



Nao Khelor Geet Of Barpeta: A Cultural And Musical Heritage Of Assam

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Abstract:

Nao Khelor Geet, the traditional boat song originating from Barpeta in Assam, embodies an effectual intersection of music, communal rituals, and historical identity. This musical form, deeply entrenched in Satriya culture and influenced by the distinctive geography of Barpeta, extends beyond mere entertainment, providing awareness into the socio-economic and spiritual aspects of the entire region. While, the practice of Nao Khelor Geet as a community event has witnessed a decline. It's impact on Assamese music and cultural identity remains significant. This paper aims to document its origins, performance structure, cultural significance, and enduring legacy.

Keywords:

Nao Khelor Geet, Folk Music, Satriya Culture, Boat Race, Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction:

Culture, being an integral part of human life has been existing since the concept of society existed. A prominent definition of culture comes from E. B. Tylor (1871), who defined it as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. As the definition gives an account that culture is a combination of art, belief, moral etc. which acts as a medium of integrating people and social life through a single thread as a whole. Though every society has it's own culture and tradition, Assam being a vastly diverse state have multiple cultural practices across the state. Among them Nao Khelor Geet has been a long living tradition of Barpeta, that is connected with the folk. Being a tradition, it serve as essential conduits for cultural memory and social cohesion. Barpeta, a district in Assam, has long been recognized as a cultural epicenter, historically referred to as the “Lucknow of the East” due to its rich musical and artistic heritage. Among

the myriad art forms found in this region, Nao Khelor Geet, the songs associated with traditional boat racing, holds particular importance. This paper endeavors to investigate the historical context, performance practices, cultural meanings, and contemporary significance of Nao Khelor Geet within Barpeta.

2. Historical Context of Nao Khelor Geet :

The identity of Barpeta as a riverine town has been instrumental in fostering the tradition of Nao Khelor Geet. Formerly known as Tatikuchi, the name Barpeta is derived from “Bar Pit,” which refers to its marshy landscape. The devastating earthquake of 1897 resulted in extensive flooding, rendering boats essential for transportation. The town is flanked by rivers, including the Chaolkhowa, Nakhanda, Beki, and Bhelengi, interconnected by the Moranoi River, whose seasonal fluctuations symbolize the dynamism inherent in Barpeta’s natural and cultural environments.

Nao Khelor Geet has its local roots in various religious and cultural celebrations. The inaugural organized Naokhel (boat race) is associated with the Tirobhava Tithi, commemorating the death anniversaries of esteemed Vaishnavite saints such as Srimanta Sankardeva, Shri Shri Madhavdeva, and Mathura Das Ata. Initially performed at Khatkhati, Baharijan of Barpeta Satra, the rising popularity of this event eventually necessitated its expansion to other areas within Barpeta.

Globally, the tradition of boat songs is prevalent in riverine and coastal cultures. Historical accounts document a notable boat race on the River Thames in England in 1829, highlighting a universal human inclination to merge rhythmic labor with communal music.

3. Structure and Performance of Nao Khelor Geet

Nao Khelor Geet is intricately linked to the traditions of Satriya music. The performance is initiated by the Kanakata or Pathak, accompanied by a chorus group referred to as the Pali. The musical structure incorporates elements such as Dhruva and Pod, wherein Dhruva interjects between verses, reflecting Satriya practices observed in Thiyo Naam and Ghokha Kirtan. As the boat gains speed, the rhythm of the song intensifies, encapsulating both the physical vigor of rowing and the collective spirit of the community.

The Naokhel is fundamentally a collaborative endeavor. Each typically comprises:

- Guriyal: Steersman
- Aguwat: Front Oarsman
- Baisa: Middle Rowers
- Kanakata/Pathak: Singer

Traditionally, these boats measured approximately 31 hands in length and were constructed from logs by skilled artisans known as Xutors. Noteworthy craftsmen included Ghanakanta Das Stula Xutor and Batohu Xutor. Historically, Satrakonora, located south of Barpeta, served as the principal site for boat construction.

4. Themes and Repertoire

Nao Khelor Geet, being a unique Assamese folk tradition, reflects a broad range of themes that elegantly integrate the spiritual with the material, the religious with the secular, the past with the present. Essentially, these songs serve as a reflection of the cultural values of the people of Assam, both their religious piety and their daily life. On the spiritual side, most works borrow extensively from the epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—where stories like the banishment of Lord Rama, the filial love of Sita, the bravery of the Pandavas, or the wisdom of Lord Krishna are told in a lyrical and participative form. In so doing, the songs not only entertain but educate the people about the ageless virtues of righteousness, sacrifice, and dharma.

In addition to these mythological allusions, Nao Khelor Geet also draws on the themes of local legends, folk, and devotional traditions associated with Vaishnavism and Srimanta Sankardeva's teachings. These works underscore the regional collective religious awareness, making the activity of boat racing transcend its physical nature; it turns into a festival of religion, solidarity, and cultural continuity.

On the secular side, the songs tend to reflect themes of nature, romance, social harmony, and the pleasures and pains of life in rural areas. The river's movement, the rhythm of propulsion, and the solidarity of the participants come alive in the lyrics. Thus, in this context, the repertoire is not limited to devotion but broadens to encompass songs of support, friendly competition, humor, and group bonding. Therefore, Nao Khelor Geet is a storehouse of cultural memory where spirituality, folklore, and everyday life blend together and is hence both a spiritual expression and a social celebration firmly embedded in Assamese culture.

4.1. Notable Songs

- *"O Ki Hori He, Arjunor Rothor Xarothi Narayan"*
- *"Nagor Kanaya Re"*
- *"O Mur Molua He"*

The song *"O Mur Molua He"* presents an intriguing case study. In this context, *"Molua,"* which colloquially denotes a species of monkey or a gluttonous boy, symbolizes a woman or, alternatively, the boat itself as a feminine entity. This term is believed to originate from *"Moriya,"* influenced by the intercultural exchanges between Assamese traders and the Bengal cultural sphere, illustrating how commerce has facilitated cultural interactions.

5. Cultural Influence and Legacy

Although active Naokhel competitions are no longer staged on Barpeta's rivers, Nao Khelor Geet persists as a culturally performed art form. Its melodies and rhythms have significantly shaped contemporary Assamese music. For instance:

- Dr. Bhupen Hazarika incorporated tunes from Nao Khelor Geet into his compositions, such as *"Bhora Barikhar Baane."*

- The film **Aparajoy**, directed by Ratna Ojha, utilized musical motifs from Nao Khelor Geet.

The ongoing integration of these melodies into modern compositions underscores the resilience of Barpeta's folk traditions and their ability to adapt while maintaining essential aspects of cultural identity.

6. Conclusion

Nao Khelor Geet represents the cultural richness and artistic creativity of the Barpeta people, a profound rapport with their surroundings, spirituality, and social life. Drawn from the ancient tradition of boat-racing, these songs go beyond the ranks of ordinary entertainment to become a distinct form of identity, worship, and communal joy. They reflect the music of the river, the religious ethos of the community, and the vibrant interplay between man, nature, and religion.

Even though the traditional context of Nao Khelor Geet has declined with the passage of time in the face of modernization and altered social practice, its musical heritage keeps echoing across Assamese society. The reason why these songs have remained so popular is that they manage to blend mythological stories, regional folklore, religious elements, and the everyday lives of rural society. This makes them not just a storehouse of oral tradition but also a living document to Assam's cultural diversity and imagination.

In today's times, protecting and reviving such traditions is the need of the time to continue Assam's cultural diversity. Institutional backing, systematic documentation, and research by scholars are needed to help protect the artistic merit and historical value of Nao Khelor Geet. Equally vital is active support from local communities in continuing the practice so that future generations stay connected with their heritage.

In the end, Nao Khelor Geet is not just a cultural dance; it is an emblem of unity, endurance, and identity. Its conservation will ensure that this unique aspect of Assamese culture continues to enrich and inspire generations to come.

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