

Reflection of the Contemporary Society in the Works of Keshab Mahanta- An Analytical Study of His Lyrics



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Abstract

Lyrics are poems laden with tune and intrinsic emotion. When it is sung it becomes a song. Songs are the external manifestations of human emotions and passions emanated from its human experiences of life and their affiliation to the society. Thus, these expressions however personal may be cannot sever themselves from social realities. Folksongs, the melodious expressions of the rustic passions too are profoundly expressive of social realities, and experiences of the everyday life. Thus, songs depict the human society in its multiplicity of expressions and directing its listeners to the desired aspects and values of life.

In this regard, the lyrical works of Keshab Mahanta, a renowned lyricist in the post independence era of Assam can be studied for their wide-ranging representation of the contemporary society and life. An observation of his lyrics hints at the lyricists' profound understanding of the varied aspects of common life and culture; and his deep empathy for human pains and sufferings arisen from social disparities. This paper attempts to analyze the reflection of human society in some of the lyrics of Keshab Mahanta namely, Kolore patote Kaaori pore, Xonore Gorhalo Xochorua Kharu, Xumalar Jiyekok Sao Buli Xomalo, Paaror Pakhit Ganthi Dilu Phulam Chithikhoni, Halodhiya Charaye Baodhan Khai and Moinamoti Nodir Paarot Madhumati Gaon. The study will be basically textual and analytical.

Keywords: Songs, Human Emotion, Reflection Of Social Realities, Empathy.

Introduction

Songs are the souls of human life. Since the beginning of civilization man has sung, created and enjoyed songs in diverse ways. Songs are the external manifestations of human emotions and passions emanated from its human experiences of life and their affiliation to the society. Thus, these expressions however personal may be cannot sever themselves from social realities. Folksongs, the melodious expressions of the rustic passions too are profoundly expressive of social realities, and experiences of the everyday life. Thus, songs depict the human society in its multiplicity of expressions and directing its listeners to the desired aspects and values of life.

It is a fact that writers and poets paint pictures of his socio-economic and cultural surroundings. Being a member of the social system, he cannot detach himself from the situation and the people he is associating himself with. Especially, the socially conscious artists, through their creations attempt to serve the two way purpose of entertainment as well as representation of life twinned with the powerful motive of social censure. They observe life through the minds' eyes, picturize it, and offer us a comprehensive idea to apprehend the time. Lyricists all over the world have expressed themselves sometimes to entertain and sometimes to express their profound responsibilities as conscious social beings engaging their works for the cause of the humanity and the society. Assamese language too have such a glorious legacy of music starting from the vaishnavite Saint Sankardeva, who employed his musical creations in the service of mankind. In the modern Assamese music arena there are several eminent lyricists and song writers who have contributed in this field

by welding their poetic genius and social concerns into great work of art. Keshab Mahanta is one of these poets and song writers of Assam who have enriched the Assamese music world with their fascinating works marked by strokes of social criticism and protest.

Objectives of the Study

This paper is a humble attempt to explore how the Assamese society and the social realities have been remained the dominant aspect of Mahanta's songs. Though, generalization is not possible without having an understanding of his entire work yet, basing on some of the lyricist's songs, attempts have been made to draw some inferences regarding the portrayal of Assamese people and his contemporary society. Thus, the objectives of the study are:

1. to study the nature of Keshab Mahanta's lyrics
2. to examine the lyricist's method of depicting the society and the people

Significance of The Study

Poets draw pictures of his era through their minds' eyes. They study their surroundings and reproduce them with the colour of imagination. Keshab Mahanta, a poet, song writer too expressed his feelings and portrayed, tried to show the living condition of people through his lyrics. His lyrics emanate from a deep love of humanity, respect in the past, and great concern for the present and intense hope in the future three realities: past, present and future at a time. The reader or listener is taken to the other side of the river of life through a close attention to his lyrics. His selection of the vocabulary is always spontaneous and conscious which strike the chord of his listeners very effectively. All these qualities impart to his works great significance and his work offers a great scope for a significant study of the socio-economic and political spheres of Assam. But interestingly, no serious study has been found on the subject so far. Thus, this paper seems to bear great significance in regards to the study and understanding of Keshab Mahanta's works and it is expected to encourage further study on the subject.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study, six songs namely, *Kolore patote Kaaori pore*, *Xonore Gorhalo Xochorua Kharu*, *Xumalar Jiyekok Sao Buli Xomalo*, *Paaror Pakhit Ganthi Dilu Phulam Chithikhoni*, *Halodhiya Charaye Baodhan Khai* and *MoinamotiNodir Paarot Madhumati Gaon* have been selected. The study is basically textual and analytical.

Review of Literature

So far our study is concerned; no such study on the works of Keshab Mahanta came to notice. But for understanding of the historical background of Assamese songs, certain books on the subject were found to be helpful. So, our study in this respect, have been entirely text-based and is the result of a close analysis of the texts itself.

Discussion

Keshab Mahanta is one of the most prolific poets and song writers of Assam and occupies a special position in the post independent Assamese literature. Born in 1926, in the family of Thanesar Mahanta, a Satradhikar in Chotiya, Keshab Mahanta

was brought up in an environment highly pervaded by the Satriya culture. Perhaps his home environment set a strong foundation for his artistic and literary pursuits.

Apart from being a wonderful poet and a lyricist, Mahanta was a writer of children's literature, translator, and an editor to his credit. An active figure of the Gauhati University Publication House and a Part time lecturer of B. Barua College, Keshab Mahanta served as an active freedom fighter in his early life. His oeuvre includes five books of songs, four on poetry and some translation works. He wrote some exquisite songs for nearly 30 Assamese films and also wrote some musical scripts for the Radio. He received the Raghunath Choudhury Award from the Assam Sahitya Sabha for his collection of verses, *Tomar Tej*. His excellence as a lyricist had been recognized as Mahanta was awarded by Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. He received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, in 1993 for his book of verses, *Morje Kiman Hepah*.

As a post-independence poet, a lyricist, Keshab Mahanta exhibited the feelings of disappointment with the social structure in the society. The socio-economic and political condition in the post-independent India shattered the dream of peace and happiness as the dream of freedom had envisaged for the common masses. The common people still found themselves in the deplorable condition of social and economic exploitation, caught within the abysmal racial prejudice. This situation incurred the displeasure among writers, poets and artists which had a clear manifestation in their creative pursuits. Mahanta's lyrics reflect the shattered dream of the masses, the oppressive system, and the struggle of common people. Keshab Mahanta, possessing a profound concern for humanity with a leaning towards Leftist Ideologies, composed numerous poems and songs conveying his philosophy. He was a staunch believer in the power of music as a medium of social welfare. His social consciousness, humanistic concerns, deep desire for social peace and harmony and all-round emancipation of the masses remain his guiding forces behind his writing (Nath, 2005).

Mahanta's interest in humanity articulates in the reflection of hopes, desires, pains and frustrations of the common man. As a careful observer of human life and society, his work gives poignant expressions to the complexities as well as joys of life. His interest in the simple rustic life articulates in the multiple expressions of folk lore and life. They breathe the aroma of the native soil, contain vivid reflection of the serene countryside, and also resonate with the smiles and sighs of the common people. Furthermore, a very rich imprint of folk cultural heritage is a remarkable feature of his songs.

Most of his songs exhibit the lyricist's all-pervading craving for social peace and desire to do away with social discrimination and disparities. Some of such songs like *Bar Gharar Mekuri Xaru Gharaloi Jai*, *Ghan Kola Kaliare Rati* still enthral the music lovers. His social commitment is clearly visible in one of the songs included in the study is, *Xonore Garhalo Xochorua Kharu*. The song is a critique on the

prejudiced outlook of the society that intensifies class divides. At the same time it targets the underdogs of the society for their submissiveness to the exploitative mechanism. The song starts with an evocative verse expressing a pique against the long drawn bigoted convention of disregarding the poor or the common men in the socio-political milieu:

*Xonare garhalo Xancharua kharu
Barloke pitalor bole
Barlokar pitalot xone cikmikai
Dai lage xamajat kole*

(I have made a *Xancharua kharu*¹. But the rich ridicules it at as of ordinary brass. The brass metal worn by the rich glitters as gold and so it is offensive to point it out in public).

By voicing out, in a suggestive language, the suppressed displeasure of the common folk, the first verse of the song gives clue to their position in the societal ladder. Poverty is a curse and it devalues human worth, and the poor always encounter humiliating situations on the ground of their economic status in the society. The verse exhibits the lyricist's capacity for deep penetration into human psyche. But in the succeeding verses, it is the lyricist who emerges in the role of a critic and appeals for action on the part of the oppressed class of the society. He appeals to express them assertively:

*Bihutolit xagun parisehi
Jore jore mora xo'
Mon tamol nohoi phalli dekhua
Mukh khuli kathati ka*

The Assamese folk festival, *Bihu* stands for cultural heritage, unity, peace and harmony, and it defines the Assamese Race. The lyricist observes that the happiness and merriment of *BihuTolis*² have been eclipsed by the appearance of large number of 'vultures' in the *Bihu Tolis*. Symbolically presenting the 'vultures' as the sign of death, decay, and some impending misfortunes to the social fabric, the lyricist entreats his country folk to act against these evil forces. However, while questioning the sad plight of the common folk in the society, the lyricist is not only critical about the apathy of the privileged class, but also about the passivity of the exploited as well. He strongly believes that unless and until they protest, there will be no alteration at all in their condition. Therefore, he becomes verbal against their role, and the sarcasm is very much obvious here:

*Katana katili banaco nepali
Tarehe gungan ga
Tako Jodi gabloi gat bol nepawo
Botah ekahike kha*

(You have toiled hard without a reward, even then you sing in their praise. If you don't have vigour to do so, have a plate full of air.)

The entire song expresses Mahanta's great concern at the social bias and also empathy for the common men, *Haladhiya Charaye Baodhan Khai* is a warning against the evil forces of society that steal the hard earned produces of the working class. The lyricist warns the *xaudar putek*³ that instead of wasting time in the luxurious boat rowing, he should concentrate on protecting the paddy fields by building *tongi ghar*⁴ at tall *xal* trees. If it is not done soon the

dreams of numerous peasants and workers will be shattered; their hard labour and sweat would be wasted. By employing some familiar symbols like *haladhiya charai* (yellow bird), *Kakati foring* (locusts), *baliya hati* (violent elephant), the lyricist has attempted to stir the people into awareness regarding the impending danger.

It is observed that the mellifluous songs of the poet touch upon the contours of human relationship in a social structure mostly in the faraway rustic environment. But being a poet of humanity and downtrodden people he couldn't be away from the growing urban life and the complexities. His song, *Kalare Patate Kauri Pore* is a good example of this rural urban conflict taking place in human psyche depicted through the life of a peon. People have to stay away from their families in a faraway city with a view to earn bread and butter for their family. But they suffer from mental agony being caught between duty and desire. The speaker in the song is a peon who stays at a distance that cannot be covered by human sight. His duty is to bring messages to people from their loved ones but he fails to get any information about his family. His concern for the family and every aspect of his household comes alive in:

*Cakure nedekha duranite
Asohi peonor cakarite
Komal dhanar kathiya porali ne nai
Bakulborar gos loli ne nai
Mon mor us-pich kare*

The crow on the plantain leaf, the rhythmic movements of forepart of plantain leaves, the deep sound of the drums, the gloomy cloudy sky of the *Axar* month, and the egrets flying in couples set a beautiful setting making his longing for his beloved *Jeuti* more intense. The *uroniya mon*, (his flickering mind) immediately flies back to his beloved. Away from all the boons of family life and the peaceful rural environment, the speaker's feelings of being misplaced in unfamiliar world oozes out very prominently:

*Cithir boja moi
Pithit bandhi loi
Parar ceneh karhiao
Mor he cenehiye
Kino bhabase
Tar eko gamake nepao*

The child in *Jeuti's* lap whom he left last year in the month of *Aghon*, and his request to come back soon, echoes in his ears making his pain more acute. His heart cries in apprehension:

*Jeuti o', Ponati o'
Kuxale aso ne sage o'*

(O' *Jeuti*, o' my son- are you all fine?)

Apart from the portrayal of individual human feelings, the song is remarkable for the portrayal of a rural landscape and also giving clue to social life. The third stanza of the song refers to the peace and harmony that prevails in those areas. No one feels abandoned in times of adversity or misfortunes. *Raij*, the village community supports individuals or fights against their problems united. The speaker in the

song has full faith in the *Rajj* that his absence will not be felt by his family at the time of calamity:

*O' patharat jodihe uthise dhal
Heruai nidibi monare bal
Raije maribo ukhakoi bheta
Dhale eri jabo poloxor etha*

Mahanta's works uphold his faith in humanity, life and attempt to strike a chord between individual and social concerns. Referring life to be the base of creative pursuits, the poet commented in an interview, "Be it poems or lyrics they speak about life. Even if you go back to Sankardev and Madhabdev, their works also spoke of life's great truths..." **Mainamati Nadir Ghatat** is another song which portrays a picture of life spent in the peaceful environs of a village on the banks of the Mainamati River. The River is symbolic of a sacred river that keeps the village sacred. At the same time the peaceful existence of the people in the village has been presented at the backdrop of the riverine beauty and serenity. The central attraction of the song remains in the vivid depiction of the shores of the river, lovely mud-free pathways, paddy fields, the village mart, cooperation among the people. Thus, the song offers a comprehensive picture of village life to its listeners. The simple dwellers of the village are far away from the city complexities. They know the power of being united; the whole village depicts a loving family. No one is oppressed here, everyone has his own voice to sing and so the lyricist says:

*Xomuhiya doka bazaar
Xomuhiya kheti
Madhumati Raije buje
Xomobaiyor bheta*

(Cooperative market, cooperative cultivation, *Madhumati Rajj*, the dwellers of *Madhumati* village knows the strength and vigour of unity)

However, the lyricist's inclination towards the cause of the common men and his belief in equality cannot be branded as a political ideology. It had been for him a way of living life, believing in it moment to moment (Mahanta)⁵. The composition, **Parar Pakhit Guji Dilo** resonates with the artist's desire for social peace and harmony. The lyric appeals to maintain unity and peace, thus:

*Koa Jadi manuh amar
Bhai bhani buli
Lowa jadi sadoutike
Bukut ankowali
Bhal lalgibo kara jadi
Rang xingar dhvani*

(if you consider the humanity as brethren, if you embrace everyone with love, it will be nice to hear the happy tune of the horn.)

His concern for the life of common men has reinforced his interest in their tradition and culture and their language. His works are permeated with the fragrance of folklore and folk life. There persists a deep longing for the lost idyllic life and culture in his works and is very much observed in the song **Xumalar Jiyekak Sao Buli Ahilo**. It offers a metaphoric search for an ideal world of one's dream. The ideal land or time represented by *Sonapur*⁶ is

seen on the verge of disintegration. *Xumala* has been presented as a metaphor and is juxtaposed to her daughter also representing an unpleasant time. The poet sadly witnesses the weaving loom of *Sumala* being destroyed by termites and the weaving shed occupied by *xon guin*⁷. Though, the song doesn't clearly explain what fire it is, yet there is obviously room for considering it to be the fire of transition which destroys old ways of life and cultural characters. He laments over the loss of those blissful time:

*Eikhinite asile kaji Xumala
Eikhinite asile tant
Hatar kathi kami eri dupariya
Ahi lagaisilo mat*

(Here was *kaji*⁸ *Xumala*, here was her loom, leaving aside wicker works at noon, I used to speak to her)

An ardent observer of life, *Keshab Mahanta* took serious interest in the folklore and life and traditional expressions of the common folk. His songs are replete with elements of folk literature or verbal literature. The reference to the phrase, *Kalare patate kauri pore* has been brought from the Assamese folk narrative *Cilonir Jiyekar Xadhu*. Again the terms *Rang xinga* and *Khang xinga* remind the listeners of the folk tale, *Bagh Aru Kekorar Xadhu*.

He had been deeply influenced by Assamese folk song genres and borrowed many elements from folk songs. **Haladhiya Caraye Baodhan Khai**, is significantly inspired by an Assamese *Nicukani Geet* (lullaby) which goes like this:

*Jonbai e eti tora diya
Eti tora nelage duti tora diya
Haladhiya caraye baodhan khai
Xaudar puteke nao meli jai
Nao e bole tulung bhutung
Bothai bole bao
Gadhulite gadhulite daba kobaon*

(Sister Moon give us a star, one star won't do, give us two. Yellow birds eat summer paddy, the merchant's son goes a-boating? The boat says: I am rocking and rolling; the oar says: I do row, In the evening, in the evening, beat the big drum)

The act of keeping watch of the summer paddy in Mahanta's song brings in to mind the folk tale, named *Campawatir Xadhu*. A comparison of both the songs, gives an understanding of the deep influence of Assamese folk music on his songs. However, the poet has masterfully created a completely new song, befitting his age by changing the context.

Conclusion

The lyricist has employed language and expressions closely associated with the traditional life. *Xumala*, *Jeuti*, *Ponakan*, *Xaudar putek*, *Bai Guloci* are representatives of the rural society. Images and expressions like *haladhiya carai*, *Kakati foring*, *kora muthi mon tamol nohoi phalli dekhuaibi*, *mukh phalli kothati ka*, *naci juti pabi*, *laghonia pet tit pani gamoca*, *hurai dilo*, etc. are rooted in the traditional Assamese language. He, as a lyricist of the common people has used their day to day language to make them feel about their situations. Through his songs he tries to

make them dream once again, raise their voice, and to protest against the evils. One can actually feel the lyricist' desire of a peaceful society through his choice of vocabulary, he has used the spoken language which make the reader feel oneness with the author.

Keshab Mahanta, as a writer of the Post-independence era has depicted the dissociation of people, the attractive artificial colours of city life and the extinctive nature of village culture. While *Mainamati Nadir Ghatat* portrays a village life, *Haladhiya Caraye Baodhan Khai* depicts the peasants' fear of being oppressed and finally the lost of voice to protest emerge in *Xonare Gorhalu Xoncorua Kharu*. The loss of village culture is shown through *XumalarJiyekak Sao Buli Ahilu*, and on the other hand the displeasure of the mechanical city life is depicted in *Kalare Patote Kauri Pore*. The lyricist' depiction of such a scene however, does not mean that he has lost all the hopes. In *Xonare Gorhalu Xosorua Kharu* he speaks about the necessity to protest, and his *Parar Pakhit Guji Dilu* is full of hope, a dream of a society where peace and harmony exist. A deep-rooted faith in humanity, his culture and tradition and optimism can be considered as the key concerns in Keshab Mahanta's songs which make them tremendously significant for human society irrespective of any age or culture.

Notes

1. A style gold bangle with a locking system
2. The fields for celebrating the ancestral Assamese Bihu festival

3. The son of the merchant
4. A high platform used for watching crops.
5. Interview with Meenakshi Gautam
6. Sonapur represents a land, full of abundance and happiness
7. Iguana, a lizard like wild animal
8. A woman well versed in weaving and spinning

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