

Songs and Hymns in the New Testament and Early Christian Worship in the Context of Vaisnavism of Assam

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The human existence on this earth and music go together. Music and songs are natural to human beings since the beginning. Music consists of sounds that are put together in a pattern and performed by people either using instruments or singing in order to give them or other people pleasure.¹ It is an art of putting sound together so that they produce a pleasant pattern. Song is a piece of music with words that are sung to the music. When this is sung with religious words by a religious group it is called a hymn. "As soon as man was capable of those exalted and even ecstatic modes of life which can be gathered under the term religious', music is found to be loosely associated with those modes."² So, it can be said that music and singing are organic parts of daily life linked with all kinds of human concern. It is also conceded that primitive music is natural and proper to ecstatic conditions of mind, whether religious or otherwise. The Bible as a whole confirms this view. So, Job feels that he hears the morning stars 'sang' together (Job. 38:7) and the Psalmist tells of the 'singing' of the meadows and valleys (Psalm 65:13). Music to these ancient poets was a way of the life of the universe. In the Old Testament the most primitive parts of the records of prophets and prophetesses show that they break into songs of gratitude for the creator's love. The songs of exaltation of Miriam, Deborah and David witness this (Ex. 15; Jud. 5; I Sam. 2; II Sam. 1). These songs may be regarded as exalted

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and a stylised sort of oratory, but even then, we cannot call them speeches but songs.

The Old Testament also speaks of liturgical music. The Jews used psalms in their synagogue worship as liturgy in the form of music which later became the basis of the first Christian church music. Ambrose (c. A.D. 397) and some of his contemporaries went so far as to claim for the Church a direct Jewish legacy in ritual and chant. On the Jewish side Manuello of Rome, a contemporary of Dante wrote the caustic distich:

“What has the science of music to say to the Christian?

‘Stolen, yes stolen was I’ from the Hebrews own land!”³

However the liturgical music was very primitive in technique consisting a broad unison melody of a few notes, more primitive, less melodic, nearer to speech than the simplest of Christian plain song.⁴

There is another kind of music which we find in the story of David’s performance on the harp to sooth Saul’s madness (I Sam. 16:23). This can be compared with the music of snake-charmers who do the same thing to tame very poisonous snakes. This is due to the belief that music has not only power to speak but it has power to do things to change a person’s or an animal’s emotions.

MUSIC IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

During the formative period of the New Testament writings, they were mostly addressed to a Gentile world. Due to this, these writings do not show any interest for the liturgical or ritual worship of the Jews, especially the rituals of temple worship. Their attitude towards the temple was at par with the Pharisees and not with the Saducees who dominated the temple worship and priesthood. All evidence point to the chants and music of the church of the N.T. times to the traditions of synagogues. The New Testament speaks of music which was common to the Jewish people as well as the Hellenistic communities in and around Palestine.

Music, songs and hymns are expressions which are very close to the New Testament records. The synoptic gospels have recorded songs which express considerable evidence of warmth towards the notion of praising God so much so that we can

agree with the slogan “the Christian church was born in song”.⁵ While singing and praising are mentioned frequently, it is extremely difficult to determine the content of the songs and the liturgical circumstances or background of the songs. Luke’s Gospel has three very beautiful songs at the very beginning of the gospel narrative, viz., the Magnificat, sung by Mary (1:46-55); the Benedictus, sung by Zachariah (1:67-79) and Nunc Dimittis, sung by Simeon (2:29-32). Besides these, the gospels and epistles also have many shorter passages which may be fragments of early Christian hymns woven into the text. The following are some of the references to the songs or singing in the New Testament churches or congregations.⁶

1. *Mark 14:26 (Matt. 26:30)*. The verse in mark is repeated identically by Matthew, which concludes the narration of the Last Supper:

“When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of olives”

Commentators accepting the synoptic gospels’s placement of the Last Supper on the first night of the Passover, identify the meal as the Passover-meal and accordingly the hymn sung at it is the Hallel (Ps. 113-118) and this is an important link in a chain of evidence that connects the singing of Psalms at Jewish and Christian ceremonial meals. The word *ὑμνησαντες* is from *ὑμνεω*, and is used transitively in Mark 14:26 and Matt. 26:30 where the hymn was that part of the Hallel referring to Psalm 113-118, although transitively the verb rendered to sing praises or praise as used in Acts 16:25 and Heb. 2:12.⁷ There is a possibility that Mark is using the word *ὑμνεω* referring to hymn (singing) as distinguished from psalming, in which case Jesus and his disciples, did not sing the psalms but something different which was called a ‘hymn’.⁸

2. *Mark 11:10 & Matthew 21:9*:

“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David, Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Jesus enters Jerusalem as the crowd shouted “Hosanna”, an event commemorated on Palm Sunday. Literally the expression of the crowd “crying out saying” (v. 9) may mean singing loudly. The acclamations of the crowd are based on Psalm 118:25-26.

The word *κραξω* in v. 9 ordinarily mean some one speaking in loud voice but later on the word was used to refer to singing as of Angel Choris:

“Ten thousand times ten thousand stood by him and a thousand times thousand ministered to him and *εκραζοντο* Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of Sabaoth, the whole creation is full of his glory” (Cf. Is. 6:3)⁹

All commentators interpret Isaiah 6:3 as the “praising” of angels. The word “Hosanna” is a coinage of Christian Greek through transliteration either of Hebrew or Aramaic. In Ps. 118:25 it is the imperative of the verb “to save” (LXX *σωσον*). It was also a prayer. The earliest Christians misapplied a prayer as a cry of greeting. The language of the Psalms is supplicatory, that of the gospel is jubilant. Mark 11:10 may not be a prayer but a shout of praise and later passed on to Christian worship as a liturgical singing. In the medieval Latin rite, it was sung as “Hosanna in exelsis” as:

“Our glad Hosanna, prince of peace
Thy welcome shall proclaim.”¹⁰

According to Eric Werner ‘Hosanna’ resembles with *hoson zes*, the opening words of a Greek libation song.¹¹

3. *Luke 2:13-14*: The angels sing the initial words of the gloria in exelsis, the hymn that is sung by Christians on various occasions.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven”.

The passage concludes the scene, referred to eventually as ‘the annunciation to the shepherds’, which plays an important role in liturgical drama, medieval musical iconography and the tradition of renaissance and baroque pastoral music.¹² The song of the angels give a musical (liturgical!) setting to the birth of Jesus.

4. *Acts 2:46-47*: “Day by day as they spent time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, *praising* God and having the good will of all the people.”

In this passage, describing the ritual behaviour of Christians immediately after the first Pentecost, the term ‘praising’ might

be taken to imply the singing of Psalm 2—"Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain?"

5. *Acts 16:25*: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and *singing* hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

The hymns they sang may be Ps. 130! Praying and singing may also be considered as the Christian witness of Paul and Silas. Did the other prisoners and the jailor think that the songs of Paul and Silas had magic power? The Greeks ascribed to music therapeutic power. It could heal wounds (Homer, *Odyssey*. Ch. 19) and it could move blocks of stones. The singing of Amphion, son of Zeus, was said to have enchanted stones to build of their own accord the walls to Thebes, the historical figure Thaletas of Gortyn (7 Cent. B.C.E.) tried to drive the plague from Sparta by singing.¹³

6. *I Cor. 14:15*: "What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will *sing* praises with the spirit, but I will *sing* praises with mind also. While allowing singing as a spiritual activity, Paul calls for intelligible singing as well.

7. *Eph. 5:18-20*; *Col. 3:16-17*: This pair of famous passages has been subjected to widely divergent interpretations. They serve as prime examples of the difficulties of New Testament musical references. "Making melody" is traditional translation of *ψαλλειν* which originally meant "to pluck a string instrument", but by New Testament times it came to mean simply "to sing" with or without a musical instrument.

- ψαλμος— Literally the cord of stringed instrument. Here it means a sacred song or Psalm (vb ψαλω)
- ὑμνος— A song, a hymn, song of praise to God vb ὕμνεω to hymn, praise, worship with hymn
- ὠδη— an ode, song, hymn.¹⁴

Singing in *Acts 16:25* as well as the evidence of *Col. 3:16* and *Eph. 5:19* suggest a variety of religious songs. Attempts of commentators to "distinguish psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" as referring to O.T. psalms and Christian composition of both a formal and spontaneous nature are suggestive. But this clarification cannot be rigidly applied. St. Augustine has a definition for hymn:

"Hymn is a song with praise of God. If you praise God and do not sing, you are not singing a hymn. A hymn then contains these three things: Song (canticum), and praise (laudem) and that of God."¹⁵ So a hymn or Christian song is a combination of Christian truth and Christian experience with subtle emotions and mood which the scriptures evoke.

The early Christian music of the New Testament had elements of music from Hebrew, Hellenism and cultures of various parts of Roman empire. The New Testament Christianity grew in diverse cultures and we find diverse cultures in the gospels. The early Christians sought to understand better the way in which the gospel challenges all human cultures and religions and sought to understand how cultures can give a clear understanding of the Gospel. This is one of the purposes for which they were not hesitant to use songs and hymns, although the wordings were changed, and in so doing the Christian music neither became captive to a culture nor became alienated from the culture.

It has been seen that in many occasions the western missionaries violated this idea by repudiating the Indian music as foreign to Christianity. Too often what was holy for many communities, their music, gestures and language was put away from the churches. This reminds us of the chorus of denunciation directed against pagan musical customs during the early Christian era, immediately after New Testament era. John Chrysostom for example refers to musical instruments along with dancing and songs as the 'devil's garbage'. "Just as God did not need the sacrifices of Jews, he does not need the hymns of Christians".¹⁵ This was because the early Christian songs were drawn either from Jewish or Hellenistic sources. Tatian's (c. 160) apologetic work is characterised by a bitter attack on paganism. In his "Discourse to the Greeks" he discarded the music as imitation of Orpheus who taught to compose and sing.¹⁶ The New Testament on the other hand indicates that people can respond to Christ in their own cultural way because within all cultures are found insights and wisdom that can be understood as revelations of God. The Spirit can speak the language of music

in various cultures and culture of music can respond to Christ in their own cultural way because within all cultures are found insights and wisdom that can be understood as revelations of God. The Spirit can speak the language of music in various cultures and culture of music can become a carrier of the gospel. When the Gospel is preached to the people in their own music, hymn, language, within their own cultural patterns they will be able to understand it better and grasp new and deeper spiritual meanings. The Latin term *cultura* is derived from the Latin *cultus*, meaning both 'worship'/'service' and 'cultivation'/'tillage'. These meanings point both to the religious roots of culture and to its educational function in human life. It involves both God and people, their action together to educate the human and to cultivate and preserve the world.

The Sankaradev culture in Assam as a means to Understand and Convey the Message of New Testament in North-East India.

The history of the growth of the Church in Assam is a history of 200 years. The Church of Assam lives in a very rich cultural heritage with age old traditions but there has been very little or no attempt so far to understand and utilize and aspect of this background (in the way the early church used the Graeco-Roman culture for its growth) as methods or instruments for contextualising the Gospel. The Christian faith never exists except as "translated" into a culture. This circumstance, was an integral feature of Christianity from the very beginning. The early church was born in a cross cultural milieu and in Pauline churches Jews, Greeks, Barnbarians, Thracians, Egyptians and Romans were able to feel at home and vice-versa. One of the means by which the early church was able to do this was through a process which renamed today as inculturation which includes music, which is a very important part of any culture.

In this connection the neo-vaisnavism of Srimanta Sankaradev of Assam may be an eye opener for the attempt of the Church for inculturation in Assam, meaning whether it has its home in Assam, Sankaradeva without any doubt was the most successful and dynamic religious reformer of

Assamese religion. He was and still regarded by the orthodox section of Vaisnavas of Assam as an incarnation of Vishnu.

He was born in 1449, into the family of a rich land lord near Nagaon and was a scholar of Sanskrit and the existing religions in Assam. He went on a pilgrimage to Puri and Vrindavan and came into contact with Bhakti religious movement. At Puri, in one of his pilgrimages, Sankaradeva found holy men singing devotional songs and attracting crowds. Taking this idea as his cue he also began to develop this pattern of singing and this gave a great impetus to the Bhakti religious movement of Sankaradeva and it began to spread like wild fire. He discovered that the melodies of North and South India were some what strange to the Assamese ear and so he developed a new style of music called Vaisnava music. This successfully attracted the common people and helped them to understand and accept the Vaisnava religious thoughts. Music became the main medium of preaching and propaganda of the "Bhakti cults".

Sankaradeva had a practical and liberal mind. He had genuine sympathy for all people belonging to different castes, sects and tribes and in return he was able to collect a rich harvest of sympathy and converts. The teaching of this Bhakti or neo-vaisnavite religion was based on the "Bhagavat Purana" which has been described as the "sun" among the Puranas. Daitary, one of the earliest biographers speaks of how and when the Bhagavanta Purana gained acceptance by Sankaradeva in this way: "Sankaradeva listened with rapt attention to the exposition by Jagadisha Mishra and realised that the Bhagavta was a scripture without parallel, the scripture that determined Krishna as the only God, Name as real dharma and Aikantika-Sarana (single-minded devotion) and Sat-Sanga) holy Association as the indispensable elements of faith. He thus realised the sublimity and profundity of the Bhagavata Purana."¹⁷ With the help of this Purana he emphasized the unity of Godhead, fought excessive ritualism, built constant devotion for Krishna, fought caste prejudices and preached equality of men and women.

Of all things that Sankaradeva did which are relevant for our study here is the introduction of music and songs as

instruments of his teaching and preaching. Assam has been well known for its cultural life, for its music, for dance and other forms of cultural activities. In fact, as far as folk music and folk dancing are concerned, there is hardly any other region which can come upto the level of Assam. Sankaradeva composed poetry by translating the Puranas into verses and composed many devotional lyrics known popularly as *Bor-gitas*. Out of the 12 books of the Bhagavat Purana, he rendered 7 of them into Assamese verse. His kirtan (singing songs) and devotional songs based on the stories of the Bhagavata are beautiful in expression and passionate in depth and feeling. His devotional copulations in verses like *Bhakti Pradipa* and *Bhakti Ratnakara* are familiar to every Assamese and command the highest respect from all. "The *Bor-gitas* reveal Sankara as a scholar, a poet and passionate devotee. He blended in these noble songs lofty thoughts with passionate lyrical feelings couched in rhythmic and ornate language he introduced many classical ragas in his songs and set the standard of the mode of singing in accompaniment to different musical instruments."¹⁸

Sankaradeva rendered into metrical Assamese Canto I of the Ramayana, *Bhaktiratnavali*. His crowning literary work *Name-Ghosa* consists of one thousand devotional verses for which it is also known as *Hajari-Ghosa*. Sankaradeva's disciple *Madhavadeva* continued his work by composing *Bor-gitas* (noble songs) tuned to classical Ragas which are also highly practical. Most of these songs depict the early life of Krishna and they can be favourably compared with those of *Surdas*, the saint poet of Hindi literature. Sankaradeva died in A.D. 1568.

By the time *Madhavadeva* died (1596), *Vaisnavism* had secured a firm foot-hold in the *Brhmaputra* valley. The rapid development and popularity of the new cult may be attributed to the following causes:

1. The movement discarded the practice of worshipping the image of a deity and replaced the image by a sacred scripture usually placed on the holy alter.¹⁹ The main shrine of the *Borpeta Satra* does not contain any idol even today.

2. The simplicity of the cult was one of the main contributory

factor of its popularity. Instead of elaborate and costly rituals it prescribed a simple form of worship by means of Kirtan or congregational and individual chanting and singing of prayers and recitations. "Kirtan literally means "passing the time". Actually it is the name applied to the narration of a sacred story".²⁰ This can be done effectively by a person who can speak or sing well accompanied by music, to an audience during the evening or night for several hours.

The people of Assam have a weakness for sacred music. Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva used this as a powerful instrument to change human attitudes and conduct and created by it a spiritual atmosphere to present their spiritual messages. The origin of the Kirtan goes back to ancient Vedic times in Northern India which was closely associated with the Vedic sacrifices. In later times the inhabitants of a village would gather during an evening to hear some singer-preaching narrate in preaching and in songs virtues of Gods or heroes of the scriptures. Kirtan was appreciated by simple villagers since the tunes were easy to follow and since the words were repeated over and over again, it was easy to remember and often the whole congregation joined in singing with the leader-singer. The Kirtan has been classified into 4 types by the school of Vaisnavism in Assam: (i) recitation of verses in praise of the deity; (ii) muttering of the names of the deity; (iii) reading and reciting stories about the deity; (iv) singing songs, especially the Bor-gitas.²¹

3. Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva wrote many devotional songs and lyrics. These devotional songs were of high sentiments and poetic beauty and were different from the popular Kirtan songs. "With their lofty ideas, literary beauty and heart rending music, the Bor-gitas not only became the solace of spiritually distressed hearts, but also came to be a potent factor in attracting people towards Vaisnavism."²² To begin the day with the singing of the Bor-git and in devotional services has been a popular practice of Assamese people.

4. Oja-Pali Choruses: This was another form of music and singing adopted and developed by sankaradeva from the existing style of his time. Oja-Pali is a party of 4 or 5 chorus singers. The Oja (leader) leads the choruses and his assistants

(Palis) repeat the refrain. The right hand assistant (dainapali) intermittently carries on dialogues with the leader of the chorus party to enliven the performance. Generally stories from the Epics and the Pranas are illustrated. Originally Oja-Pali was performed on the occasions of worship of the snake goddess Manasa during the pre-Sankarite period. Sankaradev himself used to arrange an Oja-Pali party occasionally for chanting devotional prayers.²³ The Oja, i.e., the leader of the Oja-Pali would have to be an expert dancer and musician well versed in the use of various gestures (mudra) and rhythmic movements and poses. Sankaradeva not only adopted this as an instrument for the preaching of his philosophy but made it very popular everywhere in Assam.

I have two points to make at the conclusion of this discussion which reflects two ideas regarding this contextual study.

First of all music and songs in the New Testament as well as the neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva show that music serves as a symbol of unity where people from various cultures and religions can meet on a common platform. The New Testament composers and Sankaradev, though separated by centuries and lived by very different worlds had a common method, that is their attempt to unite people in the name of God through songs and music. The early Christians lived in a Hellenistic syncretistic environment which was a major factor of *Pax Romana* for coexistence. The New Testament composers accepted inclusivism as a method to survive and grow. The early Christians grew in diverse cultures and we also find diverse cultures expressed in various forms in the New Testament. The New Testament Christians sought to understand better the way in which the Gospel challenged also human cultures and religions and sought to understand how cultures could give a clearer understanding of the Gospel which helped the Gospel to be incarnated and rooted in the culture of the people. Among all the New Testament writers, St. Paul pioneered this method when he used pre-Christian hymns and songs in his writings, altering them according to his need. The song in Eph. 5:14 has words which fall easily and naturally to the trochaic rhythm in the Greek and the verse has a cult-style of the invocational appeal."²⁴

Commentators rightly cite as a parallel the hymn from the Attis mysteries preserved in the Apuleius.

The song in Phil. 2:6-11 is another such example of adoption. Here Paul stands at the juncture of two cultures and several religious traditions. His background is Jewish but it is the hellenistic-gnostic idea which stand at the forefront of his mind.²⁵ Like Paul, Sankaradeva also had no hesitation in using songs and music from cultures other than neo-Vaisnavism. Early Christians 2000 years ago, and Sankaradeva, five hundred years ago realised that understanding, interpretation and expression belong to all people who believe in God in relation to culture. There is possibility for the emergence of the new meaning of the Gospel through one's own culture. Songs not only translate the Biblical message into our own languages but also translate its meaning in our own situation, leading to a unity through inculturation based on inclusivism of theology and religious thoughts of all people.

Secondly, music in both systems of Christianity and neo-Vaisnavism is a symbol of identification with cultures and religions. Both the systems have this common factor and both have adopted music and singing through which both could find religious expressions which reflected the needs, tasks, tastes, interests, concerns, hopes and aspirations of the communities around them. There is a great need for the same kind of identification today which may help to counter-act the long standing criticism against Assamese Christians that their religion is a foreign one. The average Assamese associates Christian and Christian preaching with wearing western dresses, drinking liquor and eating meat (Beef). "While a boy, I heard it being said that to become a Christian was to have a Brandy bottle in one hand and Beef on the other. Things are better now, but it is not usual to find Christianity synonymous with de-nationalisation and Europeanisation."²⁶ The general scene of the Church in India and the North-east India, especially the form of church worship and music, the church building and its interior arrangements, liturgy, clerical dress etc., are to a great extent western. Many Indian Christians hesitate to use Indian religious language and music because they consider them as Hindu and

therefore tainted with idol worship. In the region of Assam the display of western music and western culture is more vivid in the church than any other part of India. To illustrate this I have chosen the Assamese hymn book as an example of this bias:

The Assamese Hymn Book. This is published by the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India and is used by more than 900 Assamese speaking churches on both sides of the river Brahmaputra. The area is populated by Hindus and neo-Vaisnavites. Of the 372 hymns in the book only 33 hymns have Indian and Assamese tunes and the remaining 339 hymns are translated from European and American hymns and set to western tunes. The inspiration behind these 33 Assamese hymns was a man called Lakhiram Boruah, a Brahmin convert and an art teacher by profession in Jorhat. He was the first Assamese Christian to advocate the preaching of the Gospel through Assamese songs. Many of these songs have the style of Kirtan, Nam-Ghosa and Oja-Pali of Sankaradeva. He published 104 hymns and songs called Mukti Nam. His other two books were Sristi Lila (beauty of creation) and Uddipana (revival songs) and were written with the special message of God's love which is revealed in Jesus Christ for the people of Assam. He was convinced that there is no better way to present Christ to the people of Assam except through the culture, music and songs of Assam. Although people appreciated this effort, due to their western bent of mind and influence of the missionaries, Christians preferred translated western hymns rather than the Assamese songs with Assamese tunes.

"It is a matter of great regret that there have been relatively so few missionaries, throughout the history of Christian mission in India, who have shown any real interest in indigenous Indian music, with a view not only of appreciating it in itself but of promoting its use and development among Christians ..., but had missionaries given equal attention to Indian musical culture, there might have been less ground for the charge that Indian converts tend to be de-nationalised and the church is essentially a foreign institution."²⁷

Can the Assamese Church accept the challenge and example the composers of the New Testament, Sankaradeva, Lakhiram Boruah in the way they adopted the Graeco-Roman traditional or cultural songs and traditions of Assam as instruments to make their message more intelligible? Will the Assamese Christians be able to convince their fellow country-men that they have not betrayed but have enriched and ennobled the age old traditions of Assamese culture, music, songs and spirituality in the way they live and proclaim the Gospel message?

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