# CROSSING BORDERS AND SINGING ABOUT EROTIC DESIRES IN *BHAWAIYAA* FOLK MUSIC

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# CROSSING BORDERS AND SINGING ABOUT EROTIC DESIRES IN *BHAWAIYAA* FOLK MUSIC

With the onset of foggy winter in January, the sun in Amingaon (the district headquarters of Kamrup, Assam) had taken a backseat. One could easily tell that the days had become shorter. Yet, surrounded by a host of green trees, we were drawn to the rhythm of the neighbouring Brahmaputra separating us from the rest of Guwahati. Being a little removed from urban development during 2001-06, my school hosted a number of cultural functions. I distinctly recall one such occasion, when the theme was folk culture, and after much brainstorming the girls in my class decided to perform the folk melody *Mahout Bondhu.*

Some of the local inhabitants near Doul Govinda (a temple in North Guwahati) would play the *dotara* (a two-stringed folk instrument) as they made their way to the school. Besides the Kamatapuri language and the lyrics of the song, our teachers faced another problem: What should the singing group wear?

Our music teacher explained that the wives of the mahouts wore their traditional free flowing attire usually without bodices, but that it

may not be appropriate to dress up like them. His advice was adhered to, and we were asked to dress up in sarees with red borders which are usually worn by the Adivasi community when performing the Jhumur dance. We were also introduced as a group that would sing an 'Assamese folk' song. This confused me as a child, as the same song was called *Goalpariya* geet by my father and *Bhawaiyaa* by my grandfather. The teachers had no convincing explanations for my curiosity.

This childhood experience initiated me into years of enquiry into *Bhawaiyaa* music as an adult. From Goalpara to Rongpur and then towards Cooch Behar (now in North Bengal), I am still a traveller in the journey of *Bhawaiyaa;* the journey seems longer than history itself.

Folk legacies of music are known for their anonymous authorship and oral circulation. As such, folk music is a vibrant body of living traditions that has very little written documentation In their tonality and themes, these songs have a lot of similarities in North Bengal, Jalpaiguri, parts of Bangladesh, Rangpur and Cooch Behar—another reason why cultural zones that cut across regional borders are continually marginalized in discourses. This is certainly true of Gauripur, the region that is the birthplace of the late artist Pratima Pandey Barua (1934-2002). When she gathered songs from the wives of buffalo-herders in several parts of Goalpara, there was no need to label them. However, in 1961 along with Bhupen Hazarika and members of All India Radio, her songs (which she termed *Desigeet*) were called *Goalparia lokageet* under the banner *Kamrupi lokageet*. Goalpara, the western-most district of present-day Assam spread over the banks of the Brahmaputra has gone through a tremendous alteration in terms of political boundaries being reorganised; this is thanks to political and administrative policies after the sub-division of Kokrajhar in 1957 under the administration of Bimala Prasad Chaliha. When we engage in geographical map-making, we tend to overlook the fact that folksongs sung by a particular artist emanate not from the present-day map, but from a vision of folklife that transcends geo-political barriers.

The older formation of *Goalpara* no longer exists. However, Dr Birendranath Dutta (revered scholar and litterateur of Assam's folklore) notes in the cultural context that,[1] *Goalporia* and *Goalpara* are terms which are deeply ingrained inside and outside the geographical area, notwithstanding the area's subsequent administrative re-organizations. Sanjib Baruah wrote in *The Western Boundary of Assam*,[2] that it is still baffling that modern-day histories of Assamese culture were all written outside the boundaries of Assam, in Cooch Behar. He says, 'We now think of a language as belonging to a particular group of people somewhat exclusively; speakers of a language, we think, can be clearly differentiated, and can be counted and located on a map with precision. This modern habit, however, may distort our understanding of the ways of our ancestors.' The Kamtapuri language of the folksongs in *Goalpara* is a confluence of ethnicities, which is neither the dominant Assamese nor upper-caste Bengali, but a mixture of several dialects, and even contains tribal and Sylhetti influences.

Perhaps part of the confusion about concerns regarding 'language/community' that Pratima Pandey sang in her prime is because of the denial of history prior to the 19th century conception of the nation-state. With this notion of the nation, notions of mother-tongue and womanhood were idealized. I believe that this is very central to our conceptualization of erotic desire in the kinds of songs that she popularized. The evocation of erotic desire in her songs was responsible for their marginalization and soft censorship by the state. These songs did not adhere to the dominant lingua franca or to the dominant notions of desire (governed and disciplined) by the state. I argue in this essay that they became an even richer and diverse subject of folklore, worth revisiting through the prism of local practitioners andmemory keepers. For this purpose, I focus and document the *Bhawaiyaa* tradition, a unique form of tune and melody (in *Kamatapuri* folk music) that singers like Pratima had mastered. Revising concepts of folklore is an important concern, says Richard Dorson, in *Folklife Studies and Folklore in the Modern World.*[3] He writes, 'Folk need not

apply exclusively to the country folk, but rather signifies anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people… The unofficial culture, can be contrasted with the high, the visible, the institutional culture of church, state,' and 'finds its own modes of expression in folk religion, folk medicine, folk literature, the folk arts…'

## I

Goalpara as a district has had the best of many worlds in terms of its cultural heritage and folklore. Adjacent to present-day Bangladesh, it experienced several jurisdictional changes since it first came under British rule. Sanjib Baruah in his essay, 'Language, Subnationalism and pan-Indianism', emphasizes the contestation of the linguistic and cultural identity of Goalpara. He says that in 1919 there were proposals to merge Goalpara with colonial Bengal. This was in keeping with the 'the Zamindari interests of Prabhat Chandra Barua, Raja of Gauripur to benefit from the permanent settlement of Bengal. His pleas were significantly resisted by the tenants and newly emerging urban middle classes in a people's memorandum who stated their affinity with lower Kamrup in their language and culture. The working classes were harshly critical of the feudal decisions and were angry at the Raja's wish to co-opt into the upper caste Bengali mannerisms.' It is quite interesting that the niece of the royal Pramathesh Chandra Barua (of Devdas fame), Pratima Baruah Pandey came to devote her entire life to composing *Bhawaiyaa* folk songs. She sought to defy gender and class through her active participation away from the feudal space. Her role, therefore, is as much political as it is personal—it is an ode to the third cultural zone that would have emerged had Bengal and Assam not been mapped out from Koch Bihar territories in 1949.

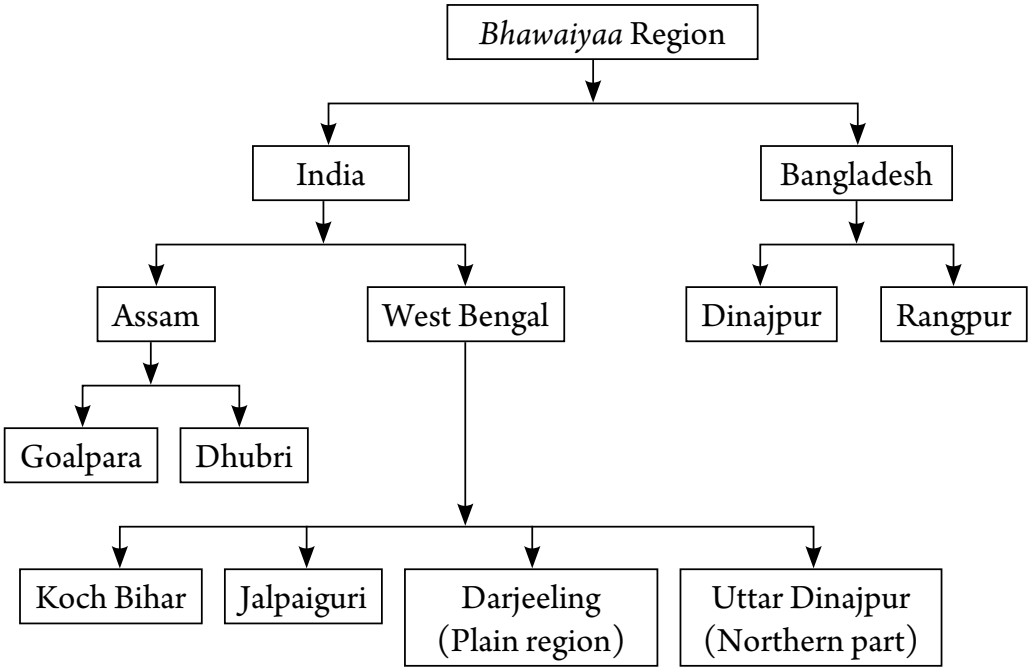
*Torsha nodir uthal patal karwa chole naau*
*Sonar bondhur baadey re mor*

*kemon kore gaaoo re*
*Torsha nodir uthal pathal re*

Whose boat is sailing in the ebb and flow of Torsa river,
amidst the turmoil in my womanly heart
O dear, how do I sing for my friend?

In this song, we get a sight of river Torsa. We are informed that the longing in the woman's heart resembles the sensuous way in which the river flows. Upon further interaction with folk singers, it was found that Torsa meant 'Toya-Rosa'—a dry river. In Bhutan, it is known as 'Aam-Msu.' Torsa river is a trans-boundary river (after entering Bangladesh it then crosses Cooch Behar and meets the Brahmaputra 22.5 km southwest of Dhubri). Many scholars like Pratima Neogi, regard river crossings as a 'melange' whose folk history is more 'collective than individual.' In her essay, 'Goalporia lokageetor Xur Baisitra,'[4] she says that *Bhawaiyaa* forms an integral part of folk music in the region. *Bedana* (agony), *bisshyed* (separation) and *biraha* (longing) are its three constitutive pillars. The diversity of this genre gets overlooked when categorized under 'love songs' or often named by academicians in Assam as *pranaimulak premor geet* ('love songs of the marital kind'). Anil Saikia in his article 'Goalpara aru Ujoni Oxomor Lokageeti'[5] compares this form with Bihu songs. He states that like Bihu lyrics carry romance and *biraha* in Upper Assam, in Lower Assam, it is the *bhawaiya, chatka* and *maishal geet* that carry messages of romantic union and separation. These assumptions and comparisons are problematic as a certain kind of economy gave rise to *Bhawaiyaa* songs; they are distinct in their tonality and have a unique flavour/story of their own.

The content of *Bhawaiyaa* songs is as important as the geographical vastness in which they are preserved and still circulated. According to Nasrin Khandoker, *Bhawaiyaa* 'emerged within the Rajbangshi community of North Bengal, becoming famous for expressing the (often sensual) desires of women.'[6] Today, there is a consensus over the use of the term *Deshi geet* for these songs. Further, there are some




divisions like *mohauter gaan, garial bondhurgaan, bhashan gaan* and *dotarar gaan* each connoting the fact that all the songs emerged from the native soil. Even Deshi Muslims are composers and performers of *Bhawaiyaa* music, and they have created an inclusive symphony with their additions to the lyrics. Mir Jahan Ali Prodhani, writes in *Goalpara: A Brief Study*[7] that the Kamata state of the 15th century must be kept in mind while discussing the future territorial divisions of the *Bhawaiyaa* region. 'Grierson and Dr. B.K. Kakoti called it "Rajbongshi Bhasha" while Dr. Birendra Nath Dutta called it "Goalpariya language." Unfortunately both the terms "Rajbongshi Bhasha" and "Goalpariya language" reduce the dialect range of the language. It is neither spoken only by a single community (the Rajbongshis) nor is it spoken only in Goalpara District (erstwhile). The common speakers of the language call it "Des/i- Bha-s.a-" or "Dhes/i- Kata-" which means local language.'

Historically tied to western Assam and the North Bengal region, *Bhawaiyaa* is an identity marker for the evolving political identities

of the Koches/Koch Rajbanshis. Undivided Goalpara consists of Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Chirang along with areas in North Bengal (Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Murshidabad and Uttar Dinajpur). and Bangladesh (Rongpur and Dinajpur). Remnants of *Bhawaiyaa* music are also found in Purnia district in Bihar, Jhapa and Morong districts in Nepal, Garo Hills in West Meghalaya and the Doars in Bhutan. One must keep this expanse in mind constantly while discussing the folklife which gave birth to *Bhawaiyaa* music. According to Dr Ashraf Siddiqui, *Bhawaiyaa* are songs sung in Cooch Behar-Jalpaiguri region which are distinguishable from others due to their lengthy, stretched tunes (*dirghalay*).[8]

*Bhang-un* or the radical break in voice is one of *Bhawaiyaa*'s powerful and distinct qualities. It brings to the fore several factors pertaining to the question of 'cultured' singing—one of the key determinants of the classical form. But being a folk lyrical composition, the long stretches while singing started marking its distinctive potential. In most parts, the melody breaks with a 'ha' sound at the end and a conscious pause, as if the air has interrupted the voice of the artist. For example, *joliya* becomes *joliya-ha* and *aashiben* becomes *a-ha-shiben* Habibur Rahman in *Bangladeshor Lokasangeet o' Bhogaalik Paribex*[9] states that the break in the voice of mahouts (elephant keepers) and moishals (buffalo herders) who sang it while grazing their animals in the fields was due to the shakiness in the air. The voice shakes quite often as one is riding a buffalo or an elephant, thus establishing a different environment for the singer that is dependent on the mobility of the animal that he is riding. It is a popular belief that only those can master *bhang-un* who are gifted and belong to the *Bhawaiyaa* region as they are accustomed to the ways of moishal and mahout singing. Further, in popular renditions of *Bhawaiyaa* as modern songs with the help of musical instruments like the guitar and a keyboard, a natural *bhang-un* in the artist's voice is very rare to hear. Even when the *dirghalay* stays and is stretched by contemporary singers like Nahid Farheen, Kalpana Patowary and others, *bhang-un* is tough to find.

The etymological origins of the word *Bhawaiyaa* are debatable, but one can surmise that they lie in the root word 'bhav' meaning emotive songs. As per the nuances in Rajbanshi language, there are multiple emotions associated with the word *Bhawaiyaa*: love, romance, sexual desire, longing, languishing and ecstasy. The first *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics were published by George Grierson as an example of 'Rajbangshi dialect' for the Linguistic Survey of India in 1904.[10] The song is about a young girl who wants to get married in order to fulfill her sexual desires. Grierson collected folk songs in local dialects from the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur towards the end of the 19th century. *Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika* (1908-12) contains a few examples of the lyrics of these songs in the printed form. However, written records do not confirm when and by whom these lyrics were composed. According to the book *Bhawaiyaa Gaan*,[11] the origins of the word can be traced back to a kind of grass called *Bhawaa*. Bhawaa grew near the riverside areas where hardworking buffalo herders (moishals) came to graze their animals. It is important to note that in many neighbouring riverside areas of North Bengal, buffalo sheds (*bathan*) were built in a particular season for the convenience of grazing. The grazers would carry their *dotaras* and compose tunes for their songs.

Though today both men and women perform *Bhawaiyaa* songs, most of the lyrics have been written by men. The lyrics range from discussing women's diverse desires as trapped in-between the self and their social expectations. Such subversive content is rarely found in dominant streams of folk music, especially those that are publicly performed. As these folksongs come from a geographically fluid location, there is a tendency to ignore their celebratory potential. Social disciplines have examined how women are embedded in relations of production, but what is relatively unexplored are the cultural dimensions of their agency in folklore; a case in point being the song:

*Arey Godadhorer pare pare re,*
*Ore Mahout chorai haati*
*Ki maya nagoilen mahout re*

By the banks of river Godadhar,
The mahout grazes the elephant,
Look how his magic charms me.

*Dudh khuwailung, doi khuwailung re*
*Mahut nakhuwailen maata*
*Eibaar haate bujiya gelu re*
*Godadhorer pare re*
*Ki maya nagoilen mahout re*

I fed him milk and I fed him curd
But he is yet to feed me milk butter
By the banks of river Godadhar
Look how his magic charms me.

As a song that is heavy on double entrende, it ties human longing with the flow of river Godadhor. The woman is in torment as she is enraptured by the elephant herder. 'Maya' here refers not simply to the illusion of desire or magic but also the bewitchment, the ability to be ravished by a far-away glance. After being fascinated by the mahout, the damsel requests an elephant rider to build his bedstead at a certain height so that she can see him while she goes to fetch water. She says she has tasted the milk and curd, but he is yet to make her taste the milk butter. What I am considering here is the place of *Bhawaiyaa* in the formation of female desire and the communities they are a part of. The persistent struggle and tension to understand the relation between a female's desires that are permissible and those that are forbidden find adequate reflection in *Bhawaiyaa* songs. The writers of these songs were aware of the societal pursuit of happiness as defined by the landed class (wealth, security, property), and they tried to articulate how people wanted to break free from these barriers while exploring their desires.

*Moni nahoi, manik nahoi je,*
*Joibon aanchole bandhibo*
*Guya nohoi, paan nohoi je*
*Oi taak otithik porishibo*
*Aar chaloro kumra nahoi je*

*O taak poroshik bilabo*
*Nahoi saale tuliya thoibo*
*Hai hai ki diya bandhiya rakhibo re*
*Aamar pora e joibon re*[12]

Neither a pearl nor a jewel is youth,
That you will pack in your *aanchol,*
Neither a betel-nut nor its leaf
That you will offer your guests
And neither is it your rooftop gourd
That you will distribute among the neighbours
Or keep it lying on the roof as it is,
Hai Hai, how shall you cage me,
And the bounty of desires that inflame me?

This *Bhawaiyaa* lyric was collected in 1928. It attempts a definition of pleasure-seekers—something similar to 'jouissance' which has been analysed as a source of resistance to the other pleasures of consensus based, collective communities. According to Cixous,[13] jouissance (a French word for pleasure, but quite difficult to translate into English) is a source of women's creative powers. Its suppression and drive to secrecy (impulse to hide or be ashamed of it) prevents women from having a fully empowered voice. Female voices seeking pleasure also refer to their *aanchols* (that part of a saree where valuables like coins, paan and keys are typically stored). Using the aanchol to safeguard things is often used symbolically in regional languages—saving love, affection and any concealed desire. Therefore, the commentary on hiding one's youthful desires inside the *aanchol* is used sarcastically in this song.

## II

Although Pratima Pandey came from a royal lineage, she identified herself with the people closest to nature—moishals and mahouts. As

such, her songs are voices of those living within very limited means. Nature, it can be argued, is the site of anti-culture according to social anthropologists like Levi Strauss,[14] and this holds true for *Bhawaiyaa* folksongs as well. According to Strauss, nature includes/enables/and also determines culture; culture therefore cannot be divorced from the natural context and its conduct of expression. When the ecological environment is conducive to the erotic essence through which women's voices are silenced, we need to relook at what constructs nature as a reticent force. As the medium of expression was itself the subject of ridicule (mostly deemed as *obhodra*), the lyrics were not considered poetry enough for the tastes of the upper class/caste elites. Yet, it is in the oral form where her songs reside and people who had no access to literary culture or the print culture could communicate using these forms.

The marginalization of *Bhawaiyaa* is therefore intrinsically related to perceptions of folk and this created a double-edged anxiety. The rising intellectuals wanted to absorb the folk domain for cultural preservation, but were ashamed of its supposed 'raunchy and loud attributes'. This subsequently led to 'modernizing' folk, an attempt to 'civilize' its primitive content and then render it for popular consumption. Take for instance—the *Bhawaiyaa* songs *Bondhur Baarite* and *Tumra geile ki ashiben* both sung by Pratima Pandey and Bhupen Hazarika.

*Joliya gelei moner agun*
*Nibiya geilen na*
*Dekhite dekhite gabhoru holu*
*Porar sengrai kore hai-re-hai*
*Moiyt pirit korung na*
*Sengra bondhu chare na*

The flame of my heart has burnt away
Yet the flame hasn't died down
With the passing of years I grew into a young girl,
The neighbourhood boys indulge in cat calls,
It's not me who chases love,

But my male friends won't let me be.

Bhupen Hazarika's voice (better known as Xudhakantha, Hazarika was a lyricist, composer, musician and an artist of repute in the North-East) modifying the tonality of the song is very interesting. In the commoner's tongue, he 'rescued' the loudness of *Bhawaiyaa* and tamed it aesthetically. One must also note that these intrusions in music did not happen in a vacuum, as in the 1960s and 1970s a regional elite idea of Goalparia was 'spatialized' conceptually to use Sanghamitra Misra's term.[15] This term left a permanent loophole in the state's cultural discourse, so much so that even today an artist from Goalpara singing *Bhawaiyaa* has to call himself/herself a Goalparia artist. The other problem is the translation of *Bhawaiyaa* as 'romantic' songs in Assamese and the unwillingness to link the lyrics to the context. In the latter part of the song, *Bondhur Barite,* which is rich in sexual innuendoes, we are informed of a Rajbanshi term *Becheya khau that* is indicative of an early marriage. This term is repeated across songs to portray the harshness of the practise as the lyrics mention that parents drive themselves mad to marry their daughters off. For instance, in the following lyrics we get a picture of a young girl who is cursing her parents for marrying her off so as to unburden themselves.

*Maau kana bapu kana, kana parar lok*
*Takaar lobhe becheya khaise swami nabalaak,*
*pran mur kaande re*

My parents are blind and so is the neighbourhood,
They have sold me out of greed for money,
My heart weeps in grief.

In between the expression of erotic desire, there is also representation of the fact that poverty is the reason for the forbidden rules for girls as they grow up. As such, we cannot separate the strands of *Bhawaiyaa* music from the issues that these songs talk of—they are seamlessly tied to each other. Categorizing them under 'romantic songs', therefore, is only the tip of the ice-berg and does not help in grasping the nuances that lie underneath.

*Emon mon mur kore re bidhi*
*Emon mon mur kore*
*Moner mot sengra dekhi*
*Dhoriya palau dure*

Such is my heart's desire
Such is my heart's agony,
My wish is to run away very far
With a boy of my choice.

Elopement is a common phenomenon in *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics; it is not regarded as taboo. In fact, pursuing erotic desires outside the social conventions of wedlock is also very much a feature of these folksongs. In these lyrics, the female voice articulates her desire to elope with a partner of her own choice. She is not shown to be a damsel in distress whom a prince shall rescue but rather someone who is prepared to face the brunt of society for the sake of her desires.

*Nodi hoise kanai holosthul re*
*O ki kanai re par korile*
*Joibon koribo daan re*

The banks of the river are restless,
Krishna, if you shall row me to the other side,
I shall give you my entire youth.

Addressing her lover as *Krishna/Sonar Bondhu/Sengra* helps the woman allude to episodes of local myths and legends in the region. Women seek Krishna not in a conventionally sacred way to fulfil their desires but as a mediator for getting human partners. To make a cross-cultural reference one could cite the example of *gali geet* in Awadh that fall under the broad genre of folksongs of northern India. In the 19$^{th}$century, the *gali* genre was considered unworthy of being sung by 'chaste' women due to their unabashed articulation of sexuality. For instance:

*Na nacna uchit na nacvana,*
*Na byahon me gali gana.*

*Kabhi mat dekho sajni ras,*
*Krishan sakhiyon ka vividh vilas.*

It is inappropriate to dance and get others dancing
Or to sing galis at weddings.
Girlfriends! Refrain from watching dramas
About the playful frolics of Krishna with the milkmaids.

*Bhawaiyaa* songs reflect passion and longing with an emphasis on emotive qualities. They evoke Lord Krishna as Kala and celebrate the erotic elevated with mystical energy. Krishna was a ladies' man: a central theme in his mythology is the love of the cowherd's maiden gopis who suffer when separated from him.

It must be noted that as long as women's folksongs adhered to the domestic, they were allowed to be sung. However, if one looks at the very public nature of these songs, there is a bewildering variety of subjects which question their domestic containment. Defying the landed classes' obsession with property, the women would evoke the moishal and mahouts and criticize the upper classes (also upper class women) through the medium of music. In *Aare geile ki aashiben, mur mahout bondhu re,* the singer enquires about her departing lover's return, addressing him as mahout. Many years later, the figure of the mahout became a vessel for both 'romanticisation and condemnation'[16] by the regional elite who were seeking to find 'roots' in rural and forested areas. Now, this mahout became emblematic of nature, a 'noble savage' treading the wild and perceived as a carrier of a 'purer' past. Due to this, the physical features of the mahout and his in-between identity as a wanderer were both facts that the Bhadralok male would be envious of.

*(Female voice): Hostir noran hostir choran hostir paye beri*
*Shottya koriya kon re mahut ghore e koye jon naari re*
*Tumra geile ki aashiben,*
*mur mahout bondhu re?*

You move the elephant, you graze the elephant,
you chain the elephant's feet;

But tell me the truth, O mahout,
How many women do you have back home?

The gradual masculinization/otherization of the mahout figure was brought alive in the discourse on music by the regional elite. In one modern Assamese song *Gauripuria Gabhoru*, the male addressee talks of how he is enchanted by the charms of an elusive lady from Gauripur. But, unlike the elephants of that area, he fails to tame her. Further, the singer of this song, Bhupen Hazarika played a strategic role in inserting tunes from Bihu. As power works in varied ways, the power of the artist's creation functions as a negotiating tactic. Dr Bhupen Hazarika had returned to Gauripur in 1956, and he included Pratima Pandey's songs in his forthcoming Assamese film, *Era Bator Sur* (*Songs of the Abandoned Road*). These were the beginnings of the introduction of *Bhawaiyaa* folksongs in the mainstream.

Constituting people's oral traditions, the remembrance and recollection of songs in particular contexts also invoke a variety of interconnections with other contexts. The fact that folksongs are sung again and again and passed down through generations also indicates the high degree of assimilation of the ideas, moods, and messages that they contain. The following lines from Hazarika's rendition of *Gouripuria Gabhoru* were sung to a Bihu tune; the male voice establishes that it is difficult to tame a damsel from Gauripur even while he possesses other strengths like being able to climb mountains and tame wild elephants.

*Porbote porbote bogabo paru moi, lota nu bogabo loi tan*
*Boliya haathi ku bolabo paaru moi, tumak nu bolabo loi tan*

I can climb the mountains but climbing up a creeper is damn tough,
I can tame a wild elephant but taming you is damn tough.

Thus, the females residing in the forest areas of Gauripur are brought alive in mainstream imagination as being wilder than elephants. Their sexuality is constructed as an urban middle-class fantasy which can be fulfilled only on the margins of the state.[17] A

woman's existence is shown to be dependent on this popularly termed 'fertile' imagination. But, as is evident from the song, she only exists in relation to someone's desire for her. There is no independent characterization of women. This is also in sync with the antiquarian approach that governed most 19th century folklore studies that thought of folk as 'they' rather than 'we.' Their culture, says Soumen Sen in *Khasi Jaintia Folklore*[18] 'is not culture per se but a sub-or para culture.'

It can be surmised that middle-class intellectuals thought it to be their 'moral responsibility' to assume control over folk culture on behalf of the sub-nation. In the public sphere, this move was highly appreciated and even sympathized with, and it ended up boosting the aspirations of the 'imaginary deferential peasant.' *Bhawaiyaa* as an oral form was hence seen as a 'contaminated' genre, one that interrupted existing ideological perceptions. Hence, it was felt that *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics and tone needed cultural cleansing; moreover, its differences from other forms of music were rigorously emphasized.

However, as we go deeper into the female voice (in *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics) addressing the mahouts in her own area, different facts come to light. The queries of the woman calling out to the mahout, for example, evoke emotions of *biraha*. This is very close to the *Doriya* sub-genre in *Bhawaiyaa* songs which is a melancholic merging of eroticism, sorrow and endless agony. Acceptable environments for women's musical performances of all kinds have also been noted by researchers who, by moving away from public, male dominated musical domains to private domains for women, discovered a variety of musical traditions. Now, the legitimate queries that arise from this social context are: Why were the women constantly singing songs of *biraha* and separation from their partners? Where were their partners headed—to a point of uncertain return?

## III

To answer these questions, we need to discuss the economy of bathans (buffalo-sheds), gaarials (bullock-cart riders) and mahouts (elephant-keepers) from the colonial era onwards. The vagabond nature of these occupations is in sharp contrast with the settled, fixed feudal world of the zamindars of Gauripur. Situated on the western side of district headquarters Dhubri with river Godadhar on its eastern side, the zamindars have a long history, and they ruled from Goalpara. Matiabagh on which the palace Hawakhan was made by the zamindars of Gauripur on the north-eastern side was the home of *Bhawaiyaa* singer Pratima Pandey Barua. Among the zamindars, Prabhat Chandra Barua was actively involved in the art and culture domain in the public sphere. He patronized the publication of two weeklies *the Advocate of Assam* edited by Mathuranath Barua in Guwahati and *Pranthabashi* edited by Gaurinath Shastri.

Raja Prabhat Barua had two wives Sarajabala and Saradabala, and from the former, he had a daughter Nihar Bala Barua, one of the first female collectors of *Bhawaaiyaa* folk songs in Gauripur. It can be surmised that Nihar Bala was acquainted with the anxiety shared by her forefathers about being on the frontiers. In fact, her work was titled *Prantabashir Jhuli*—tales of those residing on the frontiers (Pranto). She situated herself on the frontier of present day Assam, Cooch Behar, Garo Hills and Bhutan Duars. Further, she was astutely aware of being bounded by Kamrup, the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, the mountainous regions of Bhutan and by Bangladesh, Bihar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal.

Her commentaries provide great insights into the socioeconomic polity that influenced and determined *Bhawaiyaa* songs. Contrary to perceptions that *Bhawaiyaa* music was composed by men, Nihar Bala collected lyrics from women through her ethno-musical vision. These women were excellent in oral poetry and they could put in verse multiple narrative voices. This enables us to decipher the unconscious drive behind the expression of female desires. Words like *Sonarjoibon*

not only meana golden youth, but so much more. With multiple readings, words for fruits also connote sexual desires, for example:

*Paan piya sokhi*
*Dalim gache mur dalim*
*Aailo paaki*
*Dalim hoilo dogmog*
*Rosh pore faatiya*
*Kotoi din rakhim dalim*
*Gaamchai bandhiya re*

My dearest friend,
The pomegranates in my tree
Are ripening
The pomegranates are pretty luscious
And are overflowing with juices
How long shall I hide these pomegranates
In the folds of my gaamcha, O' my friend.

Nihar Bala Barua's compilation of the folk story of Hostir Kanya is a kaleidoscopic view of the day-to-day lives and dilemmas of the mahout. Constantly at the beck and call of their owners, their liminal inhabitancy in the forested areas is because of lack of choice. Not well-endowed economically like the zamindars whose leisurely pursuits would include hunting on elephant rides, the mahouts often left their wives and partners back home. These circumstances were responsible for the women having a lonely existence, but it also allowed them the space to question the fixed institution of hetero-normative marriages. *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics help us with this alternate history—in many songs, the women married to mahouts object to the dreadful life of class oppression.

*Hostir konya hostir konya bamaner nari*
*Mathay niya tam kalasi o,*
*sakhi haste sonar jhari sakhi o,*
*O mor haay hastir kainya re,*
*khaneko doya nai tor mahutok lagiya re*

O elephant girl! O Brahmin woman!
With the copper pitcher on your head and the golden water-sprinkler in your hand.
O my friend, my elephant girl,
won't you have a little pity for the Mahout?

The song titled *Hostir Kanya* is one such example. The male narration by the mahout and his relationship with the elephant have a parallel with a folk story retold in different versions in the *Bhawaiyaa* region. This eponymous folk story tells the unfortunate tale of a poor Brahmin wife named Joymala. Her husband had remarried in greed for money and left her to survive alone. As his house got bigger and servants *(dashi)* were appointed in due course of time, Joymala was assigned the task of collecting water from the river. The pitcher that was given to her was made of gold (*sonar jhari*). She decided not to eat a single grain of rice from her co-wife's house and would distribute the grains to the animals and birds near the river. As her tears flew in harmony with the river, it made the water turn salty.

Once, by the virtue of fate, an elephant king (Hosti-Roja) reached the river bank to drink water. He was infatuated by the taste and pursued Joymala to become the princess of his palace. Pleased by the gracious offer and crossing the Bhutan mountains, she finally arrived at the ivory-throne. Their unique love story was sung to glory by all the elephants. Thereafter, on a fine day near the river banks, the elephant king poured water from nine pitchers onto Joymala's head. At this, her human form metamorphosed gradually into that of an elephant—the golden pitcher at her head became a golden tusk. Her word as the princess was honoured by the elephant king as they ruled and lived happily ever after (legend has it that it is because of this story that an elephant herd is usually led by a female elephant).

After re-reading this tale and hearing similar versions in Gauripur, I was astonished at the power of *Bhawaiyaa* as a folk form. Metamorphosis is central to this story and it can be read as a road to freedom for the enslaved Joymala. At the same time, it also shows us how women can shape-shift, cross borders and undergo bodily

transformations that the established social perspective may not be able to discern. Joymala also resisted being the docile wife figure whose life was over because her husband had married again. The subterranean bits of the tale contain immense power. *Hostir konya*, therefore, is considered an in-between entity today. She is half-woman, half-elephant and at peace with her unsettled identities.

The second stanza of the song *Hostir Konya* gives a different glimpse into how even mahouts were not happy at leaving their homes, but had to wander in the wild for their bread and butter. The mahouts remembered their homes and newly married wives whose hearts broke at the thought of their departure. According to Nihar Barua, mahouts are not a special class but members of communities scattered on these frontiers. 'They were the Bodo-Kacharis, Garos, Rabhas, Tharus from Nepal, Deshi Musalmans from Goalpara and even residents of erstwhile Cooch Behar,' she states. A very popular *Bhawaaiya* lyric of Deshi Musalman is *Kun moheler hati re bhai, hai Allah rossul, Allah Allah bol re bhai hai Allah rossul*. This song describes the complex relationship between the elephants and the mahout. As the mahout's affections for the domesticated elephants grow, he is disturbed by the thought of separating from them. He is thus neither at peace away from them nor with them, and is completely torn in his position. His feelings of *biraha* in the lyrics are a result of having to make that impossible choice.

*Balu til-til pankhire kande balute pariya*
*Gouripuriya Mahut kande o,*
*sakhi ghar bari chhariya sakhi o.*
*Biao kareya chariya asilong o, sakhi alpa bayaser nari sakhi o*
*O more haay hastir kainya re,*
*khaneko daya nai tor mahutok lagiya re*

The sandpiper cries in the sands; the Mahout from Gouripur cries for his home.
I left my mother, I left my brother, I left my golden house.
I even left behind my young married wife.
my elephant girl, won't you have a little pity for the Mahout?

The importance of analysing *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics lies in the patriarchal entrapment of the body' in women's language/writing/oral songs that was naturalized with the anti-colonial reform project in Assam. The same songs suggest how dominant ideologies were not merely complied with, accommodated and reinforced, but also resisted and interrogated. Hence they also enable us to address the existing structural patterns of the society in the colonial times.

The wives of the buffalo-herders also dealt with a similar fate as that of the mahouts' wives. Nihar Barua states that the moishals were able to bring a two-fold revolution in the lives of the women. First, they had tremendous physical strength to face the wild animals trying to attack the buffaloes in the bathan (shed). Second, the ability to be brave and forgetful by nature (*baudiya)* made them perfect heroes for the women of the zamindari classes. It is also a folk belief that some moishals were given the task of building permanent shelters and houses for the upper classes. Simultaneously, there was also an assumption that palaces and houses could not imprison the makers, namely the moishals.

When a moishal left his newlywed wife, other moishal women come together to reproach him (*dhiko* or *dhikkar*). They told him that they were extremely disappointed that he had no kindness for his new spouse. They also warned him not to go buffalo rearing in certain chars (sand banks in the river's course) because the young women inhabiting that area were rumoured to practice black magic.

*Dhiko dhiko dhiko moishal re*
*Moishal dhiko gaburali-gabhoru*
*E heno sundoro konyak*
*Kemone jaaiben chari moishal re*

Dhiko dhiko dhiko you buffalo herder,
Dhiko dhiko the young woman
Have you no heart
leaving such a pretty lass behind?

*Tokhone na koisung moishal re*
*Moishal ne jaan saura-para*

*Saura parar sengri gula*
*Jane guya pora, moishal re*

We had warned you before, O' buffalo-herder,
Do not tread the char areas,
The young girls living in chars
are masters of black magic, O' buffalo-herder.

In the last stanza of this lyrical melody, the voice shifts from the women reproaching the moishal to the moishal's wife. She laments that the abundance of her youthful desires will now go in vain in the absence of her partner. Her last words are rich in rhetoric—she asks her husband in a mocking tone if she's supposed to incarcerate her youth inside the strands of a cloth. The song is also fascinating for the way it has moved to the mainstream with edited lyrics. *Saura-para*, which means riverine char areas (found in the entire *Bhawaiyaa* region) has been replaced by *Goal-para* in Pratima Pandey's rendition. Jagdindra Rai Choudhury in his book *Hengul Boron Aaaxi*[19] tells us about the treatment of these songs by All India Radio, Guwahati. Pratima Pandey was asked to translate her lyrics into Assamese first, and second to focus on the 'religious' content. The bhadralok members of AIR made the *Bhawaaiya* difficult to be recorded in its rusticity. As a result, a geographical formation of a river that couldn't be marked accurately was changed to Goal-para (a political entity now), as a stringent mapping of the sub-nation.

*Tomra jaiben moish bathane re*
*Moishal amar pore hiya*
*Ei sonar jouboon ki rakhim*
*Kapore bandhiya, moishal re*

You are headed to the buffalo-shed,
O' buffalo-herder, my heart burns in agony,
What am I to make of my golden youth
Am I to lock it up with a piece of cloth, O'buffalo-herder.

*Bhawaiyaa* folk songs like *Hostir Konya, Geile ki ashiben* and others were considered a threat as they lent power to women's use of public spaces and questioned the need to restrict women's access to these spaces under the guise of 'protecting' women. Khandoher states in his essay, 'Love beyond Boundaries: Subjectivity and Sexuality through Bhawaiya Folk Song of Bengal', 'the adulterous desire expressed through women's voices has agency symbolically existing in the Bhawaiya lyrics, and not morally dismissed by its performances. It shows a different narrative of "adultery" that is not as the "other" of marriage, but which transgresses its norms.' One has to bear in mind that women of the moishal/garial/mahout communities exercised much power both within and outside their huts. A woman was neither an angel in the house nor a witch, but she defied such notions of womanhood which got consolidated with the nationalist movement in Bengal. Scholar Partha Chatterjee writes in his essay,[20] 'Nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicised" tradition—reformed, reconstructed fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality.' But *Bhawaiyaa* melodies in their poetic prowess and linguistic play take us to those grey in-between areas. The multiple words used for lovers/elephants/buffaloes/bullocks/rivers help us unearth some of those in-between areas. They are also an indication of how layered and difficult it is to understand *Bhawaiyaa* emotions as homogenous sensations.

The platform of the Brahmo Samaj reformers[21] was dictated in part by their desire to efface the erotic from women's lives and to suppress women's sexuality in the interest of conjugal harmony. One such lyric that discusses the brother-in-law as a companion in her husband's absence is in complete subversion to that:

*Diner Deura Raaiter bondhu re*
*Malle jati kul*
*Tok dekhiya mur yuboti mon*
*Hoil re aakul*

Brother-in-law by day, and lover by night,
To hell with our family folks
Brother-in-law, my youthful heart is aroused
Whenever I get a glimpse of you.

Many a times, when the moishals or mahouts did not return from their long journeys in the wild, society sought to label their wives as widows. Accordingly, widows were not supposed to explore desires —even the basic desires of hunger or craving food. However, in one *Bhawaiyaa* song, the rebellious voice of a widowed woman comes to the fore. She expresses earnestly that she will feast when her husband dies physically (perhaps a hint of the fact that with his prolonged absence, she has been widowed already). Further, she will continue to seek love and will only consider herself a widow when her lover dies.

*Baalite randhinu balite barhinu soi*
*Jole bhaseya dinu harhi*
*Mur biyar swami morile*
*Maas bhaat mui khaiym re*
*Bondhuwa morile huym moi bari*

I cooked and built my family castle on these sands, my friend
I drowned my utensils in the water
When my husband dies,
I shall feast on rice and fish
Only when my lover dies, shall I become a widow.

## IV

About four years ago in Gauripur, Ganga Sankar Pandey, the husband of Pratima Barua Pandey shared with me some concerns with *Bhawaiyaa* folk songs from Gauripur. He remains, till date, an ardent admirer of the courage and rebellion his wife showed to the norm-bound mainstream conditioning. He said to me, 'I was born in Rai Bareilly and knew Awadh Lokageet from before. But folk songs in

Kamatapur have way more variety – for instance, I had never heard mahout songs before. This is certainly a prized possession of the region – whether we call it Kamatapur, or Goal-para or Rajbanshi.' Mr Pandey was also eloquent in articulating the importance of a subject his wife had picked up in her prime. He added, 'Pratima was very sensitive to socioeconomic depravity that plagued the mahouts and moishals. Frequent early marriages with elderly grooms, moreover, created a lot of child widows.' The resistance from widowed women in *Bhawaiyaa* lyrics is therefore not a mere display of the erotic, but a voice we choose not to hear. When the wish of a widow to express her desires is read divorced from its context, the lyrics are lost in translation.

There have been multiple maps drawn in the *Bhawaiyaa* region on communal and linguistic lines. With every stroke of the pen, there are voices that are lost in a chauvinist din. In circumstances like these, it is imperative to locate and document musical traditions. Across regional channels in Assam, Mr Pandey has to, unfortunately, testify the language of the songs and their authenticity as 'Assamese.' However, there is little to no discussion or debate around the significance of erotic desire in these songs. They are easily de-contextualized and universalized as vulgar melodies or for those on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The charting of the sub-nation Assam was complete with the extraction of folk, but the radical value of folk was eliminated slowly but surely.

Dharani Das, librarian at B.N. College Dhubri states, 'Lokageet was the medium of Pratima's expression and her life support; she was practising fifteen days before her death also. She'd started in 1950 across Shipra river and her last performance was in Tezpur Mahotsav.' Mr Das further commented that the death of *Bhawaiyaa* is certain with the kind of cultural appropriation happening at the cosmopolitan level. He was referring to shows like Coke Studio which tampered with folk forms and erased their contexts. '*Bhawaiyaa* or any folk form is meant to be fluid, so experimentation is not what I am against. Quite the contrary. I am concerned that once the emotions of the mahouts and moishals are wiped out from the songs, they will be disseminated as

playful entertainment. The universalization of the folk for commercial value and the needs of the urban elite is dangerous,' he said.

In the 1950s, when AIR was 'fine-tuning' and editing *Bhawaiyaa* songs to dilute them of their crass nature, the result was a permanent fracture of the folk psyche. Borders were imagined where they did not exist. Listening to Mr Das' argument and his careful strumming of his mellifluous *dotara* (which he made himself), I understood that folk can be used as a vessel for social change and class struggle. It can illuminate the lives of mahouts and moishals' wives who have suffered at the hands of the changing feudal structures and nation-state boundaries. *Bhawaiyaa* provides that passage, I feel, to rethink and re-read the lyrics and navigate the borders created by our ancestors. This might be our chance of dismantling those maps and reclaiming folk histories.

When Pratima breathed her last, it was raining heavily. I had just returned from school and there was a sense of vacuum in my father's eyes. His library is still full of old HMV cassettes of her melodies. The newspapers on the following day reported how the maestro of *Goalparia lokageet* was no more, once again falling into the trap of demarcating boundaries with her contribution. The trend still continues—and from time to time, the regional elite in Assam try to paint her as a bhadra-mahila (editing and modernizing her lyrics with western instruments). Ironically, her entire life and musical tryst was a rebellion against this very notion and an affirmation of the life-force which was feared.

Jyotirmoy Prodhani, in *Life as lore: The Art and Time of Pratima Pandey*[22], recalls a moment from the artist's death when masses of people from Gauripur were headed to the cremation ground. He writes, 'Apart from the members of the cultural and cinema fraternity in Assam, ordinary folk from as far as Sikkim, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar in West Bengal, and Bihar joined the last procession of the princess of Gauripur.' Although I have my reservations about artists being revered only after they are dead, for the very first time, I saw *Bhawaiyaa* being a force of unity. She will be a reminder that despite

the artificial categories invented for dividing people, *Bhawaiyaa* has metamorphized from a musical form into a community.

Pratima had eerily transformed into the in-between realm of irrevocable power. Her story and the many re-tellings of the half-woman/half-elephant *Hostir Konya* became indistinguishable from each other. Even after many years, I can still hear the sounds of the Gauripur forests blending in rhythm with the melancholy of women seeking invincible love and glory.

(The author is thankful to the informants in Gauripur and Dhubri, especially, scholars of B.N. College Dhubri for their inputs).

## NOTES

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17. Think of the 1970 film *Arenyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights of the Forest), written and directed by Satyajit Ray. In it, we see how the Calcutta city slickers visualise the forest (and by extension forest dwelling women) as untamed in the wilderness. Hence, the rules of Bengali upper-class gentility do not hold in that space and members from that very class can unleash their darker demons.
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