

The Significance of Śaṅkari Music for Assamese Society

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Abstract:

Śaṅkarī music is one of the oldest cultural and spiritual traditions of Assam. It was created during the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which was led by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva in the 15th and 16th centuries. Based on the devotional melodies called Bargīts and enhanced by performance styles like aṅkīya nāt and bhāona (drama), Śaṅkarī music has evolved beyond its religious function to serve as a vehicle for identity development, social change, and cultural integration. It democratized religion by focusing on devotion through music rather than ritual, breaking down caste and class barriers and encouraging collective involvement in Satras and Nāmghars (community prayer hall). The tradition also boosted Assamese literature, theatre, and performing arts, as well as creating a unique system of rāgas and tōlas that elevated the genre to classical status. Śaṅkari music is still a live heritage today, representing spiritual depth, social peace, and cultural pride. This study focuses on its varied relevance, revealing how Śaṅkarī music continues to affect Assamese society's moral, cultural, and communal life. Caste and class boundaries were broken and community involvement in Satras and Nāmghars (community prayer hall) was encouraged by their emphasis on devotion through music rather than ritual. Śaṅkari music continues to influence the moral, cultural, and communal life of Assamese society, as this study illustrates.

Keywords - aṅkīya nāt, bargīta, satras, nāmghar

Introduction:

Since the 15th and 16th centuries, Śaṅkarī music has been associated with the eka-śaraṅ-hari-nām dharma (Neo-Vaishnavism) that was spread throughout Assam. Its main components are liturgical music played in Satras and Nāmghars (community prayer hall), devotional songs called Bargīts, and musical dramas called aṅkīya nāt or bhāona. It was intended to serve as a vehicle for social cohesiveness, cultural synthesis, and ethical education in addition to being a form of religious expression. Comprehending its importance illuminates the ways in which Assamese society was and is shaped.

Review of Literature:

Maheswar Neog in his book *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam: Śaṅkaradeva and His Times* (1949) emphasize the literary and artistic legacy of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, particularly the flourishing of Bargīt, aṅkīya nāt, gītas and Assamese devotional poetry, which enriched both language, culture and Assamese Culture-As Reflected in the *Medieval Assamese Literature* (1988) by Dr Arunima Bharali describes about the socio-cultural-political, religious, philosophy and fine arts of medieval period in Assam. Maheswar Neog and Keshab Changkakati (ed: 2008) in the book *Rhythm in the Vaishnava*

Music of Assam has explained the various aspects of the musical development, specially, related to the Śāṅkarī music in Assam. Aṅkamālā (2014) of Keshavananda Devagoswami where discusses about the origin of aṅkīya nāt, bhāona or drama, also mentioned about the songs, the rāgas which are used in drama. Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami in his literary works Satriya Sanskritir-Swarnarekha (2015) mentioned in detail about the all aspects of Śāṅkarī Culture in Assam, it may be considered as a rare book in Assamese literature. Nanda Gopal Biswas' book Bhakti Movement in Assam describes how Bargīt, Śāṅkarī dance, aṅkīya nāt, and Bhāona changed Assamese culture by encouraging equality, enlisting women, influencing literature and language, and more. Satras and Nāmghars, in addition to Śāṅkarī music and performance, played an institutional role in the development of a shared Assamese identity, particularly in guaranteeing inclusivity. Various studies examine specifically how theatrical and musical forms under the Śāṅkarī tradition affect moral instruction, social cohesion, and cultural continuity.

Śāṅkarī music has a diverse role in Assamese society, serving as a social tool as well as a devotional art, according to the literature assessment. The tradition that Śrīmanta Śāṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva established through Bargīt and other musical forms, according to researchers, combined spiritual devotion with artistic finesse, making religious practice approachable and emotionally captivating. Additionally, according to musicological assessments, Śāṅkarī music has a hybrid character that creates a unique cultural heritage by combining parts of local folk music with Indian classical rāgas and tālas. Śāṅkarī music is demonstrated to have an educational function in performance traditions like aṅkīya nāt and bhāona, imparting moral and ethical ideals in addition to devotion. It is also seen in certain critical writings as a counter-hegemonic practice that empowered oppressed people and questioned traditional ritualism. All things considered, the results show that Śāṅkarī music has played a significant role in maintaining a living heritage of harmony, dedication, and social cohesion in addition to forming Assamese cultural identity.

Objectives

To research the performative and cultural importance of Śāṅkarī music in customs like bhāona and aṅkīya nāt

- To comprehend how organizations like Satras and Nāmghars help to preserve and pass on Śāṅkarī music from one generation to the next.
- To evaluate Śāṅkarī music's current significance and the difficulties it faces in Assamese society.

Methodology: In order to investigate the importance of Śāṅkarī music in Assamese society, this study uses a secondary research methodology.

The role of devotion and spirituality

Śāṅkarī music, which was a key component of the eka-śaraṇa-hari-nām-dharma movement that Śrīmanta Śāṅkardeva's started in the 15th and 16th centuries, is based on devotion and spirituality. Through the singing of God's name and the demonstration of genuine bhakti, the music's profoundly devotional nature seeks to draw listeners closer to Him (Neog, 1984).

Śaṅkarī music emphasizes the values of love, compassion, and unity among all beings and is used as a means of moral teaching and spiritual elevation in addition to being an artistic medium (Barua, 2015). Beyond the confines of ceremony, the devotional songs, like Bargīts, written by Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva and his student Mādhavdeva, express a sense of submission and heavenly longing (Goswami, 1999). Therefore, devotion and spirituality are not only topics in Śaṅkarī music; they are its core, directing both artists and listeners toward self-awareness and heavenly harmony.

Literary Influence and Cultural Identity

A deep fusion of literary genius and cultural identity derived from the Assamese Bhakti tradition may be heard in Śaṅkarī music. The Bargīt and Āṅkīya Nūt, two works by Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva's and his disciple Mādhavdeva, demonstrate sophisticated lyrical language that blends artistic innovation with spiritual devotion (Neog, 1984). In addition to enhancing Assamese literature, these literary creations brought disparate people together via a common language of religion and culture (Goswami, 1999). Assamese cultural identity was greatly influenced by Śaṅkarī music, which fostered a sense of communal belonging by incorporating moral, spiritual, and aesthetic qualities into daily life (Barua, 2015). Śaṅkarī music, with its rich lyrical content and devotional quality, is a symbol of Assamese literary, spiritual, and cultural pride in harmony.

Structure, Innovation, and Preservation of Music:

Despite having its roots in classical Indian traditions, Śaṅkari music is characterized by its religious and regional elements. Similar to Hindustani classical forms, the Bargīts, composed by Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva, use a clear melodic structure called rāga and tāla that has been modified to convey intense spiritual feeling (Neog, 1984). Through his creative use of rhythm, melody, and straightforward lyrics, Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva was able to make music accessible to a wide audience while maintaining its spiritual integrity (Goswami, 1999). This musical history has been preserved and passed down through oral tradition, ritual practice, and community performance thanks to the efforts of numerous organizations like Satras and Nāmghars (Barua, 2015). Consequently, Śaṅkari music's importance as an artistic and spiritual tradition of Assam is maintained by its structural discipline, innovative vigor, and committed heritage.

Continuing Relevance & Identity Formation:

The spiritual, cultural, and social life of Assam is still greatly influenced by Śaṅkari music, which originated in the 15th and 16th centuries under the direction of āṅkīya nūt. The reason for its continued relevance is its capacity to change with the times while maintaining the moral principles and bhakti (devotion) that are the foundation of the eka-śaraṇa-hari-nāmdharma (Neog, 1984). The Assamese people's collective identity and sense of community are strengthened by the performance of bargīts, nām-prasaṅga, and āṅkīya nūt at Satras and Nāmghars, in addition to maintaining the musical tradition (Barua, 2015). These establishments serve as living archives of cultural memory, where musical expressions and spiritual rituals coexist to promote social harmony and religious continuity. Moreover, Śaṅkari music has transcended its religious roots to become a representation of Assamese

cultural pride and identity, serving as a unifying legacy that cuts over boundaries between rural and urban areas (Goswami, 1999). In the present era, Śaṅkari music's significance in the development of Assamese identity has been further reinforced by its resuscitation and reinterpretation by academics, artists, and cultural institutions. In order to expose the next generation to the spiritual and artistic depth of Bargīt performances and Śaṅkari compositions, educational institutions and cultural festivals are progressively including them (Bordoloi, 2018). Śaṅkari music's ability to change while maintaining its artistic integrity and depth of commitment is demonstrated by its incorporation in recordings, internet platforms, and academic programs. Furthermore, Śaṅkari music is positioned as both a local asset and a type of intangible global legacy because of its themes of universal brotherhood, peace, and devotion, which continue to strike a chord with audiences around the world (Saikia, 2020). Therefore, Śaṅkari music's ongoing significance stems from both its preservation and its capacity to represent Assamese spirituality, identity, and cultural resiliency in a dynamic way.

Congregational Chanting, or Nam-Prasaṅga: In Assamese Śaṅkarī tradition, Nām-Prasaṅga, or congregational prayer or singing, is a fundamental social and spiritual activity that was brought about by Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva as a component of the eka-śaraṅa-hari-nām-dharma. Together with singing bargīt (devotional songs) in communal prayer rooms called Nāmghars or Sattras, it entails the group chanting of Nām (the names of God), particularly Hari Nām. (Chanting in Congregation). Traditional instruments like as the khol (drum) and tāla (cymbals) are typically used to accompany these sessions, fostering a devotional and rhythmic atmosphere that promotes introspection and emotional elevation. By uniting people from various castes and backgrounds in common devotion, Nām-Prasaṅga not only cultivates a close relationship with the holy but also advances societal cohesion. The practice has been essential in maintaining the oral legacy of Śaṅkarī music and disseminating the principles of equality, humility, and social peace, as S.L. Baruah points out in her book. Thus, in Assamese society, Nām-Prasaṅga is a potent instrument for fostering spiritual and cultural unity as well as a revered musical tradition that is why it has a great significance in our society.

Śaṅkarī music has several layers of meaning. Indeed, it is religious, but it also subtly reflects social, artistic, and religious elements. An alternative to strict ritual and caste hierarchy was provided by Śaṅkardeva and his adherents by making music the primary medium of devotion. By doing this, they refocused society on ethical principles and a shared sense of identity in addition to reforming religious practice. Through their rāgas, structure, and performance style, the musical forms itself reflect creativity that combined different cultural streams, including Vaishnava, tribal, folk, and Sanskrit. Additionally, preservation measures are particularly crucial given the ongoing difficulties. Assamese culture is based on Śaṅkarī music, which is not just a tradition but a way of life. Its significance stems from the way it influenced spirituality, sparked social equality, contributed to the development of Assamese culture, and still serves as a pillar for people's sense of community. For Assam to retain its moral principles, cultural memory, and communal harmony, this tradition must be preserved and revitalized.

Findings:

According to the study, Śāṅkarī music has significantly influenced Assamese society's socio-cultural and spiritual landscape. It develops as a cultural force and a devotional activity that combines religious thinking with artistic expressions. The results show that Śāṅkarī music promoted equality and community involvement across caste and class boundaries through bargīt, aṅkīya nāt, and bhāona. These songs also served as a vehicle for moral instruction, social reform, and spiritual devotion. The literature also emphasizes the hybrid musical structure, which created a distinctive Assamese identity by harmonizing local folk elements with Indian classical ragas and talas. It has been discovered that organizations such as Sattras and Nāmghars play a vital role in maintaining and passing on this custom, guaranteeing its persistence over time. Additionally, the results reveal that Śāṅkarī music serves as a cultural unifier, promoting harmony among people and strengthening Assamese identity while simultaneously adjusting to contemporary settings through recordings, performances, and educational programs. Overall, the research demonstrates that Śāṅkarī music is a vibrant cultural legacy that continues to influence Assamese society's identity and values in addition to being a spiritual art form.

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