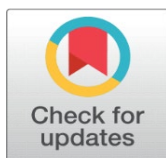


READING RESEMBLANCES AND FLUIDITY BETWEEN THE ZIKIR SONGS OF AZAN FAKIR AND OTHER SONG GENRES IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Zikir songs of Assam are the Assamese Islamic devotional songs composed by the Sufi figure Shah Miran, alias, Azan Peer Fakir, who came to Assam from Baghdad in 17th century. Assamese scholars categorize zikir under the folk Bhakti or Sufi genre. According to Syed Abdul Malik, a pioneer writer on the subject, the word zikir is said to have been derived from the Arabic term *ziqr*, which means to remember, listen to and to mention the name of Allah. Interestingly, the concept of remembrance of the Divine, like in zikir, also resonates with the Neo-Vaisnavite Bhakti philosophy of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva of 15th century Assam. There exist philosophical and lyrical resemblances not only between zikir and borgeet (Vaisnavite prayer songs), but also between zikir songs and lokageet, and dehbichar geet. Musically, there are resemblances of rhythmic patterns and melodic phrases, which reflect a fluid exchange amongst zikir and other folk genres.

This essay is a musicological exploration and lyrical study of some examples showing these philosophical resonances and musical fluidities. In doing so, the article highlights the synthesis of the merging of the Hindu and Islamic philosophies, lyrical and musical aesthetics, in and through the songs of zikir by Azan Fakir.

Keywords: Zikir, Bhakti Movement, Assamese Sufism, Musical Fluidity, Folk Music

1. INTRODUCTION

I carry no discrimination in my mind O Allah,
I do not see a Hindu different from a Muslim, O Allah!
When dead, a Hindu is cremated
While a Muslim buried under the same earth
You leave this home
To reach that Home
Where all merge into one!

-Azan Fakir

The above is a zikir (translated from Assamese), which is an Islamic Assamese devotional song-poem, composed by the 17th century Sufi figure named Shah Miran or Azan Peer Fakir. Azan Peer Fakir is said to have migrated from Baghdad to Assam via Ajmer and Delhi. On reaching Assam with his mission of spreading the tenets of Islam, he was surprised to find that the Muslims were following Islam only in the name. They were merged in the larger Assamese Hindu mannerisms of social and religious life, which was mostly Neo-Vaisnavite in nature following the Nama-Dharma of Vaisnavite Gurus Srimanta Sankardeva and Srimanta Madhavdeva. Shah Miran is said to have learnt the Assamese language himself, married a local woman, and merged into the Assamese lifestyle. He imbibed musically and philosophically with many existing rhythms, folk melodies, and religious philosophies. It became possible for him to propagate the Islamic values through this merge with the existing aesthetic and philosophical values of the folk Assamese life.

Today, multiple levels of synthesis exist amongst zikir and other song genres of Assam. I attribute this synthesis to the fluid nature of *loka parampara* or folk traditions working in tandem with the accommodative and inclusive philosophy of Bhakti or Sufi expressive cultures.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL RESEMBLANCES

In 15th century Assam, two figures, Sankardeva (1449-1569 AD) and Madhavdeva (1489-1596 AD) brought in a literary and cultural renaissance in Assam through their brand of Vaisnavism that propagated the philosophy of *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*, meaning the single-minded devotion of Vishnu or Krishna. The music forms of borgeet and namakirtan are vocal music genres originating from this brand of Neo-Vaisnavism. All the eminent scholars who have written on Azan Fakir and his music, including Syed Malik (2003), Hossain (2014), Deka (2012) and so on, have paid attention to the influences of the Sankari arts and philosophy on the music of Azan Fakir.

Nama-Dharma of Sankardeva preached the remembrance of the Divine Name of God through various modes of Bhakti: *sravana* (listening to the recital of the Name and glories of Hari or Vishnu), *kirtana* (recital of the glories and Name of Hari), *smarana* (recalling or remembrance of the Lord's Form and Name) and so on.

Two Vaisnavite songs reflecting the kind of sacred significance of Nama in Vaisnavite faith can be *Hari Nama rase Vaikuntha prakase* and *Naame Gangaajol loboloi komol boi aase hridayar maaje*. While the first song says that Hari's Name is the divine ambrosia that would open the doors of *Vaikuntha* heaven, the second song reflects that the sweet nectar of Nama is the pure Ganga flowing through the devotee's heart.

One finds resonance of a similar importance given to the chanting of the Name even in Azan Fakir, who followed the Sufi philosophy of *zikr*, meaning remembrance. In *Jibar Saarothei Naam O Allah*, the devotee calls the Holy Name of Allah as the only true

companion to life. *Keval Naame Keval Naam, keval Naame rati, dine rati loba Naam nokoriba khyoti* gives an urgent message to waste no time and surrender oneself to the chanting of the divine Name, day, and night. In yet another zikir, *Momin bhai dosti rakha Allahe param dhan* the poet addresses the *bhakta* (devotee) companion that the Name is in fact the ultimate treasure leading to Divinity.

Among other things, many Vaisnavite songs also talk of the transience of materialistic pleasures and worldly sufferings of *maya*. One may take the Borgeet *Pawe pari Hari koruhu katori* in which the *bhakta* surrenders on the feet of Rama, beseeching for the rescue of the soul from the poisons of the material distractions (*bisaya bisadhara bise jara jara Jivana narahe thoro*). A very similar critique of worldly pleasures and illusory attachments is heard in the Zikir, *bisoy khon gologroho bisoykhon bisoy golore mani*, where Azan Fakir rebukes material pleasures as the ominous presence (*gologroho*) dangling from the neck [Deka \(2012\) 27-28](#). The song cautions the devotee to see the reality that because of this ominous presence she remains dry even within water. This metaphor of dryness within water is suggestive of the failure to access the Divine even while being near the Divine, because one is constantly blinded by the illusory attachments.

However, it is not just Vaisnavite music that zikir is seen to have resonances with. The other folk music genres of Assam like Kamrupi lokageet, Goalpariya dehbichar geet and tokari geet also find resonances in zikir in some or the other way. The Goalpariya lokageet are songs with the themes of dehtattva and dehbichar that speak of the impermanence of this human body, the futility of all material wealth, decay, and death.

There is a striking resemblance of imagery between the zikir, *lorali kaal gol haahote khelate bhakti kora kun kaale* and the Goalpariya geet sung in Western Assam *Balyo kale gelo haashite khelite Joubono kaalo gelo ronge*. Goalpara has proximity to Bengal, hence Goalpariya Lokageet in its content and tonality are very similar to the Baul songs of Bengal. In both the abovementioned songs, the zikir and the Goalpariya lokageet, there is reflection on the merriment, pleasure-seeking, and laziness with which one passes youth and childhood, failing to recognize the time one wastes away from seeking God.

It is evident that there is a close affinity amongst these songs at the level of philosophical ideas and images as well as language and metaphors. However, it is also important to understand that there is not just a conversation (or resemblance) between Azan Fakir and other existing traditions of Assam but also between Azan Fakir and other Bhakti and Sufi happenings all around the subcontinent. It is important to place it within the folk culture of Assam, but it would be a blunder to not look at it under the larger umbrella of Bhakti as well. In one *bhajan* of Kabir, to describe the ignorance of a devotee who searches for the Truth in the wrong place, he uses the metaphor, *paani me meen pyaasi* (Like the fish who stays thirsty in water). Interestingly, there is a zikir wherein appears a markedly similar metaphor, *agni more jaarot pani more piyaahot* (the fire dies of cold and the water of thirst). Clearly the spiritual vocabularies of disparate regions have much more commonness than one may instantly give credit for. Hence, one can say that Azan Fakir's zikir does not just reflect resonances between the regional bhakti folk philosophies, but he also stands at the intersection of a larger thread of bhakti philosophy cutting across different regions of the subcontinent.

3. MELODIC EXCHANGES AND FLUIDITIES

To understand the musical fluidity between zikir and other song genres of Assam, I interviewed Anil Saikia, a renowned folklorist of Assam. Saikia promptly pointed towards the tune of a *biya geet* (wedding song) *sahurar bore ghor phool aase fuli* (*Flowers bloom in my in-laws' house*) (personal communication, Guwahati, June 12, 2018). He demonstrated to me by singing the musical similarity of the *biya geet* with the

zikir, *saahebjai aagote hoi saheb hoi* (Our Guru-Saheb leads us, Hail O Hail). Both the songs are sung in the *kaharwa* style (8-beat) rhythm in the same medium *laya* (tempo). The musical notation below should give the readers a little idea of the melodic similarity.

Zikir:

sa-hib jai agote - | hoi saheb hoi
 sa sa re sare sadha | sadha ga re sa

Biyageet:

sahurar bore ghor | phool aase fuli
 sa sa re sare sadha | sasa raga rala

dha - dha of the manohar saptak (lower octave)

With written notation, one may not be able to fully articulate the intricate musical particularities. As Barthold Kuijken's self-explanatory book-title goes, [Kuijken \(2013\) *The Notation is Not the Music*](#) (2013). One has to only musically imagine the embellishments in between the notations. There is a *kaaj* (musical embellishment) that is rendered by the singer in the quick succession of the small melodic phrase *sasaresaresadha* in the beginning of both the above songs. This melodic phrase can be sung in numerous ways by a singer with a permutation and combination of numerous rhythms and tempos. However, it is one particularly playful and swift motion of *swaras* (notes) as is done in the Assamese folk music context, that makes it recognizable. This common way of performing the musical embellishment is what connects the wedding song and the zikir musically.

In yet another example, we can see a striking musical resemblance between a *huchori* and a zikir. A *huchori* is a form of choral singing heard during Rongali Bihu, a spring-season festival of the Assamese. There is one *huchori*, *deutar podulit gundhaise maloti keteki mole molai, O gobindai ram* (My father's frontyard is full of the fragrance of *maloti* and *keteki* O Gobindai Rama) (*Maloti* and *keteki* being two fragrant flowers found widely in Assam). Now the melodic patterns of this *huchori* are strikingly similar to that in the

zikir, *moi tur banda eku najanilu, Allah hey* (I am your ignorant servant who knows nothing O Allah),

Huchori: dha - dha of lower octave (mandra) Saptak

Dantar	podulit	gundhaise	maloti
sa sa	sa sare	sa dha sa	sa re ga

Zikir:

Moi	tur	banda	eku	najanilu
sa sa	sa sare	sadhāsa	sa	re ga

While one is a folk bihu song celebrating springtime fertility the other song is a call to the Divine from a devotee. One is reflective of the *laukik* (worldly) affairs while the other sings of the *alaukik* (other-worldly, spiritual) relation. However, despite the distinctiveness in the lyrical content of the two, there is an unmistakable musical resemblance through a common melodic phrase *sasasaresadhasasarega* sung with a similar *kaaj* (embellishment) in the movement from one note to another.

Ismail Hossain, an eminent scholar who has worked extensively on Azan Fakir and Zikir, speculates that Azan Fakir with his creative genius composed his songs in accordance with the music of the places he was settled in at each point of time (personal communication, Guwahati, April 21, 2018). This can be an interesting perspective towards understanding the intra-cultural (intra-musical) exchange that might have happened (or still happens) between zikir and other songs genres at each point in the journey. However, more than attributing this to the creative genius of Azan Fakir alone, I would also accredit the common folk in every generation that shaped zikir into a song of their own, linguistically, and stylistically. Because of this traditional oral fluidity, today in practice one can see ample resemblances and similarities in the musical characteristics of zikir and many other Assamese folk forms.

4. BILATERAL EXCHANGE OF ISLAMIC AND HINDU VOCABULARY

In one of Madhavdeva's Borgeet, the *dhruvansha* (refrain) says:

Bhoyo bhai saabodhaan

Jaawe naahi chute praan |

Gobindero faraman

Nikote milobo jaan||

[Mahanta \(2014\)157](#)

O brother, beware!

Your soul is leaving.

It is Govinda's order,
Meditate on this moment of life.

This borgeet is said to have been sung by Madhavdeva when Sankardeva's son-in-law Hari was about to be beheaded under the orders of the erstwhile Ahom King (p.158). In that hour of death, till the soul leaves Hari should meditate on every passing moment of this transient life; that Madhavdeva says is Govinda's *faraman* (order).

The word *faraman* however, is not a word from the erstwhile or current Assamese Hindu vocabulary and is clearly an import from the Islamic vocabulary. This hints at a fluid unrestrained flow of language from one side to another, beyond the religious affiliations of the communities singing the songs.

Again, during my conversation with Ismail Hossain, he narrated his encounter with a Kamrupi *biyanaam* (wedding song) that was being sung by some Brahmin women in the district of Nalbari in Assam.

Arobore mokka, arobore mokka
doraghoror namoti misa kothar pakka

The Arabic mecca, the Arabic mecca,
The folks from groom side, in lying aren't they *pakka* (experts)?

On asked about the reference of mecca, the women replied that they haven't seen the mecca, but they knew it was a sacred site for Muslims. On further probed as to their motive behind using it, their answer was rather simple. "The groom side women were teasing us and while retorting back we needed to have a word which would rhyme with *pakka*, hence came mecca!" Hossain reflects on this incident and asks me, "What secularism, isn't it?" What Hossain was trying to point at was the cultural syncretism that was reflected in the fluid borrowing of Islamic vocabulary by the Hindu singing women.

5. CONCLUSION: FLUIDITY OF THE FOLK AND BHAKTI - SUFI EXPRESSIONS

The concept behind the word "folk" was born in Euro-America more than two hundred years ago. In the United States, "folk music" combines a sense of old songs and tunes with an imaginary "simpler" lifestyle, featuring the mountaineers of Appalachia and the African American blues singers, all playing acoustic instruments—guitar, fiddle, banjo—with a hint of social significance. In Europe, even though the word comes from the German *volk* (folk), the genre has different overtones based on local social resonance [Slobin \(2011\) 1](#). Outside the Western world, "folk" exists as a term from foreign shores. In India, it bears colonial traces and class markings, as *folklorica* does in Latin American usage (p.2).

Folk culture as understood in commonsensical terms is an "expressive culture" (p. 6) of the many ways that people perform feelings and beliefs. Folk culture is what emanates from the lives of the common people, and like a river, changing shapes, "routes" and colors from one region to another. Even within one region, there are numerous styles to one particular 'folk' form, due to the factors of continuous influences from music of neighboring regions, influences from other genres within the same region, collaborations amongst different artists and usage of different instruments with changing times, individual artistic dispositions and so on, which are constantly at work. That the folk forms or genres are mostly the ones which are circulated in an oral mode make them suitable for fluidity and change.

The nearest parallel term which defines the 'folk' in the Indian scenario is perhaps *Loka*, as used in *loka parampara*, i.e., people's traditions or the local traditions. Here we are largely looking at the umbrella containing local, regional, oral, and vernacular

traditions. In the context of music of Assam, one may say, 'lokasangeet' or 'lokageet,' literally meaning 'people's music', is a parallel for folk music.

The Bhakti and Sufi oral traditions of the Indian Subcontinent are part of this long-standing folk tradition or loka parampara. The Indian Bhakti movement came into being around seventh century AD in Tamil Nadu and gradually took hold in the other regions of the subcontinent reaching its expressive zenith in the medieval period. Music and poetry have been the predominant modes of expression in this movement. Bhakti, very broadly, has been a movement which facilitated the personal form of devotion of the devotee, thus breaking the hegemony of the Brahmin priesthood. Bhakti is not a monolithic phenomenon as it varies according to different socio-political and cultural contexts. The musical expression also differs in different contexts, depending on its employment of local languages, metres, and rhythms. Naturally, it meant a huge uprising of the vernacular mode of expression, where the devotees communicated with the Divine in the most day-to-day language, as, in Arundhati Subramaniam's words, the vernacular came closest to the "many shifts of the bhakta's inner weather" (Subramaniam, 2014, xiii)

Hence, in most cases, the secular folk and the devotional Bhakti expressions have merged conveniently, in linguistic and musical styles. For both, travelling spontaneously with time, there is no way to ascertain any one 'authentic' sound. Bhakti and Sufi poets have been travelers from one place to another, reciting and singing their poems in different regions with distinct musical styles. Each region treats the poems in their own unique vernacular style. Folk forms in general are by nature fluid entities, reflecting beliefs of the people, by the people and for the people at any given time. In the understanding of folk expressive cultures, James Clifford advises us to think of "routes" rather than "roots." [Slobin \(2011\) 7](#). Hence one gains more by looking at bhakti and the folk expressions, through "routes" rather than "roots," in order to understand them as fluid, malleable and open expressive cultures subject to influence, assimilation and transformation.

Jin-Ah Kim, in his study of Cross-Cultural Study of Music regards cross-cultural music as a "distinct, dynamic-complex process, determined by the configuration of evolving relations between different systems of reference" [Kim \(2017\) 29](#). These systems of reference - ethnic, social, national, regional, institutional, medial, and specific to groups or persons - do not exist in isolation, but develop in mutual, ever-changing relations to each other. The actors involved continuously renegotiate these relations.

I invoke Jin Ah Kim's way of looking at cross-cultural music making in my studying any culture, or cultures, as existing within/along with other cultures. This allows me to look at the characteristics of any expressive form, music or not, as fluid objects changing shape with time and other external influences from surrounding cultures. Standing amidst various genres of music within a region, I am able to see the samenesses and resemblances amongst them, as a fluid and continuous exchange under various circumstances.

Applying these frameworks, one can argue that the philosophical, lyrical, and musical exchanges, resemblances, and fluidities that we observe in zikir (with an Islamic Quranic origin) vis-à-vis other song genres of Assam (with a non-Islamic origin), are a part of a constantly evolving cultural performance. These exchanges come through a socially imitative behavior wherein we see a close musical imitation amongst styles within geographical proximity in a region. This hints at the larger notion of a socially cohesive behavior through music. The resemblances of musical embellishments amongst different song genres reflect the sense of belonging to one region, or one larger common musical culture. Like James Clifford, I too would not use the word 'root' for folk Bhakti and Sufi oral traditions but would go for 'routes. Different Bhakti-Sufi folk genres may have roots in various religious or ethnic sources, but their 'routes intertwine, intersect,

share, connect and communicate-socially, philosophically, ideologically, musically; and hence show resemblances and sameness at multiple levels.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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