetitive motif of the 'Lotus feet of Rama' as a mere ontological reflection of the *dasya bhava* in the text, but phenomenologically too it may have a larger meaning in the composition as such, not just in the text but also in the musicality.

In Sankardeva's compositions where he condemns all the worldly desires of senses as illusionary, the description of Lord Rama's feet appears as the only real, ultimate refuge for the devotee. In the above composition where the poet addresses his mind as if it is a separate entity, it is sort of a warning to the mind to not get swayed away by the illusions of life, to not get deviated by the materialistic happiness as the final goal. The mind somehow is the epicentre of all the evils because it is the one that is fickle like *water on a lotus leaf*. So many compositions of Sankardeva are basically about this whole idea of *bhakti* for Hari in order to not get delusional by *maya* of the world or by the lures of the sensory pleasures. While all



relations, desires and attachment and knowledge seem to be looked at as unreal, the feet of Rama seem to be the only real thing to be aspired for by the devotees.

It is almost as if the Lotus feet of Rama, which stand as the embodiment of the Master, are the **anchor regulating all the sensory emotions** of the servant (dasya) devotee. Also, the devotee deliberately craves for blessing for such a regulation to occur, as we saw even in *Pawe Pori Hori*. It is the feet which the devotee himself comes back to, so that it can pin the bhakta down to the worthy motive of life, ie, bhakti. It is a poetic achievement of Padasevan mode of Bhakti here.

Other compositions like *Nahi Nahi Romoya Bine*, renounces pilgrimages , fasting, penance, holy fire, yoga, effort , incantation and ritualistic performances as they do not endow salvation. It asks the ‘foolish’ bhakta to get rid of the maya of ‘mother, father and wife’ and to hold onto the feet of Rama. It asks to give up mundane attachment and desires so as to resort to Naranaya’s feet. Sankardeva sees that all the bhavas of anger, love, lust, greed are but transitory and these have to be renounced for the greater goal to be achieved, i.e., bhakti, at **the feet of Rama, and here is where tranquillity and peace Santa (sama) can be achieved**. We can read this as a move away from all the ‘excesses’ of life, towards the main motive of life, the Lord’s feet.

However, at the same time, one should also know Sankardeva does not seek for nirvana (liberation) through bhakti. He looks at bhakti as an end in itself and not as a means to an end. So perhaps for that purpose, the appearance of the feet appears as real where the idea of the poem is to not finally leave you at an illusion but to bring you back to the real, where one can continue the bhakti sadhana of the Lord at his Feet. **The feet become the centre of peace, the centre or starting point sama, to be returned to after all that is experienced in the world**. And since that returning is not a final end, but a process in itself, it is complex. One strives to reach that balance of sama, but since the world is an illusion, the illusion works on the mind and the mind goes astray. So the reaching of the sama, straying again and reaching back yet again, is a continuous painstaking process and not an end. Thus, the Feet of Lord Rama becomes a metaphorical centre of sama (peace) as the sthayibhava (latent emotional basis) of santa rasa (tranquility).

## Music and Sama in Borgeet

There is a remarkable freedom in Hindustani Classical music in playing around with the sama (rhythmic centre) of the tala. Performers do a lot of improvisations and *layakari* (rhythmic play) with the percussion to come back to the sama after any number of cycles. Anagat griha (completion of tonal pattern before sama) and atet griha (completion of tonal pattern after sama) are both seen in the improvisations. However, unlike the Hindustani singers, there is limited freedom for a Borgeet singer in terms of its discipline of restricting itself within the tala<sup>148</sup>. The words hold the tala and the tala hold the words completely. Unlike classical singing where the performer can take rest in between within the tala, in Borgeet there is hardly such liberty. There is a liberty and freedom in Hindustani music in being able to improvise as long as one wants in an alap (elaboration of notes) session or tana (rapid succession of notes) in Hindustani rendition. As long as one comes back within tala it matters less how many cycles of the tala one covers. As long as one catches up with the sama after two or three cycles, it does not matter. Neither does it matter significantly if one holds the anagat griha or the atet griha. In fact that deviation will sometimes embellish the rendition. But in Borgeet, there is an attempt to reach the sama without any deviation. A symmetric harmony is achieved in an **on-the-dot attainment of sama, on the completion of the cycle on the precise mark**. However, it is not just the beginning of the cycle that I refer to here, but the beginning of every matra (beat) of the tala. For example, in a 14-beat Bisom tala, and a composition set on it like *Naahi Naahi Romoya Bine*,

|         |            |        |        |       |  |
|---------|------------|--------|--------|-------|--|
| Dhinnak | girgirdhin | Na~Khi | Ta~dhi | Na~ta |  |
| Na      | ~~         | Hi     | Na     | ~~    |  |
| X       |            |        | 2      |       |  |

|       |          |         |       |          |  |
|-------|----------|---------|-------|----------|--|
| Tao~~ | Khititak | TakDhei | ~ tak | Dheitata |  |
| Hi    | ~~~      | Ro      | ~~~   | Mo       |  |
| 3     |          | X       |       |          |  |

<sup>148</sup> Goswami, “*Bargeet: Asam Ka Shastriya Sangeet*”, 230.

|                   |              |  |             |                              |
|-------------------|--------------|--|-------------|------------------------------|
| <u>Khithidhin</u> | <u>Na~ta</u> |  | <u>Tao~</u> | <u>Girgirgirgir</u>          |
| Ya                | ~~           |  | Bi          | Ne                           |
| 2                 |              |  | 3           | (1 <sup>st</sup> cycle over) |

|                |                   |               |  |               |              |  |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------|--|---------------|--------------|--|
| <u>Dhinnak</u> | <u>girgirdhin</u> | <u>Na~Khi</u> |  | <u>Ta~dhi</u> | <u>Na~ta</u> |  |
| Ta             | ~~                | Po            |  | Ta            | ~~           |  |
| X              |                   |               |  | 2             |              |  |

|             |                 |  |                |              |                 |  |
|-------------|-----------------|--|----------------|--------------|-----------------|--|
| <u>Tao~</u> | <u>Khititak</u> |  | <u>TakDhei</u> | <u>~ tak</u> | <u>Dheitata</u> |  |
| Ro          | Ko              |  | Ko             | ~~~          | ~~              |  |
| 3           |                 |  | X              |              |                 |  |

|                   |              |  |             |                              |
|-------------------|--------------|--|-------------|------------------------------|
| <u>Khithidhin</u> | <u>Na~ta</u> |  | <u>Tao~</u> | <u>Girgirgirgir</u>          |
| ii                | ~~           |  | ~~          | ~~                           |
| 2                 |              |  | 3           | (2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle over) |

|                |                   |               |  |               |              |  |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------|--|---------------|--------------|--|
| <u>Dhinnak</u> | <u>girgirdhin</u> | <u>Na~Khi</u> |  | <u>Ta~dhi</u> | <u>Na~ta</u> |  |
| Pa             | ~~                | Ra            |  | Ma            | ~~           |  |
| X              |                   |               |  | 2             |              |  |

..... (3<sup>rd</sup> cycle)

*Naahi* starts with the Sama (X) of the tala, and in 1 *avartan* (cycle) over the full tala, it reaches the word *Taroko*. Here, two things will happen. There would not be a delay or an advance in catching the next line on sama (X) again. The singer tries to catch *paramananda* of the next line exactly on the sama (X) without a delay or advance. Not only that, but under the '*tadi nata tao khititak*' theka (bol) of the tala, all the words are expected to fall on the beats of the tala on-the-dot. The words and the tala are bound strongly. This lesson on trying to catch the matra (beat) appropriately, has been given ample number of times to me even in my own experiences with Rupjyoti Ojah.

I argue that there is an aesthetic harmony and peace sought in making every syllable fall into their place in the cycle of the tala, despite the difficulty of keeping such consciousness of calculation. There is constant movement from one octave to another, but nowhere does one lightly cross over any note superficially. One goes through each note with effort and emphasis, covering most tonal passages with a meend-like glissando movement. But with graceful alacrity of that glissando, one needs to be aware of when and where to place the next word in the cycle. A Borgeet singer would not venture into much improvisation or embellishment at the cost of a precise placement of the tala. This harmony of attaining the sama (X) and to bind every word to the matra (beats) of the tala, is something I read as the musical and rhythmic attainment of *santa rasa* which is constantly pursued in the rendition. At this point, the 'musical sama' and the idea of 'sama as peace' coincide. On every on-the dot attainment of the matra (beat), there is a symmetry and harmony that the singer tries to attain. If the to and fro movements from one octave to another reflect the tortuousness of the worldly life, the constant maintaining of the rhythmic sama is an attempt to keep coming back to the sama (peace) of the *santa bhakti rasa*. So, by musically coming back to the sama of the tala on the dot, there is also a sama (peace) of the *santa rasa* that the performer attains in a way.

Here let us combine all the ideas of sama that we have seen so far. One is to look at the feet of Rama as the metaphorical sama (peace), another the attainment of the sama as the aesthetic harmonic centre of the rhythm, and thirdly to look at the sama as the *sthayibhava* of the *santa rasa*. Seeking sama (peace) at Rama's feet is to be achieved through all conditional factors of ascetism and relinquishment. It is the constant perseverance of the singer to keep coming back to the feet of the Lord for liberation. In the process it metaphorically also becomes the *sthayibhava sama* of the *santa rasa* through an attainment of the Feet as the spiritual centre. Musically, the harmony of attaining the sama again and again after the

sancarin, is also metaphorically like the harmony of attaining the feet of Rama again and again with much effort, after repeatedly going through cycles of the mundane affairs of life. Thus the sama is not only the aesthetic centre of the cycle of the tala, but also **the aesthetic centre of santa rasa**, and by virtue of being the aesthetic centre of the santa rasa i.e. peace , it is also the centre of dasya bhakti at the Feet of the Lord.

## V.

### **Borgeet: Saguna or Nirguna?**

In 2002 in a conversation with Linda Heiss and Krishna Kant Shukla, the family members of Kumar Gandharva, while talking about his treatment of the swaras when he sings nirguna *bhajans* of Kabir, said something interesting. They said: “classical swaras are different from nirgun swaras...in sagun there is a picture, a form, a person. In nirgun there is no picture, no form. In nirgun swaras there is no outline..its all in the **phenk**.”<sup>149</sup> The verb phenk is something which Kumarji uses often for bringing forth the nirgun voice, where *phenkna* literally means to throw or to hurl. The nirgun voice is thrown or shot, with great power but substantially without striking anything. In Kumarji’s own words, we get more sense of this quality of music when he says:

Where does my music come from? Does it come only from notes, tempo, rhythm? Is it bound within the seven notes of the scale? Or is it from a place these things do not reach, from where some hint (*sanket*) arises, some suggestion (*dhvani*) of sound or resonance (*nad-ninad*). It this where music lies? To this day, I can not decide. Certainly it is not bound within the notes. Sometimes I try to grasp it, but it keeps receding away farther and farther away from me....<sup>150</sup>

Neela Kirkire spoke of her own experience of hearing Kumar Gandharva sing nirgun:

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<sup>149</sup> Linda Heiss, *Singing Emptiness Kumar Gandharva Performs the Poetry of Kabir* (London New York Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), 36.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid*, 24.

Nirgun and sagun are two streams among *sants*. In sagun there are Ram and Krishna, there are objects of devotion..nirgun is related to nature (*nisarg*). There is no concrete image to worship. The sky, the sun and moon and so on, are inside the body. ....the *total carefree abandon* of kabir, I have seen it in Kumarji.....in his swaras, I *lost my entire identity*. There is only the sound (swara), the voice. When he was carried away in the swaras, he became free of all cares...he became Kabir. <sup>151</sup>

There is a reason behind me going into such detailed description of what a nirguna might imply, or how nirguna music may be rendered through the voice of one of the most noteworthy *Kalakaar* of nirguna bhajan, Kumar Gandharva. It is because, that is one way of looking at bhakti poetry, either as saguna or as nirguna. Linda Heiss in her commendable work on exploring the nirguna swara through his voice, talks about a sense of abandon, non-concreteness, formlessness, infiniteness and indefiniteness which is experienced in the reading or listening of Kabir through Kumar Gandharva. As Linda Heiss in her work tries to find out nirguna musical manifestation of a nirguna poetry, it may be interesting to think of a saguna musical understanding of a saguna poetry too. There might be swaras or ragas common to both kind of singing, but the way the swaras are treated in each kind will be different.

This becomes important for me because it sets me into a pursuit of finding out what Borgeet essentially means: a saguna or a nirguna form? : And how that can be reflected in the musicality. Since I began my chapter with a hope of not reducing my engagement only with the lyrical component, this journey of finding out how a saguna swara (if at all there is one) is sung, becomes very significant.

Sankardeva followed consistently the commentary of Sridharaswami, an ascetic of the monistic school of Sankaracharya. In Bhagavata Purana, God has been described as immanent and transcendental and having both nirguna (attributeless) and saguna (having attributes). Sankardeva in his Bhakti Ratnakara, “without denying the indeterminate and attributeless aspect of God laid more stress on the saguna aspect because loving devotion demands a personal God”<sup>152</sup>. Baapchandra Mahanta, interpreting Sankardeva, discusses the focus on saguna, saying that one cannot rip apart from the saguna essence and in sadhana one cannot totally discard the nirguna essence either. The saguna is the leela of the *vishwa*

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>152</sup>Satyendranath Sarma, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati : Gauhati University, Department of Publication: 1966), 257.

nirguna and maya is also part of the nirguna brahma leela. **That is why the way is to find nirguna within the saguna**<sup>153154</sup>.

In the compositions of Madhavdeva, the saguna image is quite clear. The form of Krishna or any other avatar of Vishnu as an object of devotion, the praise of all his bodily attributes, the glorification of all his activities is a part of the saguna worship. The nature (nisarg) of nirguna poetry is here replaced by description of attributes of Krishna. They are mostly however simple and touching, and do not use very metaphorical language like his Guru. It attempts to tell simple narratives of the Bala-Krishna and gives a clear essence of saguna bhakti.

However, I find it interesting to analyse the compositions of Sankardeva where the saguna image is not frequently seen. In fact his songs mostly have a sense of a nirguna worship. There is an essence of nirguna in the metaphors he uses for the futility of the human body, much like in nirguna poetry and there is a feeling as if the devotee is seeking for a transcendent liberation beyond the world. But we need to be careful to understand that, even though he uses highly subtle language for the transience of the human life and critiques all ritualistic form of worship and scriptures, he still comes back to an immanent form of surrender to his Lord at his Feet. He is not looking for a way beyond, but on the feet of Rama. There may be no anthropomorphic image of the deity, but the feet become a form, a concrete image of worship in the devotee's imagination. The idea that Baapchandra Mahanta talks about, that nirguna essence is to be found in the saguna essence, can be seen in Sankardeva.

However, apart from the lyrics, musically also can we find a way of articulating such a feature of a singing which has both saguna and nirguna? The phenk that Kumar talks about in his nirgun singing of Kabir, do we see a counterpart here? When Neela Kirkire talks about that total carefree abandon of Kabir which is reflected in Kumar's swaras, where she loses her entire identity, I would like to explore if there is a carefree abandon in Borgeet singing too, or is it something else.

Let us begin with the analysis of one of Sankardeva's Borgeet, *Gopale Ki goti koile re Govinde*. There is a sense of urgency in the call of Sankardeva in this composition. There is a

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<sup>153</sup> Baapchandra Mahanta, *Borgeet*, 12.

<sup>154</sup> Much like "Tulsidas managed to maintain a co-relation between nirguna and saguna bhakti." See: (Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective: a Study in the History of Ideas*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2002), 25.

sense of bhayanaka (fear) rasa in the description of the metaphors which compare the worldly desires with fearful imageries of animals. There are images of maya as a deer, of greed as a tiger, of kama (lust) and krodh (anger) as dogs, and all these eating him alive. These are images signifying the peak of all dangers which pose imminent threat to Sankardeva.

The composition starts with a very powerful sadja (Sa) and rishabh (Re) for the first word ‘Gopale’, in the tara saptak (upper octave), with a pattern going like “Go~Pa~Le~” on “Sa~SaReSa”<sup>155</sup>. It is here interesting that according to Brihaddesi, vira (heroicism), raudra (anger) and adbhuta (surprise) rasas should be reflected by sadja and risabha swaras<sup>156</sup>. Each pada (verse) of the composition starts in the mandra saptak (lower octave) and roams around with a sense of deep pondering in the lower octave for half the verse. Then with the second line, the singer would immediately reach the tara Sa (Sadja) again with a sense of urgency. The wielding power with which the Tara Sa is reached again and again easily makes one have a feeling of ecstasy. It conveys a sense of urgency that the words mean. The uncertainty of the futile and the illusionary, is felt at the elevation of the Tara Sa (Upper Sa). However, as everything culminates with the devotee resting on Hari’s feet for rescue, the music too constantly comes back to a resting peace. It journeys around all three octaves, gallops on the drut laya (fast tempo) of the tala, with a restlessness very similar to the rasas of adbhuta (surprise) and bhayanaka (fear) conveyed in the words. But as the prime rasa of Borgeet, bhakti, suggests a coming back to the feet of the Rama, the tonal passages also come back. With the end of the song which says *Natho, bipholo boyoxe sobo gelire* it starts receding back into the madhya (middle octave) and then to the mandra saptak (lower octave) at the end.

Overall it does not make one lose into emptiness, as would a nirguna rendition of Kabir by Kumar. In the structure of the proposed rendition, what we see is that there is a sense of a throw (phenk) like Kumar Gandharva in a lot of places, but nowhere there is a total carefree abandon of the swara. The swara is thrown away in the air, but soon enough the voice lassoes it down and grasps it into control back to its place. The way the swara is left in the air by Kumar Gandharva to explore the depth of it, is not seen in the Borgeet. It will explore for a while, going deep into it, but it also comes back within a frame eventually. The ‘sense of aloneness’, the ‘failure to grasp the notes receding away’, a ‘carefree abandon’ of a

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<sup>155</sup>“borgeet gopale ki goti koile” YoutubeVideo, 7:16. Posted[September 24 2012].  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX1I6FpMyfw>.

<sup>156</sup> Matanga, *Brihaddesi*, 49. However, the words heroicism, anger and surprise are not the direct meanings of the rasas but are the sthayibhavas (stable emotional basis or latent emotion) that give rise to the vira, raudra and adbhuta rasas respectively. For the purpose of ease, here the bhavas and rasas are almost used interchangeably.



nirguna swara , is replaced by a sense of control , a consciousness to come back to a centre, a careful bounding oneself within an image , of a saguna swara.

As Parinita Goswami said, in Borgeet singing there is a control over the words and tala, over the swara and its movement all the time. There appears to be a sense of clarity always as to where to place a swara, which swaras and ragas to use<sup>157</sup> for a particular composition and where the sama (rhythmic centre) is. We discussed the idea of the sama already in the previous section. That becomes very crucial here in this understanding of nirguna combined with saguna. The sama as we discussed as the on-the-dot attainment of the notes and words in tala as well as the peace of attaining the feet of the Lord, both become the regulator of the voice here. The voice which can easily lose itself in a throw, is regulated back by a discipline of *sama* in rhythm, a *sama* of peace as well as a *sama* attainment of the holy feet of Lord as the centre of devotion. There is a sense of nirguna like losing consciousness of the voice in the elevation of tara Sa, yet soon enough the loss is held back. So, as Baapchandra Mahanta talked of the co-existence of saguna and nirguna in Borgeet, we may read a musical manifestation of that co-existence here.

Emotions are manifested in different mystical traditions in different ways; in many sufi singing for example, it ranges till extreme ecstasy, where the devotee can start dancing and whirling and may even become unconscious. Caitanya Mahaprabhu is said to have moaned in ecstasy in his kirtana-singing. But in a Borgeet rendition however, such ecstasy, musical or physical, is never seen. “In bhakti as opposed to sufi, it is not transcendence but immanence that is sought”<sup>158</sup> and in Borgeet this aspect is seen very strongly. In sufi, there are many upward movements of the tonal passages and it aims to stay there in essence. Whereas in Borgeet, it reaches upwards in its movements to the tara saptak and more, but it also comes back at the end at the feet of Rama, which is the only real place for liberation. The ecstasy of going out of the realm of the world, is not played out totally in Borgeet. It is a surrender of a different kind in Borgeet. It is uplifting but not to transcend one beyond the world but to make one more immanent. Physically too, in the austerity that is associated with the singing of Borgeet, especially in sattras<sup>159</sup>, there is almost an ascetic control of gestural and bodily movement, which is important to understand the kind of consciousness that we are

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<sup>157</sup> As has already been mentioned that Sankardeva and Madhavdeva both prescribed Ragas for the composition they wrote.

<sup>158</sup> H.S. Shiva Prakash, Discussion with Dipanjali Deka, New Delhi, 14 April 2016.

<sup>159</sup> This physical austerity is mostly seen followed even when Borgeet is performed on stages outside of Sattras and they are mostly done as an act of reverence towards the tradition.

talking about. This can also be connected in opposition to the idea of losing control that we see in the Deodhani dance of the Sakta practices. Beyond the need for control of consciousness that is reflected within the text of the compositions, the control of consciousness is seen in the musical control of the throw of the notes, in bringing them back to a discipline of rhythm and laya, and in the attainment of the aesthetic centre of sama, which is not only the musical rhythmic aesthetic centre but also the philosophical, devotional and aesthetic centre for the dasya bhava of the devotee. The to and fro movement, the swirling and turning about of the swaras as discussed in the above example of *Gopale ki goti koile*, shows a possibility of a loss of the swara in the nature, but the need for a constant consciousness of the devotee controls it down, showing a musical manifestation of the nirguna-within-saguna essence of the Borgeet bhakti.

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## Chapter 3

### When Devotion Becomes Performance

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Listening through an array of Borgeet links in Youtube a year ago, I came across a link titled:

“Singer: Sanghamitra Bharali || Folk Classical Fusion Borgeet || Song: Nahi Nahi”<sup>160</sup>

What followed was 9 minutes and 57 seconds of an aural experience which raised a number of questions. Set in *Raga Gauri* and *Tala Bisom*, *Nahi Nahi Romoya Bine* is a Borgeet composed by Sankardeva. In this song, Sankardeva denounces everything from pilgrimage, yoga and rituals to mother, father and wife as *maya* (illusions), and affirms Rama’s feet as the only real rescue. Through a very poignant flow of notes, starting from *mandra saptak* (lower octave) to *tara* (upper octave) and back again to *mandra*, *Nahi Nahi* provides a scope for a meditative journey of the voice through unseen passages. However, do I get that meditative experience in Sanghamitra’s version, remains a question worth pondering over. Instead of the conventional *raga-alap* of *Raga Gauri*, she starts with a Sanskrit *sloka*, which was shockingly followed by a male voice rapping through his spiritual ‘*gyan*’ in English. Filled with rocker thrilling cries amidst an arrangement of Western orchestration devoid of the sound of *khol* (percussion used with Borgeet) and flute, the rendition failed to become a reminder of a community where *bhakti* is a day to day experience. To justify its title, it also included a ‘classical’ piece on *tabla* leading upto the last *pada* (verse), making it sound incongruous at the least. In an admixture (fusion) of western and indigenous elements, the result that came out left me with an intense sense of alienation from the sonic experience of Borgeet that I was acquainted with. Now, is this sense of alienation in me because of a familiarity of how Borgeet sounds in the context of a *sattrā* (monastery), and will somebody who is new to this genre also feel the same alienation?

This phenomenon is something which is not limited to the genre of *bhakti* but to other indigenous forms as well. We have started seeing this lately with the era of modernization setting in the last century, and especially after the post 1990s frenzy of digitized music.

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<sup>160</sup> Sanghamitra Bharali. “Singer:Sanghamitra Bharali || Folk Classical Fusion Borgeet || Song:Nahi Nahi ||”. Youtube video, 09:57. Posted [May 1, 2014]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-1iMwLDpd0>.

Devotion as an experience is falling apart as the local and the indigenous is lost in the midst of a global hysteria for ‘spectacle’ or ‘representation’. I take both these terms from Guy Debord’s *Society of Spectacles* in which he aptly talks of the world we live in, where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation”.<sup>161</sup> “Being into having” and “having into appearing” has become the norm for all our experiences, according to Debord.

Taking specifically the case of Borgeet, this chapter would examine some shifts that I see taking place in recent times: A shift of Borgeet from the realm of bhakti in a local community world, to the realm of performance outside of that spatial and temporal context. Firstly, by understanding this shift, I explore what primarily we see as bhakti and what kind of shift makes it a performance. Secondly, I look at what kind of consequential anxieties occur because of these shifts. And thirdly, I *question the existing polarizations, including my own*, and try to problematize the debate more with many unresolved questions of whether our understanding of bhakti and performance could be so simplified in binaries.

## I.

### **When (Does) Devotion Become/s Performance?**

#### **Community shift**

It was the winter of December 2014. We were in Uttar Kamalabari sattra in Majuli. In the dimly lit naamghar (prayer-hall) of the sattra, we sat waiting for the bhaktas to come for the evening prasanga (recital). While we sat, we heard a voice in the distance singing the Borgeet, *Gopala ki goti koile*. In the darkness of the rural night, amidst only the creaking sound of crickets, the crystal sharp voice was clearly that of a young monk. It made a peaceful entry into the darkness of the night. It seemed as if he was singing it aloud as he was walking or may be working. As we sat listening to it, another quite similar young voice from another direction joined him in the next line of the song. We could not see either of them as they were outside the Naamghar as we sat inside, and we were also not sure if even both were

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<sup>161</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacles* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

in visible proximity of each other either. However, as they kept singing for some time together, the profound realization that came to me was the sense of a community that existed in that space. One knew the song as much as the other did. These bhaktas who were left there in their early childhood, learnt everything together, right from playing the khol to reaping their own harvest.

There is sharing and contagion, both of which are very significant to understand even the concept of bhakti. The term bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhaj* which means "to divide, apportion, share." In the religious sphere, bhakti denotes an attitude of devotion on the part of a worshiper to a personal god. In such an atmosphere "devotees are linked with their god and with one another by a bond of "shared" love"<sup>162</sup>.

Bhakti is meant to provide a space where co-devotees share their devotion through all their senses. In that experience of sharing amidst co-travellers in the same journey, there are certain acts. The devotees in Uttar Kamalabari sattrā who later that evening came in the prayer-hall and carried out the prasanga playing the khol and singing the Ghosa, were deeply absorbed in the music they sang for God as we sat watching. With a certain everyday-ness, they enacted within that space. These 'cultural enactments',<sup>163</sup> as Shiva Prakash would call them, are repeated as a community on a daily, monthly and yearly basis. They are mostly enacted as services to God without a need for an audience, the sole audience being the Lord himself. Sometimes they also perform for an audience on occasions such as the Raas Leela, DouL Utsav or Krishna Janmastami, where the entire village community would participate. The audience's participation is also of a certain kind. They would sit the whole night till morning, watching the Raas 'performed' by the bhaktas (devotees), without complaining of the time. They can leave and come anytime they please. If the space of the sattrā contains one community, the village space is a bigger circle of community on which the impact of the sattriya culture is seen to a large extent. It is more of a shared culture between both these communities.

The space of the sattrā and the spaces around it become a context for the performance practices too. What creates that context includes the space, the dress, the environment, the religious ritualistic prasangas as well as the company of the fellow bhaktas. Ashok Ranade while talking on music in a religious ritualistic environment, says:

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<sup>162</sup> Norman Cutter , *Songs of Experience : The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>163</sup> H.S. Shiva Prakash, Discussion with Dipanjali Deka, New Delhi, 14 April 2016.

Sounds of conches and bells, talas, *mridanga*, fragrances of sandalwood, *dhoop*, the use of reds, yellows and the blues, closure of eyes and the insistence of loud recitation, etc. occur commonly in rituals. Intention is to ensure *channelization* of the otherwise unceasing wanderings of the mind. This is the reason why formulation of rituals is keen on symbolistic use of colors, shapes, tastes, smells, and sounds.<sup>164</sup>

I observe a similar aesthetic and social *channelization* in the environment of the sattrā. When I asked Bandana Deka, who is a practitioner of Borgeet as well as a regular visitor of the Godmur soru sattrā in Majuli, what is it really that she thinks facilitates the bhakti in the singing of Borgeet in the sattrā, she told me that it is not always solely the song or the text, it is definitely more than that<sup>165</sup>. The entire lifestyle of the bhaktas revolves around a certain kind of living. They eat *sattvika* food, wear white clothing, grow up hearing the Vaisnava songs and rhythms and live certain principles. As Maheswar Neog says, “ever since the day of initiation, the life of a disciple becomes a life of dedication.”<sup>166</sup> The prasangas are done at a fixed time every day, with incense burning, bhaktas facing the *monikut* (where the Holy Book is Kept) and the *bortaal* (big cymbal) beaten to mark the beginning of the ritual. They need not ‘perform’ bhakti consciously, as they embody certain codes of bhakti in their day to day life. With this embodied self, whatever they enact in their ritualistic patterns, become expressions of their ‘embodied and lived’ bhakti, rather than a form of performance. All these embodied factors contribute towards building a certain kind of an ethos within their cognition which then manifest and express in anything they enact, be it Borgeet singing or Sattriya dance. It need not be technically polished but it is believed to come from an immersive devotion which is the essence of their being and living inside the sattrā. It is a conformity of a culture that has been developed within that institution. With time, these obligatory codes become normative. The adherence to these norms becomes the adherence to the ‘traditional’ and any break away from these norms becomes a non-conformity to the tradition. Thus we see that in common perceptions, idea of bhakti is attached to, if not strictly defined by, the idea of the traditional, where traditional includes a whole lot of embodied experiences, mostly of a community such as this one. Bhakti as we know is an experience, and this experience is understood as a contagion which exists in a community of devotees. In the case

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<sup>164</sup> Ashok D. Ranade, *Essays in Indian Ethnomusicology* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998), 98.

<sup>165</sup> Bandana Deka, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Godmur Soru Sattrā, 28 December 2014.

<sup>166</sup> Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and His Times* (Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2008), 354.

of sattra, this contagion becomes obvious within and around the space and socio-aesthetic context of the sattra.

However, outside of this ‘context of contagion and experiences’, it seems like an “appearance” of a context, as Debord would say. Certain devotional aesthetics are built in order for the appearance to look real. Let us take the example of Papon, a renowned multi-lingual performer /entertainer with his own band called East India Company. The public performer is remembered for his experimental fusion performances in Coke Studio, Hindi and Assamese modern songs, and live rock performances in multinational platforms, where he is seen entralling the audience with his vibrant gestures and movements across the space. The audience claps, dances and jumps with Papon in such performances (Image 1). However, can the gestural and musical appearance of a Borgeet rendition by the same performer be the same?

On one occasion ‘Srimanta Sankardeva Movement- Bengaluru Initiative 2013’, Papon sings *Aaju Porobhate dekh*. He wears a traditional attire of dhoti and kurta with a *gamocha* (piece of cloth with woven embroidered border)<sup>167</sup> hung round his neck. Sitting in an austere position, he plays a *khuti tal* (small cymbal) as he sings.<sup>168</sup> Accompanied by a Khol player on one side and a flautist on another, the vision appears aesthetically devotional and tranquil. This is in contrast to the rocker Papon image that one is familiar with (Image 2). This appearance makes the ‘presentation’ something closer to reality, which is the reality of bhakti in a sattra. However, there is an alienation from one to another. The vivacious rhythm that Papon as an artist has, is different from the rhythm that exists in the mannerisms of a bhakta. There is a disjunction between the two different lived realities. In one reality, Borgeet is presented, in another it is ‘represented’.

This disjunction from lived everyday reality to an appearance, from a presentation to a representation, is what I see as ‘performance’. Papon may not share the same codes or ethics of life as are preached within the sattriya community, but he can still perform or represent the codes of the community. He can ‘appear’ to be a bhakta and ‘represent’ the practices of the bhaktas. The immersion that we see in the day-to-day life of the ritual setting where the

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<sup>167</sup> Gamocha is considered a reverential item in Assamese culture.

<sup>168</sup> “Borgeet by Angarag”. Youtube Video. 5:32. Published [June 8 2013].  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVaui0mPII1>.

bhakta sings for the Lord without fail, irrespective of the presence of an audience, is not seen here. Papon would need an external audience to validate his performance / his representation.

The stage of ‘Srimanta Sankardeva Movement- Bengaluru Initiative 2013’ on that particular day had a specific meaning. The space had a “performative spatiality”<sup>169</sup> or a performative environment during Papon’s performance. An environment of devotion and spirituality is created, through images of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva put up and smell of incense burnt. But following this, it would only be a blank space, once more waiting to be given a performative meaning with another performance. The space has no meaning of its own, but is given a meaning with every performance. One might argue that the meaning inside the space of the sattras too, is ‘created’. But a space as a sattras, has long been consecrated, with its meaning validated, enacted, performed every day and every year in a dedicated mode of ritual repetition. There the environment becomes a lived reality of a community, whereas the stage for ‘Bengaluru initiative’ does not. A performative space as the one where Papon sings Borgeet, is meant to carry a devotional meaning only for a limited period of time.

This is only one example of how we can see various aspects of performance in a rendition on stage or a mediatised setting. In the next section, some more factors which define and concretize this shift of Borgeet in the realm of performance, would be dealt with.

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<sup>169</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, section on ‘Performative Spaces’ in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (London and New York, Routledge, 2008), 107-114.





Image 1 : Papon in A Concert <sup>170</sup>



Image 2: Still from Youtube Video, <sup>171</sup> Papon Singing Borgeet in *Srimanta Sankardeva Movement- Bengaluru Initiative 2013*.

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<sup>170</sup> Retrieved free from Google Images. Accessed on 19 July 2016.

<sup>171</sup>“Borgeet by Angarag”. Youtube Video. 5:32. Published [June 8 2013].  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVaui0mPII>.



Image 3: Bhaktas performing in the morning prasanga inside Barpeta Sattr Naamghar. (Taken on 23 September 2014)

### **Shift From Interiority to Exteriority**

Jacques Attali, speaking on music says:

Exteriority can only disappear in composition in which the musician plays primarily for himself, outside any operability, spectacle, or accumulation of value; when music, extricating itself from the codes of sacrifice, representation, and repetition, emerges as an activity that is an end in itself, that creates its own code at the same time as the work.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 135.

In a prayer-hall when an individual or a group would sing a Borgeet or a Ghosa, there would not be any overt sense of focus on exteriority. The congregation would face the object of devotion, the Bhagavata-Purana, and do the ceremonial singing. Closing their eyes, meditating on the rhythm, maintaining a physical discipline while sitting, observing an austere behavioural discipline in the space, everything would reflect a concentration of all the senses inwards (Image 3). In this presentation, the need for any spectacle is minimal. It is more an interior communication that is sought. Although there is an external object of devotion representing God, the value of the presentation is solely based on the interiority of the communication between the devotee and the devoted through this object of devotion.

However, in another place and context when Manas Robin, a popular singer from Assam known for his Bihu songs, sings the Borgeet *Suno Suno re Suno*,<sup>173</sup> we see a shift (Image 4). As opposed to a sitting position, Manas in his jeans pant and T-shirt, walks into the platform smiling away in a dramatic manner. Holding the microphone, Manas uses hand gestures to communicate with the audience. The constant movement from one corner of the stage to another reflects the need to address all corners of spectators. And the vibrant gestures create an aura of dynamic and dramatic interaction, which are reminders more of his popular Bihu performances.

What we see here is a shift from the kind of interiority that we saw in the prayer-hall to an exteriority focussed on a spectacle. In the exteriority of this communication, the focus is on the audience which replaces the figure of God. This replacement is evident in the constant need to satisfy this external audience rather than a need to build an interior connection. This replacement is also seen in the reversal of the position of God physically. One needs to notice the shift of the object of devotion here. Although there is no Bhagavata-Purana here, the image of Sankardeva which is hung up as a marker of the auspicious occasion, appears at the back of the singer. As opposed to the naamghar (prayer-hall) where the bhaktas and audience (or non-bhaktas) would all become one to face God for the prasanga, here the split of audience as a separate entity is significant.

After singing in the daily prayer-hall, the singers need not have reviews from an external audience, since it is a part of a ritual where one's singing is not up for judgment. However, as performance, the singer would at the end, wait for the appraisal and judgment of

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<sup>173</sup> Manas Robin, "Borgeet bargeet suna suna he suna". Youtube Video, 2:21. Posted [Dec 29, 2009]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sid5byxDac4&list=RDSid5byxDac4#t=0>.

the audience. Rather than a presentation to God, it becomes a representation for an audience in a hall, or for a judge in a radio audition, or for a non-indigenous crowd in an international platform who may be unaware of its indigenous context of bhakti.

The split of the audience as a separate entity signifies one of the most important factors of this exteriority. The performer is not singing “for himself outside of any operability,” but very much within a need to create a satisfactory spectacle. This operability outside of the self and the shift to a spectacle, is what I see as another very important aspect for the shift of Borgeet to the realm of performance.



Image 4 : Still from a Youtube Video<sup>174</sup>, Manas Robin ‘Performing’ *Suno Suno Re Suno*.

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<sup>174</sup> Op.cit.

## Factor of Time

In the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the Gramophone industry setting in, one could hear early performers like Gauhar Jan, shrinking their entire renditions down to 3 minutes in the 78 rpm recordings. This time constraint of the technology, signified an important shift in the performance aesthetics of the singers. An entire performance which they could usually sing on for an entire night, with connoisseurs relishing and singers exploring each musical passage with luxury, was bound to be cut down to 3 minutes because of the limitation of the technology regulated by time. After the Gramophone, came the Radio, television, the proscenium stages and so on, with the era of modernization, with similar sets of rules and regulations on time. Classical singers especially had to design their entire concert- repertoire on the basis of this regulation. In the theatre scene too, traditional genres which would go on for days and nights in a row, began to be shrunk down to 3-4 hour performances for the city halls and National festivals.

Although Borgeet in the sattras are sung at a particular time and each raga of the Borgeet is said to have a specific time-factor associated,<sup>175</sup> the actual act of singing in the traditional practices might not be restrained by the factor of time. But in the modern set up of the stage and media, this aspect undergoes a change. I would like to discuss the case of All India Radio (AIR) here. In Assam, the year 1948 becomes a significant year in giving Borgeet a larger listenership, when AIR Guwahati<sup>176</sup> invites Dayal Chandra Sutradhar from Barpeta sattras to train popular singers like Bhupen Hazarika and Birendranath Datta for broadcasting Borgeet through radio<sup>177</sup>. Over the years, Borgeet has gained not only an increasing listenership but also a range of performers from different spaces, who are not from the sattras set-up.

All India Radio (Guwahati) binds a fixed timed slot of 10-5-10-5 minutes for the Borgeet singer, where the singer is expected to render 4 compositions. These compositions are to be sung in a manner so as to fit the above time slots of 10 and 5 minutes, which are to be scheduled for broadcast later, one after another in that same pattern. The singers become bound to make 'appropriate' choices in order to fit this paradigm. Many a time, they are seen choosing compositions in a drut laya (fast tempo) for the 5 minutes slot and the ones which

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<sup>175</sup> Neog, *Early History*, 283-284.

<sup>176</sup> Guwahati centre was first established on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1948. See: B.N. Goswami, *Broadcasting: New Patron of Hindustani Music* (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House 1996), 100.

<sup>177</sup> Rupjyoti Ojha, Interview By Dipanjali Deka, Jun 26 2015.

are in vilambit laya (slow tempo) for the 10 minutes slot. Generally, the compositions have at-least 5-6 pada (verses) apart from the dhruv (refrain). But in order to regulate the rendition, the singer would cut down 3-4 verses and reach the last verse directly so as to end the rendition within the stipulated time. Also, in traditional practices, the refrain is generally repeated after every verse, but in such recordings the singer may sometimes decide to move from one verse to another without repeating the refrain everytime. Thus, many nuances are seen changing in this temporal shift. However, despite such cautionary measures by the singer, the recording may be manipulated at the end. If the rendition fails to remain within the time-limit, the voice may be faded away by the authority, and singers may be seen complaining of their songs getting 'cut' when they are finally broadcasted.

In such conditions, more than immersing in an experience of Bhakti as the prime goal, one observes that the adherence to the modern idea of time becomes a more important goal. In Bhakti as a mode of experience of 'devotion', music has been a means of unmediated connection between man and God. Compositions have been addressed to God and are meant to appease him. Even though the prasangas have a fixed timing, the immersive mode in the rendition is possible. But such an immersive mode may not be feasible within the mediated time constraints. If a bhakti bhava is believed to be achieved with an undisrupted sense of immersing in a composition, a constraint of time interrupts that experience. Can bhava be then regulated by time, remains a key question here.

Borgeet in a mediated context becomes a product of a schedule. When it is broadcasted in the early morning "Vandana" programme, it undoubtedly becomes a part of a devotional awakening for many and a devotional beginning of the day for listeners far and wide. However, the process that goes behind creating those few minutes of devotional broadcast, is not something that is a moment of spontaneous experience of bhakti. It is constrained, pre-decided, judged and sometimes even manipulated. It is a moment of alienation for one who may want to have an immersive experience in the studio with a certain sense of subjectivity, because it is not possible. He or she will be constantly interrupted, corrected, shortened, lengthened and constrained. This experience of alienation is something new in the realm of experience of bhakti perhaps making Borgeet more of a performative experience rather than an act of a spontaneous devotional immersion.

## II.

### Anxieties in This Shift

Keshabananda Devagoswami, among many scholars, has critiqued modern performances of Borgeet, with the concern of traditional forms getting ‘corrupted’ in the ‘outer’ context. Devagoswami also grieves the lack of concern towards the *gayan-bayan* in the sattras who are currently in an economically misfortunate state. N. Mahanta laments in his work, “an artist can sing a Borgeet sweetly with brilliance, but can she or he follow the *padhati* (system) that is followed in the prasanga?”<sup>178</sup> Mahanta even questions the intention of the ‘half-knowing city-dwellers’ in opening music schools and institutions with a commercial mindset. Abani Pathak, the station director of AIR Guwahati and a composer himself, is critical of Angaraag Papon Mahanta, nowadays using Lokageet in Coke Studio-like platforms and turning it into something alien to the indigenous ear. Pathak is critical of Papon thinking that he is doing any justice to Lokageet by distorting it beyond proportion<sup>179</sup>. Here we see that the one finds it difficult to talk of musical shifts without referring to the community shifts, of the music getting out of the hands of the ‘traditional’ people.

For Borgeet, the shift from traditional to global and from the ‘interiority of devotion’ to the ‘exteriority of performance’ comes along with various anxieties. These anxieties are reflections of larger issues of classicization and nationalism which one cannot ignore. I shall *survey* and critically engage with some of these anxieties here.

#### Anxiety of Maintaining ‘Folk’ and Borgeet Distinction

There is an increasing anxiety amongst traditional musicians and scholars towards maintaining a distinction between the aesthetic features Borgeet and any other form. There is a constant need felt to maintain a distinction from the Lokageet of Kamrup region which is

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<sup>178</sup> N. Mahanta , *Sattra Sanskriti Rupsaaya, Asaar Riti aaru Utsav Anusthan* (Sibsagar: Shri Leela Mahanta, Deka Sattradhikar, Kowarpur Borkhatpaar Sattra, 2001), 133.

<sup>179</sup> He was referring to the Kamrupi Lokageet ‘*Shamorai Koliya*’ that Papon has sung with Sugandha Garg in Coke Studio India. Many have criticized the exoticization of the indigenous musicians and instruments in the set, as well as the compromise of the devotional ethos to an erotic one in the representation. (Abani Pathak, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Guwahati AIR, 17 December 2014.)

closer to the Barpeta Sattrā. Especially the sattrās of Majuli and Bordowa which are comparatively distanced from the Kamrupi Lokageet of Lower Assam, this anxiety is stronger. Apart from Lokageet, N. Mahanta laments that nowadays in nama prasanga outside the sattrās, there is sometimes a similarity seen with the clapping of Bihu, which is an indigenous ‘folk’ form. Even the tune goes to reflect a merry happy tune, which is completely in contrast to the poignant ethos of the Borgeet, he says.<sup>180</sup>

This anxiety may be seen as a consequence of the status of ‘Borgeet as the classical music of Assam’ in recent times, and thus a need felt to distinguish it from any folk influence. This is similar to how the systematization of Hindustani classical music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century entailed a stronger defining of different ‘other’ categories like semi-classical, light music or folk music. This ‘other’-ing becomes significant in the stronger assertion of Classical itself, with reference to which these are seen as ‘deviations’.

However, despite these opinions, Hari Prasad Saikia of Majuli, who is a Borbayan (chief player of instruments), points out some inherent characteristics in the tala of Borgeet which are clear influences of Bihu. Even in some talas in khol played with Borgeet, some 4-matra (beat) talas like *Dhena khetta Dhei kheetti*, are very short, similar to the Bihu Dhol’s rhythm *jhintak khintaak dhei*. He says that some Ghosa Kirtan also has Bihu’s 1-2-1-2 rhythmic pattern of *Dhin chakchak Dhin chakchak*.<sup>181</sup> Apart from music, a hand gesture in Sattriya dance where both wrists are crisscrossed is also similar to a step in *Mising* Bihu.<sup>182</sup> Since Bihu has existed as a popular idiom even before Sankardeva, it is probable that Sankardeva imbibed this from Bihu, he supposes.

Bhobananda Borbayan (chief player of instruments) says that in Dhrupad, even to establish one swara, it takes a long time. But in sattriya music, even though it has a lot of similarity with Dhrupad style, one does not make it as slow. Borbayan speculates that it is because of the influence of the folk rhythm, which is generally drut (faster) or atleast madhya (medium) tempo. Sankardeva seems to have embraced the local idioms, since Borgeet was a

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<sup>180</sup> Mahanta , *Sattrā Sanskriti*, 133.

<sup>181</sup> Hari Prasad Saikia, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Bhopur Sattrā Majuli, 25 November 2015.

<sup>182</sup> Even from daily life movements, Sankardeva took inspiration. He took the walking steps from real life. He kept the gati and style same, but beautified it to stylise it as a *shastriya (margi)* form. Unlike Loka which keeps changing every moment, Sankardeva looked at the *mool* (root essence) and then formed a style. (Interview with Hari Prasad Saikia, Interview By Dipanjali Deka, Bhopur Sattrā Majuli, 25 November 2015)



medium for propagation to the mass. Hence even when he used Sanskrit, he used it in a way so that both elite and common people could be attracted towards it.<sup>183</sup>

Kabin Das of Barpeta claims that in the melodic execution of Borgeet, in its straight reaching into higher notes and sharp downturns to a lower note, it sounds very similar to Naga folk songs which have similar melodic patterns of movements<sup>184</sup>. This kind of connections across regions may be likely, as Sankardeva is also said to “have used the *bhot-tala* or *bhurtala*, in the singing of Borgeet and nama-kirtana from the land of Bhutias”.

Since Sankardeva travelled not only in Assam but all over the Indian subcontinent, like a bee sucking honey from all the flowers he inculcated all that he saw and heard into his art, be it theatre or dance or music. Sankardeva had been inclusive in his shaping of his art practices and one cannot really rule out the influence of other contemporary indigenous forms and styles on Borgeet. In such a case, when syncretic mixing has been there in Borgeet and other practices since its inception, one can argue that this anxiety for a distinction between Borgeet and Folk is relatively recent. It can be said that it has taken shape only with the recent attempt of giving Sattriya forms the status of Classical. An anxiety like this is perhaps an inevitable appendage seen in any form of classicization.

### **Anxiety Amongst Different *Xoili* or *Thul***

Beyond the anxiety of ‘folk’ versus Borgeet, another level of anxiety exists amongst different *xoilis* of Borgeet. A *xoili* or *thul* of Borgeet is a distinct stream or style of singing which is followed in different regions of Assam, here specifically meaning the styles of different sattras. Largely, there are three major styles of Borgeet: Bordowa style which is prevalent in Middle Assam, Barpeta style prevalent in Lower Assam and Kamalabari style prevalent in Majuli and Upper Assam. Although the style that is prevalent in Bordowa is considered to be ‘authentic’ by many, considering this is where Sankardeva was born, the other streams of Barpeta and of Kamalabari are widely taught and practised. Time and again, practitioners, performers, judges are seen coming into disagreements and challenges, failing to come to a common judgment due to the differences in these styles.

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<sup>183</sup> Bhobananda Borbayan, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, New Delhi, 8 August 2015.

<sup>184</sup> Kabin Das, interview by Dipanjali Deka, Barpeta, 28 September 2015.

This is not much different from the conflicts amongst the *gharanas* (familial tradition of learning) in case of Hindustani classical music. For each gharana at one point, it became extremely crucial to define and confine themselves within their predefined codes so as to have their own unique identity and importance. So much so that, to then merge two gharana styles, or to even forego any style, became quite a radical act in itself as one can see in the case of Kumar Gandharva. Similar cruciality appears in case of the *sattras* too. On being asked if the *sattras* fear that the cultural practices might go astray now that they are out of the *sattra*, Bashist Sharma who is the *Burha Sattradhikar* (Head) of Barpeta *Sattra*, says that the fear is not of the *sattra* as such, but of the *bongkhara*<sup>185</sup>. *Bongkhara* word could loosely mean the different ‘clans’ of people who are assigned certain duties in the *sattra*, including the duty of teaching and imparting music and the other arts.

In my conversation with Krishna Goswami, who is a proponent of the Bordowa style, he quotes a number of instances from his experience, where he faced disagreements because of the differences in *xoili* (stream or style)<sup>186</sup>. In a competition where a participant sang the composition *Anonde Govinde*, Goswami questioned the participant about the Raga he was singing in. On knowing that he was singing it in *Suhai* raga, Goswami responded that it is traditionally sung in *Asowari* raga, on which the participant answered that he was singing it according to the Barpeta *xoili*.

At this point, Krishna Goswami explains to me that this deviation occurs because of the concept of *Bondha* ragas and *Mela* ragas in Borgeet. Each composition is set to a particular raga originally by Sankardeva or Madhavdeva. For example *Anonde Govinde* is traditionally set to *Asowari* raga. However, if any *sattra* or any individual decides to compose the same Borgeet in another raga, they are free to do that. That freedom comes by virtue of the *Bondha* raga exception. When the participant sings *Anonde Govinde* in *Suhai* and not *Asowari*, he is using the provision of *bondha* ragas to break or deviate from the allotted raga for the composition and to choose another raga, i.e. *Suhai* in this case. Thus *Suhai* becomes a *bondha* raga for the Barpeta *xoili*.

Although Krishna Goswami accepts that it is a legitimate option, he is disappointed by the thought that after a point, all our original ragas might get lost because of this freedom that *sattras* and individuals take. He further speculates that Sankardeva must have allocated

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<sup>185</sup> Bashist Sharma, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Barpeta *Sattra* Barpeta, 26 September 2015.

<sup>186</sup> Krishna Goswami, Interview by Dipanjali Deka, Samguri *Sattra* Majuli, 26 November 2015.

certain ragas to certain compositions keeping in mind the bhava that he wants to evoke. Thus, these changes by people might actually also impact the bhava evocation in the desired manner. What is interesting here is again the sense of deviation becoming a cause for anxiety amongst musicians and scholarly practitioners.

In a heterogeneous space like Assam, where the name ‘Assam’ itself means ‘uneven’ or ‘unequal’, Borgeet has manifested differently in different parts and the influences are also different according to the geographical proximity to certain other locations. Like in Barpeta, its musical flourish is considered to have been impacted by nearby Bengal’s Caitanya Vaisnavism. Also, the influence of Kamrupi Lokogeet which is indigenous to Lower Assam region, influences the singing of Barpeta as the same singers who sing Lokageet may also sing Borgeet as well, thus bringing in the style of one into another. In such a scenario, how does one read such ‘deviation’s in Borgeet of using one Raga over another, which is perhaps according to an artistic discretion?

However, these identity conflicts amongst different xoilis again seem to be a manifestation of a larger classicization taking place. Any kind of classicization leads to standardization and normalization. There is much talk of standardizing all forms of Sattriya culture, not only Borgeet but also the Nat (Ankiya Nat) text<sup>187</sup>. This anxiety towards deviations and the urge to standardize, can be seen as an appendage of the impact of classicization, wrapped around with regional identity conflicts.

### III.

#### **Problematizing the Binaries**

Amidst the confusion of anxieties that have been discussed so far, there are some unresolved questions however, which have taken a back seat. In the rush of claiming authenticity and originality of Borgeet, the relation between ‘bhakti and performance’ has not been problematized much in academic circles or in the traditionalists’ viewpoints. Is there any way

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<sup>187</sup> Pona Mahanta proposed such a standardization of the Ankiya Nat texts in a seminar. Pona Mahanta, “Ankiya Nat: Text and Structure” (Paper presented at the ‘8<sup>th</sup> Ankiya Bhaona Samorah: A Festival of Ritual Plays in of Assam’ organized by Sattriya Kendra, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, March 2016).

of knowing that the bhaktas in Majuli that evening who came and did the prasanga, did not have an element of ‘performance’ in them? The interiority that we talked about in an immersive experience, could it not have been affected in the case of the bhaktas by the awareness of an audience (us) present? They may have intended to impress us outsiders and does that not bring about an element of exteriority in it, no matter how feeble that may be?

The sattra as an institution creates an environment where Vaisnavite bhakti flourishes and manifests not only in the lifestyle of the bhaktas and performance practices but also in every other paraphernalia of the institution. A kind of community develops which embodies certain codes and rhythms. The spatial and aesthetic context does become essential in building a sense of community meant for devotion. However, whether that can be the primary factor in deciding the aspect of bhakti in a rendition of Borgeet, is a larger question which needs inquiry separately in a much broader sense.

Saint poets all around the subcontinent, roamed around singing their songs and poems. Be it Meera or Kabir, Akka or Lal Ded, they attracted people like bees around them as and when they walked from place to place. Their community was being formed on the roads, under a tree or outside a temple. Their community was ‘mobile’, exactly like them. Baapchandra Mahanta says that even Sankardeva in Assam moved from place to place attracting people to his faith of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. His Borgeet songs “worked like arrows, and wherever they were shot, Neo-vaisnavism found its place and grew”.<sup>188</sup> These places, initially called *than*, were much smaller and informal structures, and only later grew into full-fledged institutions of sattras. The kind of classicization and standardization one observes around is perhaps a gradual process, and there is not much to support the idea that the Gurus had wanted to make the Sattriya art practices fixed, static, standardized entities.

Bhakti also carries another very important meaning, i.e., of a bhava, an emotion. We have hinted at the evocation of a bhakti bhava in the immersive enactments in the naamghar (prayer-hall) of the sattra, and suggested a lack of it in the performances by the likes of Manas Robin. But this simplified idea needs to be expanded more. Can there not be moments of immersive transcendence even in the most ‘deviant’ of spectacular performances? In case of Borgeet, can a sense of bhakti-like immanence not be evoked even in performative

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<sup>188</sup> Banikanta Kakati, preface to *Bargit Somikshya* by Girikanta Goswami (Nagaon: Nityanxu Nilay Prokaxon, 2009),13.

scenarios which are completely exterior and meant for display? I am not certain of an encompassing answer here, but these questions seem worth-exploring.

There is something in the musicality in the Borgeet also that has the potential to evoke a kind of bhakti. There has to be something in the way one engages or immerses into the composition, where may be one can locate bhakti in. And most importantly, there has to be also a kind of receptivity in the listener to undergo an experience of bhakti through the music. In doing so, the context may be anything and the singer may be anybody.

I would like to discuss the case of Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, that offers nuanced meanings. **Ashwini Bhide Deshpande (1960-)**, is a Hindustani Classical singer of Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, who has rendered the Madhavdeva-composed Borgeet called *Alo Moi Ki kohobo Dukho*<sup>189</sup>. In Hindustani ‘Classical’, ‘semi-classical’ and ‘light’<sup>190</sup> music, *murki*, *khatka*, *zamzama* and so on, are all melodic tools or alamkaras which embellish the rendition. Ashwini Bhide Deshpande has beautifully captured the essence of the Borgeet composition and yet there are subtle influences of a Hindustani style which is seen in her polished tonality and the usage of different murkis in places. A Borgeet rendition is recognizable because of its minimal use of such melodic tools or alamkaras. Each note is expected to be covered with much effort and emphasis. There is generally heard a *meend* (glissando-like) effect, which is basically a glide from one note to another. Deshpande’s version has captured the meend effect beautifully but she also merged it with some murkis in moving from one line to another. One might say her renditions does show some influences of a Hindustani *taleem*.<sup>191</sup>

However, Kabin Das, who is a practitioner having learnt from the Barpeta sattrā, claims that the version of Ashwini Bhide Deshpande is one the best renditions of that composition he has heard so far. According to him, sometimes even the local singers cannot touch the bhakta’s heart (here by bhakta he did not imply the one inside sattrā, but anyone who has the *capacity* of devotion) as this one does, “that too coming from somebody from a faraway land”. He claims that the reason she sings so uniquely is because she has a rigorous training of swaras (notes)<sup>192</sup>. Das’s viewpoint suggests a relation between an emotional

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<sup>189</sup> Monjit Rajkonwar, “Ashwini Bhide Deshpande ..... alo moi ki kohobo dukho.mp4”. Youtube Video 08:26, Posted on [Sep 22, 2011]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG3ct2h4glE>.

<sup>190</sup> All these terms are used totally acknowledging and keeping in mind the problematic discourses and debates of such classification as folk, classical, modern etc. Here, the usage is referring to the general understanding of the words.

<sup>191</sup> Term used for musical training in the vocabulary of Hindustani Classical music.

<sup>192</sup> Kabin Das, interview by Dipanjali Deka, Barpeta, 28 September 2015.

impact and a polished technical virtuosity. It means that the same training and technical virtuosity which could easily become an aspect of alienating display of performativity, here becomes a facilitator of devotion. Das argues that today there is still a lag in case of Borgeet in reaching out to the people, because of sattras' conservative mentality. "We treat as it is a private property, which it is not", Das says. By 'we,' Das refers to a collective Assamese community which is responsible for Borgeet remaining unrecognized nationally. Kabin Das talks of finding poignancy within the innovative efforts of people from all quarters, not necessarily from the sattras or from Assam. In recognizing the efforts such as Deshpande's, the building of a global community which is larger than the sattras and the Assamese community becomes possible.

In the ritual repetitions of a Borgeet in the sattras naamghar, the bhakta may not always have an equally devotional engagement every single day, and may sometimes even have a distanced engagement. It could very well be an alienated mechanical act, having been part of the embodied cognition for a long time, and hence done without thought and attention after a point. On the other hand, even a rendition which is sung outside of the socio-aesthetic context of the sattras may have more immersive dimension of bhakti. It may have an engagement and attention to each and every word, and an effort to bring out the poignancy through each and every swara.

Ashwini Bhide seems to have absorbed the words of *Alo Moi*, before diving into the melody of it, which comes across from the way she manifests it in her singing. She expressively renders a trembling, tearful voice in *porano nigore nedekhiya sando mukho*, which appropriately portrays the pathos of the words. The words above mean: 'the eyes are today full of tears not being able to see the moon-faced.' Referring to Sankardeva as the moon-faced, Madhavdeva is said to have composed this song after Sankardeva's demise. Deshpande effectively captures the *pain of Madhavdeva* for his Guru's loss, through her intensive engagement with the slow melody and poignant text. The bhava of *karuna* through which bhakti is being evoked here, is effectively aroused by Deshpande.

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to record the same composition ( *Alo moi ki kohobo dukho*), sung by a bhakta inside the Godmur Soru sattras in Majuli during the morning prayers. Within a ritualistic environment, with incense burnt, lamps lighted, head bowed down in reverence and the Bhagavata Purana in front, the old bhakta started his singing

slowly. He had no instrumental accompaniment to go. He solely had his voice and I closed my eyes to listen to that voice.

The bhakta did not use as many *alamkaras* (musical embellishments) as Deshpande. He reached into the notes straight and formed a relation from one swara to another with utmost economy of flourishes. It was rendered with a kind of simplicity where only the voice was the route of communion between him and the Divine, and between the listener and the Divine through him. Deshpande took a freedom of improvisation through her capacity of having command over the swaras, while the bhakta showered his simple day-to-day engagement with the composition. Both in their own ways evoked a chord in the listener. In the monastery I was bound to close my eyes with every verse that went deeper into the experience, while Ashwini Deshpande did subtle experimentations within the limits of the raga which evoked an equally powerful sentiment in Kabin Das. Should one then distinctly call one rendition- immersion and another- performance? Or may one see elements of both kinds in both the renditions? Is the role of the listener also not significant here?

Norman Cutter refers to the *Sahridaya* role of spectator explained in Natyashastra, when he explains:

Rasa cannot be realized unless the audience is receptive to the *bhava* represented in a poem. Similarly, a bhakti poem cannot fully come to life unless its audience is psychologically prepared to serve as a vessel for the poem's reincarnation.<sup>193</sup>

The devotional socio-aesthetic environment of sattrā helps facilitate an experience of bhakti, both for the singer as well as the listener. But a spatio-cultural context may not be the only factor facilitating that experience. If the capacity for attaining *santa* is present latent in a singer as well as in the listener in its potential best, an immersive experience of Bhakti can be experienced even beyond the space of the sattrā and the context of a *prasanga*. The faculty of listening works not only with the text or context, but beyond them, which is why a sense of tranquillity was aroused in R. Venkataraman listening to Kabin Das despite the ignorance of the language or context in which Kabin Das sang. Similarly, Kabin Das was also equally moved by an innovative effort by Deshpande, despite the knowledge that Das has of the conventional style of singing a *Borgeet*. We here see that if the melody and rhythm are met

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<sup>193</sup> Norman Cutter, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 89.

with an immersive singer and a receptive listener, one may work through the binaries of immersion and performance or interiority and exteriority, to reach a common emotion of bhakti, as well as larger community of bhakti which works beyond the spatial boundaries.

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## Conclusion

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David Shulman, in his reading of the *Abhyamba-Kritis* compositions by Muttuswami Diksitar, the 18<sup>th</sup> century composer, analyses “the aural construction and activation of a divine presence” through “melody, rhythm, pitch, phrasing, sequence, tonal texture, and especially musical repetition as the building blocks of the entire endeavour.”<sup>194</sup> He calls this process “auralization”. Shulman asks a profound question “how has the composer grammaticalized this goddess in the forms in which he sees and hears her in his mind?”<sup>195</sup>

In this dissertation, I travel from the possibility of an intended meaning by the composers Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, to the closest execution of that meaning in the renditions that I hear. It is a difficult task to travel across centuries to make such a speculation, especially when “meaning” itself is a subjective construct. I have tried to find a “musical meaning” of bhakti through the grammatical elements of melody, rhythm, tonality and embellishment of notes in Borgeet. What makes this journey comparatively expedient is that Sankardeva and Madhavdeva have prescribed ragas for each of their compositions, and that the lyrics as well as the designated raga-name for each composition, remain preserved in through the efforts of the satras. But a textual preservation does not ensure a singular thread of continuity of musical style through years. Oral traditions change shape within the scope of just a few years. There may be, and in most cases there is, a difference in the way a composition is heard by anybody and then sung. There will always be a different swara added here, a new alamkara attempted there. The text of these works may remain static, but the “performance” or the “expression” of those texts, is fluid. That such a rich history may be lost in the fluidity of such performative translations over time, is perhaps the reason of fear for many scholars, musicologists and traditional musicians at the moment. There is hence, a constant need seen to notate, textualize and standardize, which leads to a kind of classicization of the genre of Borgeet or for that matter any of the arts related to the sattriya culture at this moment<sup>196</sup>. There is a large volume of works devoted to the musicological study of Borgeet, carefully detailing the different tala-system and the notations of each

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<sup>194</sup> David Shulman, *Muttuswami Diksitar and the Invention of Modern Carnatic Music: The Abhayamba Vibhakti-kritis* ( Amsterdam, J. Gonda Fund Foundation of the KNAW, 2014), 23.

<sup>195</sup> “Abhayâmbā is endowed with an individual subjectivity, realized in music or, better, grammaticalized and also profoundly interwoven with the composer's subjective, personal, individual sensibility” Shulman says.

<sup>196</sup> Apart from the need felt to make these arts a source of “cultural capital”.

composition. But as Jacques Attali observes, such kind of single-minded collective investment on the mathematical codes of musical materials runs the risk of “the rise of a positivist musicology and pseudoscientific music theory, both of which depend upon and reinforce the concept that music is autonomous, unrelated to the turbulence of the outside, social world”<sup>197</sup>.

Hence this dissertation has consciously remained aware of the need to move beyond a solely positivist musicological study of Borgeet, although it is not without the musicological derivations that I am able to move forward with any kind of inter-textual analysis. The need to study music as a product of society, as Attali suggests, leads me to historically analyse the *ethno-musicological shaping* of the aesthetics of Borgeet and of the sattriya music<sup>198</sup> in general. The inclination to *find a musical meaning* of bhakti in Borgeet directs me to connect the philosophy of bhakti with the musical nature of the compositions. Lastly, the necessity to address the ‘conflicting realities’ in the contemporary scenario makes me explore the fundamental question of *what bhakti even means in the present age*. These three motivations have characterized my three chapters respectively.

The social scientists’ reading of the genre demands a historical reading of the context to understand the notions attached with Borgeet like ‘lack of femininity’ and ‘absence of the erotic/sringara’. The ideological understanding of the tenets of the Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma helps one look for the ‘erotic and feminine’ *other*, which in this case are the Sakta and Tantric cults and loosely also the *loka* forms<sup>199</sup> of music. How his ideology of a ‘regulation of excesses’ can be reflected in the rhythm and lyrics of music as well as in the physicality of the monks, is seen. Although we have compared the characteristics of a dance form Deodhani to a vocal form Borgeet, the larger goal was to compare the energies of the two kinds of ethos. Sisir Kumar Das, writing on the Bhakti movement, comments on how “each movement operated within a specific geographical area, used specific languages, appropriated local traditions in their own way and the movements under their leadership acquired uniqueness, almost an autonomous character”<sup>200</sup>. He rightly asserted that just as it is misleading to read these regional movements in isolation, it is more so to read the bhakti movement as a homogenous pan-Indian phenomenon. So, it becomes necessary to understand the aspects of

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<sup>197</sup> Susan McClary, “Afterword: The Politics of Silence and Sound” to *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 149.

<sup>198</sup> Any musical material that may have come up from the sattria, like even the Raas Geet, or Anka Geet, or the Bhatima and so on. Although my work has specifically tried to deal with the form of Borgeet.

<sup>199</sup> Especially the erotic form of Bihu content.

<sup>200</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, *Polyphony of the Bhakti Movement* (Guwahati, Forum for Sankardeva Studies, 1998).

femininity, erotic and sringara, keeping in mind how these are being reflected in other traditions of Bhakti across India, but also to not go too far to impose a pan-Indian meaning of these terms on Borgeet or on Sankardeva's Vaisnavism. One sees that the 'erotic', 'sringara' and 'active sexuality' are actually the 'excesses' that Sankardeva and Madhavdeva set out to regulate. The first chapter ends with a sense of in-betweenness and liminality in the lyrical and musical aesthetics of some compositions of Borgeet and in the social, physical body of the bhakta, which only reflect the explorative potential of all the keywords that I began with, femininity, erotic, sringara, masculinity and so on.

However, in order to explore a socio-cultural analysis of the lyrics putting his philosophy also in the context of the societal forces, I do not intend to undermine the merit of a separate engagement with the music and its philosophical meaning. Looking at Bhakti as a social force and looking at bhakti as an emotion needs enough investment, which could not be combined into one, for the sake of coherence, and which is why two separate chapters (1 and 2) looking into each. However, it was a challenge to not go into the tangles of the classification of rasas in Borgeet and rather sticking to the most widespread notion of dasya and vatsyala as the common prescriptive emotions. Neither have I considered the intricacies of the bhava-rasa theory as is discussed in Natyashastra. In fact I have almost used the words rasa and bhava interchangeably here, attempting to denote the larger notion of 'evoked sentiment' that is meant in the context of discussion of Borgeet. The complex discussion of the bhava into rasa transformation is not mentioned either in the Carita Puthis, which is why I also deemed it would be far-fetched to go into that debate. Also, in the first two chapters, even while discussing the musical styles of the renditions of Borgeet, I did not venture into the debates of identity conflicts amongst satras based on the 'authenticity' of ragas used in different *thul*, as it would dilute the main thread that I want to explore through Borgeet, i.e., the relation between music and bhakti. I remain within the paradigm of the musical elements of raga, swara or the tala as prescribed by the composers, but without going into the criticality of 'authenticity' of one rendition over another. In that case, what remains my anchor is the need to dig deeper into the relation of music and bhava. There is an intriguing and intangibly deep relation between the two abstract worlds of music and sentiment as well as between music and spirituality or music and religiosity. Ashok Ranade concludes his discussion on *Divinity and Music* in *Perspectives on Music*, "in a performing art such as music, no idea, theory, ideology can subsist on the non-performing thin air of verbalized conceptualized

statements, however cogent, coherent and convincing they may be”<sup>201</sup>. Despite an agreement with this viewpoint, I set out on this task of attempting to explore relations between the two vast worlds of music and sentiment. With the larger intention of seeing how an “auralization” of bhakti may be seen in Borgeet, I observe the meend-like oscillatory movements of notes as a musical reflection of the way life is looked at as ‘tortuous windings of futile distractions’, the coming down to the rhythmic centre of *sama* as also a centering down of the bhakta to the *sama* (peace) of the *santa rasa*, and the sense of musical and rhythmic control as may be a manifestation of the constant consciousness of the devotee to be bound to Rama’s feet.

However, after throwing a glance at history and going through a journey of musico-philosophical metaphors, it becomes necessary to address the questions I have kept suppressed in both these chapters for fear of dilution. I look at performances in the third chapter. I go through performances in the online platforms, analyse performances from my interviews –in *sattras* and other spaces and look at them critically to dissect. One must understand that some of these are also materials I am referring to in the first two chapters. The ‘between’ in “*Transmutations of Borgeet: Between Devotion and Performance*”, does not really intend to create a demarcation of the third chapter dealing with ‘performances’ as opposed to the first two chapters dealing with ‘devotion’. In fact the whole point is to problematize this distinction, by questioning our binaries, which I do at the end of the third chapter. The vast amount of conflicts of the current times required a separate chapter and yet was not enough. I have only touched the tip of an iceberg.

Surveying the anxieties between identities of the *sattras*, the conflicts between usage of *bondha* and *mela ragas*, the struggle to claim and maintain an ‘authentic’ Borgeet, the struggle between a traditional and a modern Borgeet through a distinction of a *sattra* / ‘outside of *sattra*’ space, are some of the conflicts I have tried to outline. Each of these is a huge area of research which needs to be taken up cautiously. It may seem obvious to some that I have kept many popular names out of my discussion in this chapter. Performers like Zubeen Garg, Angarag papon Mahanta, Zuble Baruah are famous contemporary singers who regularly experiment with local forms like Lokageet and Borgeet in their songs. It will be as much interesting as it will be enriching to include their discussions. But I must admit that this omission was deliberate. In my fieldwork, I have come across practitioners, teachers, scholars and bhaktas inside the *sattras*. Names like Kabin Das, Rupjyoti Ojha, Parinita Goswami,

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<sup>201</sup> Ashok Ranade, “Divinity and Music: An Indian Perspective” in *Perspectives on Music: Ideas and Theories* (New Delhi; Chicago : Promilla & Co.; Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2008), 114.

Krishna Goswami, Hari Prasad Saikia have hardly been in an academic mention. It is sad a fact, considering the amount of knowledge that they have to impart and experiences they have to share. These information and experiences broadened my way of thinking, which could have otherwise easily taken a stereotypical route. Looking into the training system by the traditional musicians *gayan-bayan* would be another rich area of research, in order to understand the shifts that I referred to. Withholding many specific details, this last chapter, has perhaps only articulated a key question that I felt was lacking attention: of bhakti and its relation with performance.

I end with a poem by Devar Dasimayya, a 10<sup>th</sup> century Virasaiva poet, which throws light on the dichotomy of the gendered body in the construction of culture. Time and again this poem has crossed my mind and broadened itself up into a larger metaphor for any kind of classification, dichotomy and binary that I come across. The in-betweenness and “liminality” of -- masculine and feminine, tandava and lasya, saguna and nirguna, devotion and performance; all fall into an endless loop of questioning back again whenever I read this poem.

*“If they see breasts and long hair coming*

*They call it woman,*

*If beard and whiskers*

*They call it man:*

*But, look, the self that hovers*

*In between*

*Is neither man*

*Nor woman*

*O Ramanatha!”<sup>202</sup>*

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<sup>202</sup> *Speaking of Siva*, translation by A.K. Ramanujan (Penguin Books, 1973), 110.

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