Chapter VII

ORAL LITERATURE: CULT SONGS

I A General Introduction about the Oral Literature of the District

(a) Nature and Language of the material

Both in quantity and variety, the wealth of the oral literature of Goalpara is most impressive. Strewn over the various parts of the district there are folksongs of an almost bewildering variety, a large number of tales and ballads, apart from rhymes and riddles, proverbs and aphorisms, that are intricately woven into the fabric of village life. In recent times there have been growing signs of consciousness among the people of the district about the desirability of preserving this cultural wealth, and attempts are being made by local enthusiasts to collect, study and bring to light such material with a view to attracting the attention of people outside the district. Thanks to the radio and other mass media, Goalpara folksongs are now a hot favourite with music lovers throughout Assam, although more for their musical than for their literary richness.

While surveying the field of the oral literature of the district, it is important to bear in mind a few points which are essential for maintaining a proper perspective.

As we have already pointed out, the folk culture of the western parts of the district, has striking affinities with those of the adjoining parts of North Bengal and Bangladesh, such as Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur. The affinities are particularly
strong in the fields of oral literature and music. No doubt there
are tones and shades that give distinctiveness to the material of
Goalpara in most cases. But the points commonness are so many and
contact with the above regions is so free and constant that the line
of demarcation is often lost.

Again, in keeping with the nature of the cultural pattern
of the eastern and southern parts of this district, the folk-litera-
ture of these regions contain material that bear a close resemblance
to similar material available in the adjoining areas of Kamrup dis-
trict. However, such resemblance seldom overshadows the distinctive
character of the former.

What we have noted above is nothing unnatural and does not
pose any serious difficulty in the matter of collection and study of
the folk-literature of the district. But what constitutes a real
problem in this field is the presence in west Goalpara of a large
body of material which is clearly of East Bengal origin. Part of
this material has been assimilated into the local culture and is
hardly distinguishable. But the unassimilated part is also not ne-
gligible; and since there has not always been enough consciousness
about the super-imposition of such material among the people of
these parts, some of this unassimilated material remains practically
undetected and passes off as local, thus giving rise to a confusing
state of affairs.

This confusion becomes all the more confounded because of
the fact that the 'literary language' of the western region more
often than not differs appreciably from the language of common per-
lance and has a tendency to incline towards the literary language.
of East Bengal. Often this inclination is quite pronounced. Thus, apart from the obviously imported East Bengal elements, there are others which, although of undoubted local origin, contain in their language clear marks of Eastern Bengali. Sometimes, again, there occur stray Eastern Bengali expressions in an otherwise uncontaminated composition in the local dialect. Such artificiality of language appears to be more pronounced in compositions which have marks of some kind of sophistication or of being the products of conscious literary effort, whereas the simple and unsophisticated compositions are found to be largely free from it.

Now, it is common knowledge that the literary language of any area differs to a greater or lesser degree from the language of ordinary conversation. But the reason why we have dwelt at some length of this point is that the presence of Eastern Bengali influence on the folk-literature of the district should not be taken as an overall index of the nearness of the dialect of the district to Bengali, much less of the cultural pattern of the district to that of East Bengal. It is true that dialects of western Goalpara have certain elements in common with Eastern Bengali. But the Eastern Bengali elements appearing in much of Goalpara folk-literature as also the extent of the areas in which such Bengali-oriented material is current are beyond all proportion to the likeness of Goalpara dialects to Eastern Bengali.

Thus, leaving aside the obviously imported elements, the various materials of folk-literature of the district are available in three different linguistic forms:

(1) in the dialects of West Goalpara
(2) in the dialects of East Goalpara
(3) in the artificial literary language which contains an admixture of Eastern Bengali, the proportion of the latter varying from item to item.

Aside from this, there is the large body of material which is available in the languages of the tribal population of the last named district. A detailed treatment of this material is not possible within the scope of this study and has not been attempted. Nevertheless certain of its features have been touched upon.

(b) Classification

A classification of this vast mass of material, which would forestall over-lapping would seem to be almost impossible. However, an attempt has been made to put the different items under a few relevant and convenient heads and to study them against their proper background in the following manner:

(1) Folksongs of various types and associations
(2) Ballads, tales and myths
(3) Rhymes, riddles, proverbs, etc.
(4) Oral literature of the tribal people.

Since the folksongs themselves are of a very rich variety, they have been divided into the following sub-classes:

A. Cult songs: songs connected with religious beliefs and practices.
B. Songs of social ceremonies like marriage
C. Songs of a lyrical nature
D. Miscellaneous songs.
The remaining sections of this chapter are devoted to the cult songs while the rest of the material has been dealt with in the next three chapters. Due mainly to the problem of language, the tribal contribution has been taken up in a separate chapter.

II Songs of the Manasā Cult

(a) Padmapurāṇ songs

As we have already remarked, Padmapurāṇ (locally pronounced as Paddapurāṇ) or Mārai-gān performances based on the well known story of goddess Manasa and her encounter with the merchant Chando constitute one of the most popular and widely current institutions of folk-entertainment combining singing, dancing and often, acting.¹

Singing of Padmapurāṇ or Mārai-gān songs by specialised groups form an important adjunct of a full-scale Manasā Puja performance. The core of the Padmapurāṇ story in a nut-shell is this: Chāndo, a very prosperous merchant, is a staunch devotee of Siva. He refuses to worship Padmā (another name of Manasā) the serpent goddess and even inflicts indignities on her. The irate goddess so designs things that Chāndo faces one adversity after another. All his merchant ships are sunk and six of his seven sons lose their lives. The last son, Lakhindar, is married to Beula. But through Manasā's machinations, Lakhindar also dies of snake-bite on the marriage-night in spite of the best precautions of Chando. The grief-stricken Beula

¹. In South Goalpara, only Mārai-gān performances are held in connection with a Manasā Puja and Padmapurāṇ songs, though dealing with the same theme, are sung on other occasions like a shrāddha ceremony. While the khol and often the flute are used to accompany Padmapurāṇ songs, the only instruments used in Mārai-gān are cymbals, as in Gā-pāli performances of Kamrup and Darrang.
gets a raft made, on which she places the body of Lakhindar. She herself sits beside it and the raft floats down the Brahmaputra. After going through many painful experiences, she at last arrives at the heavenly abode of Siva and Padma. There she pleases Siva with her dancing and at his intervention gets Lakhindar and his six brothers back to life, of course with the promise given to Padma that Chando would be persuaded to worship her. Beulā comes back with the resuscitated sons of Chando who at last agrees to offer a flower in obeisance to Padma, although grudgingly. The complete Padmapurāṇ, however, contains lots of other materials.

In the colophons of Padmapurāṇ songs, the authorship is ascribed to Narayanadeva, one of the three Manasa poets of Assam, who is also called Sukavi, perhaps a title given to him in recognition of his literary achievements. Thus, it may be questioned if Padmapurāṇ songs as pure folksongs. But at the same time we can also consider the following points in favour of considering them, at least partially, as material of folk-literature. The first point, of course, is the universal popularity of the songs which itself gives them a folk character. The next is the local character of the language and even of the style. Narayanaśeva's songs are sung in all parts of Assam in which Manasa Puja is in vogue. While in Goalpara they are generally known as Padmapurāṇ songs, in Kamrup and Darrang they are popularly called Suknāṇī, the word being a corruption of Sukavi-Narayani. Although the Padmapurāṇ/Suknāṇī songs are basically the same both in content and form, the versions popular in Goalpara

1. Narayanadeva or Narayandeb is also the most popular Manasa poet of East Bengal, especially of the Mymensingh area. The Bengali narrative is also very similar to that of the Assamese version. See P. K. Maity: The Goddess Manasa, pp.108-110.
differ from those current in Kamrup and Darrang. Often this difference is substantial. This goes to prove that local materials have entered into the versions prevalent in each region, bringing them down, at least partially, from the level of literary songs to that of folksongs. Moreover, there are patches in the Goalpara versions which have no parallels in the Kamrup and Darrang versions, and these bear unmistakable signs of folk authorship. The rather unpolished treatment and style of these patches are in contrast to the general literary standard of Narayanadeva but in agreement with much other material of folk-poetry widely popular in these parts. This further confirms the contention that these at least are of folk origin. The following is a part of such a piece which describes the chaotic situation when Lakhindar's marriage party arrives at the town of the bride and the antics of the women who are so moved by Lakhindar's beauty that they approach him with amorous proposals:

A young woman comes up and says

I have a dwarf husband whom I can hardly stand.
To the market, to the street or to the water-ways
I don't take him, for I'm ashamed.
My father and my brothers, blind as they are,
Married me off to this dwarf
Even when the beautiful Lakhâi was there.

Another young woman comes up and says

I have a deaf husband whom I can hardly stand.
I try to converse with him in signs,
But the deaf man follows nothing
When I pull him by the hand, he starts a scuffle with me.  

(b) Basipurān songs

Basipurān songs are mostly songs of the Manasa cult sung to the accompaniment of the peculiar flute called mukh-bāsi or bam-bāsi. The speciality of basipurān singing is that unlike Padmapurān it can be performed on any occasion, and not necessarily at a Manasa Puja. Basipurān is performed and enjoyed more for entertainment than for any ritualistic significance. Sometimes the basipurān singers sing the story of creation which has some resemblance with those found in Rāmāi Pandit's Sunyapurān and Manakara's Manasa Kavya.

(c) Bhāsān

Bhāsān refers to the special singing of that part of the Padmapurān story which narrates the episode of Beulā floating in a raft with the dead body of Lakhindar on it. Its practice, however, is limited.

(d) Bishohori songs

These songs belong exclusively to the women and they have the stamp of sincerity and sublimity of the female mind bent in supplication. There is no doubt about their folk origin and their authors are none other than the

2. The flute is often used in Padmapurān performances also.
unsophisticated female devotees of the goddess. The following song is sung while the preparations for the puja are afoot:

'Go to the early market, O Sonai,
And pay an advance for the goddess' mandishä.'

'How much will you charge for the mandishä, O māliyā?'

'The vermilion of your hair-parting, O Sonäi,
So much shall I charge for it.'

'Go to the early market, O Sonäi,
And pay an advance to the banana-dealer.'

'How much will you charge for the bananas, O banana-dealer?'

'The conch-shell bangles of your hands, O Sonäi,
So much shall I charge for the banana.'

[Sonäi: A name; it designates the woman who is performing the puja. Mandishä: A temple like structure made of pith needed for the puja. Māliyā: From māli, an artisan who makes images and other articles of pith.]

The next song is sung at the time of placing the tray of offerings (dālā) before the goddess:

With golden sandals on my feet,
I planted the paddy seedlings.
What for did I plant them?
If I had five sheaves of paddy,
I could have prepared the dālā.

With golden sandals on my feet
I planted the banana,
for
What did I plant it?
If I had five bunches of banana,
I could have prepared the dālā ... etc., etc.

Here is a song for the offering of flowers:

The goddess who is fond of flowers, she who is flower-complexioned,
With the pot of flowers on her head
She goes in her chariot.

Stay here, Padmāvati, all the year round,
I shall build a platform of flowers for you.

III Songs of the Pox-Goddess
(Šhitilā ṇām/Thākurāṇī-ṇāṁ/Āi-ṇāṁ)

These are songs sung by the women-folk in praise of the pox-goddess (Šhitilā/Thākurāṇī/Āi) when the disease spreads out in the locality. Such songs are found mostly in the middle and eastern parts of the district; and both in form and content they are akin to a similar class of songs popular all over the rest of the Assam Valley as Āi-ṇāṁ (mother's songs). In the Goalpara songs also the term Āi (mother) occurs very frequently but the terms Šhitilā-ṇāṁ or Thākurāṇī-ṇāṁ are more popularly used to designate them.¹ These songs are marked by sincerity and earnestness of feeling and simplicity of

1. Although the goddess is not normally referred to as Shitalā or Thākurāṇī in the rest of Assam, these names are not unfamiliar. In fact they frequently occur in pox-goddess songs of these areas. For example,

'Āi-ṇāṁ Šhitilā dukhiyār putalā.'

'He Thākurāṇī Āi tomar Nilāchale rati.'
The sun goes from the east to the west,
The time for Mother Shitala's worship is passing away—
Towards the east is Mother Shitala.

The sun goes from the east to the west,
The time for Mother Basanta's worship is passing away—
Towards the east is Mother Basanta.

The sun goes from the east to the west,
The time for Mother Luti's worship is passing away—
Towards the east is Mother Luti.

And so it continues with other names of the goddess coming in succession in each stanza.

Here is another song in the same style, in which the devotee wishes to be ferried across the river so that she can join the congregational prayer (nām) of the goddess:

Bring the boat from the other side
I am going to the nām of Mother Shitala
Do ferry me across.

1. These numbers appear in some songs:

Mother Small-pox has come, nām is being performed
Seated by the pavilion, (O Hari)

Mother Measles has come, nām is being performed
Seated by the pavilion, (O Hari)

The seven sisters have come, nām is being performed
Seated by the pavilion, (O Hari)

The nine sisters have come, nām is being performed
Seated by the pavilion, (O Hari) ...

—See S. Sarma (ed): Samajika Samiti Samrakshan Smriti, p. 113
Bring the boat from the other side  
I am going to the nām of Mother Basanta  
Do ferry me across ... etc.

Here also the same words are repeated over and over again once with each of the names of the goddess.

Probably due to the fact that the belief in the power of the goddess is almost universal among the Hindus irrespective of sectarian divisions, women often sing in the congregational prayers held to propitiate Shitalā some popular devotional songs with predominantly Vaishnava themes.

I have cleaned the place  
And have arranged the offerings  
After burning the incense,  
Presently will come  
Krishna, the friend,  
With his sixteen hundred gopinis.

Here is another such song, outstanding for the sense of dedication it embodies.

What shall I worship your feet with, O Hari?  
I would have offered you milk,  
But the calf has drunk it up.  
I would have offered you flowers  
But the bee has sucked them up.  
I would have offered you ...  

Exactly similar songs are found in other parts of Assam which are sung both as Gosāi-nam or Brindābani-nām (songs in praise of Krishna) and as Ḫi-nām (Pox-goddess songs).¹

M. Neog (ed) : Chomāi Parbat Atri Mīri Bāit, p.7.
IV Sonārāy Songs

There is a long ballad-like song narrating the story of the birth and deeds of Sonārāy, the tiger-god. The narrative, as found in Goalpara, is rather loosely knit with certain disconnected fragments, suggesting that there are probably some missing links. However, the story runs as follows:

'A childless milkman is shunned by people as he is considered unlucky. The wife of the milkman worships Dharma Thākur and prays to be blessed with a son, failing which she threatens to commit suicide. Dharma Thākur takes pity on her and 'takes shelter' in her womb and child, Sonārāy, is born to her. Sonārāy grows up very much like Krishna in Mathura — tending cows, stealing curds and cream and playing other kinds of mischief. Then the grown up Sonārāy comes in confrontation with a mighty Mughal who inflicts indignities on him, gets him arrested and puts him in chains. Sonārāy appears to the Mughal in a dream and threatens him with dire consequences. He frees himself from bondage and sends the tigers who, in spite of the precautions taken by the Mughal, cause much depredation to his family and also attacks him. The Mughal then repents and promises to worship god Sonārāy.'

But the whole ballad is seldom heard in full. The boys that come to collect contributions from house to house for Sonārāy Puja sing only short pieces, some of which are fragments from the ballad. They also sing independent rhymes a few of which contain references
to Sonārāy. Some others, again, are simply meant for jesting.¹

To take a few specimens:

Brother Balarām, he speaks smilingly
God Sonaray has come down along with fierce tigers.
Early in the morning there have appeared
Striped and spotted tigers that bite human beings.

The bird flies—it has 'nepurs' on both feet
God Sonaray plays on the flute and sings.

[nepur: a kind of ornament that jingles]

This is how the boys ask for alms or contributions which they euphemistically call dokkhīnā (Skt. dakshinā) for Sonaray:

A kulā—full of paddy is needed as offerings to Sonārāy,
And a pair of guā-pān besides.

Veiled threats like the following are also used to warn of the consequences of non-compliance with their request:

Anybody who disdains to give dakshinā for Sonaray
We shall surely meet while grazing cattle,
If one neglects to give dakshinā for Sonaray
One’s hands and feet will be torn off one’s eyes will be spoilt.

And when they receive contribution to their satisfaction, they are most generous in invoking blessings:

0 god Sonārāy, bestow boons on this household,
Let it prosper both in progeny and in wealth as long as
the sun and the moon shine.

Let its cattleshed and granary be fuller,
Let the members receive honours in court and assembly;
Let their cattle grow and let their vegetable garden thrive,
Let the enemies of the household be devoured by wild tigers.

There are some rhymes with romantic elements:

The maiden goes down to the water
And waves form in the river;
To which family belongs this woman
Who bathes so late at night?

The maiden plucks flowers
And she chooses the buds,
Inside the buds
There is the gunjari-bhomora

(Gunjari-bhomora is a stock phrase meaning the bumble-bee)

The jungle is on fire
And the ashes are flying;
What a pity that so pretty a maiden
Has neither father nor brother.

A few of the jesting rhymes:

The old woman is no longer young,
She has grey hair,
But she has decked her hair
With flowers of the kalmu sak

(Kalmu is small plant growing in marshy pools, which is used as a vegetable)
I know nothing, [says] the medicant
    Counting his beads;
I filled up my bag
    When I found paddy in the yard.

And here is one with a touch of pathos:

The floods have damaged the rice crop,
    And pests have spoilt the mustard.
With what shall we pay
    Our taxes to the landlord?¹

V Kāti Puja Songs

Singing and dancing, as we have seen, are essential as parts of Kāti Puja rituals.² The singing starts with songs of prayer to mother Basumati (Earth) seeking her permission for the installation of the puja articles and the performance of the puja:

Mother Basumati, give us some earth
    We want to instal the ghat
Mother Basumati, give us some earth
    We want to perform the puja ...

And so on.

Sometimes songs in invocation to Saraswati are also sung.

The preliminaries over, the singers start singing the narrative pieces describing the various stages in the preparation for and the performance of Siva's marriage with Chandi. This part

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² For specimens of Kāti Puja songs see Niharbala Barua: 'Praanta-bāsir Jhuli' in Desh, Jan 2, 1954.
called Siber biyāo (Siva's marriage) is followed by those describing the consummation of the marriage, the conception of Chandi, the birth of Kati and the birth rites of the new-born god. The name of this part is Kāti-Sijjan i.e., the birth of Kāti (Sijjan < Srijana, creation).

The story runs thus:

'Old Siva (Bura Sib) is weighed down by loneliness and decides to get married. He goes to Nārad, his nephew (Nārad Bhāginā) and requests him to act as the go-between. Accordingly, Nārad goes to Chandi's father, pays him the bride-price and fixes up the date for the marriage. Siva goes shopping in preparation for the marriage. Friends and relatives are invited and on the auspicious day the marriage party proceeds to the bride's place along with a band consisting of broken drums. The marriage duly takes place, after which Siva retires to Kailas'.

In time, Chandi attains puberty and the appropriate social rites are performed. Information is sent to Siva at Kailash. Siva comes to Chandi and the couple are united, after which Chandi conceives.

Here follows a section describing the growth of the foetus, month by month, in Chandi's womb. On completion of ten months, Chandi is in labour pains. A midwife is brought in and with her assistance Chandi gives birth to Kāti whose birth rites are duly performed:

0, the Old Sib!
Old Sib took hemp and dhuturā and became senseless.
He remained without food for three days and nights
Regaining his senses, the old Sib thought to himself.
'Who will look after me in this lonely house?'
Old Sib ran to Nārada the nephew,
'Hurry up, 0 nephew, and fix up my marriage.'

The narrative continues till the marriage rites are completed and Siva goes back to Kailás'. Next comes Chandi's coming of age.

O Mother Chandi!
Year followed year,
And Chandi became twelve years old.
On her twelfth year
Chandi attained puberty ...

Then follows Chandi's union with Siva:

Sib started out on the bull's back
And arrived at Chandi's house.
Chandi took Ganges-water in a golden jug,
Chandi took five fruits in a golden plate,
She took a trayful of cloves and supāri
She offered them to Siva and bowed to him.
In the first part of the night Chandi chewed pān and tobacco,
In the middle part of the night Chandi laughed and played,
In the last part of the night Chandi made love,
And in the small hours Sib and Chandi fell asleep.

Thus Kati was 'installed' (thiti hoil) in her womb and the foetus grows month by month.

Chandi is carrying for a month and then for two months.
From two months it has passed into four months.
From four months it has passed into five months ...

So it goes on till the period of confinement is over and the child is delivered with the assistance of a midwife.
The next part is an elaborate description of Kāti's charms, organ by organ. It starts with the head which is likened to a big wood-apple (siriphal):

'Who made your head, O Kāti?'
'In my previous birth I gave away a siriphal
The head was made by Bāsudeb, [Vāsudevā]
I was begotten by father Sankar.'

Next comes the face which is compared to a round metal-tray (bātā):

'Who made your face, O Kāti?'
'In my previous birth I gave away bātā
The face was made by Basudeb,
I was begotten by father Sankar.' ...

And the process goes on in the same manner with the other organs including the genitals. Some of the images are interesting: the eyes are likened to stars, the nose to a flute, the ears to the palāsh (flame of the forest), etc.¹

This is followed by cleaning rites (kāmāni) in which songs playfully attacking the barber are sung. There are also songs for quietening and humouring the child:

O the poor child, he cries to be carried on the lap.  
Who is your father and who is your mother?  
O the poor child, he cries for milk.  
Who is your father and who is your mother? etc.

Next come the Kāti-ghāmā songs many of which are grossly erotic in content and are hardly reproducible. We are giving below

¹. Many different versions of the same song with slight variations are to be found in different parts of the district.
a sampling of some mild specimens.

You promised to come, O Kāti,
But why didn't you come?
I cooked rice and kept it ready
In the hope that Kātikā would come;
But the rice became stale ... etc.

Also:

So Kāti you did not get married
Even to this day.
Now there is going to be a scandal
Implicating you with So-and-so ... etc.

The grossly erotic songs are called motā payār or Kānāi (or Krishna) dhāmāli and are never sung except in the performance of the puja rites.

Last of all come the songs that accompany mimetic acting and dancing depicting the agricultural operations culminating in the ceremonial reaping (ēg ānā) and the driving away of the bats (bādul hānā).

Here is a part meant for the sowing act:

We have sown the hēuti and bitri seeds in the soil ...

This is for the act of weeding:

We are doing the weeding for the householder,
He won't give us a little rest.
We weed a little
And drink jugs of water ...
And here is the song of the hat-chasing rite:

From afar came the bat
In the hope of eating the banana;
The bananas remained in the trees,
And the bat went back to his home-land.

It may be added that the songs cited above belong to the westernmost parts of the district. Some other songs are also current in other parts of the district.¹ Here is one from the Salkocha area in which there is a reference to Ushā Bāli, who, according to the myth current in these parts, was to have been married to Kāti.

There is the sweet-ball-shop at Kāti's door,
With that sweet-ball Ushā performs the fast.
There is the naivedya-shop at Kāti's door,
With that naivedya Ushā performs the fast.
There is the ghat-shop at Kāti's door,
With that ghat Ushā performs the fast. ... etc., etc.²

VI Bās Puja Songs

Various narrative pieces dealing with different themes are sung in connection with Bas Puja. The more important of these narrative pieces are those containing (1) the story of the birth of Madan-Kām, the finding of different species of bamboo and the selection of the right species to represent Madan-Kām, (2) the story of

¹ A few specimens of the songs from the middle and eastern parts are to be found in U. Pathak: 'Goiālpāra Sanskritit Kārtik Puja' in Dainik Asam, Dec 1, 1968.

² A slightly different version of the song was published in a letter feature in Amar Pratinidhi, July, 1962.
the birth of cotton and the preparation of cloth, (3) the story of the creation of hemp (bhāng) and its consumption by various gods, rivers, lakes and human beings. In some areas there are also pieces about the growing of flowers, about the creation of the world and about the creation of the singer of Bas Puja songs (jāgūr). It has to be admitted however that it is difficult to find a logical development in the story element contained in the songs. The piece dealing with bamboo runs thus:

A son is born to an octogenarian māli and is named Mālagiri. He is entrusted by god Madan-Kām with the task of obtaining bamboos needed for his puja. Mālagiri goes to Brahma who advises him to approach Vishnu. Vishnu in turn sends him to Siva on whose advice he goes to the river and finds varieties of bamboo. He collects bundles of bamboo-shoots and takes them to Madan-Kām. Madan-Kām with the help of Mālagiri, plants them in rows. Next, there is the description of how Mālagiri selects the right bamboo for the puja of Madan-Kām, cleans and decorates it with appropriate rites before installing it for the puja.

The song runs in the following manner:

Glory and reverence to Ram,
I say glory and reverence to Ananda Dharam,
God Madan-Kām is born with a sundi flower in his hand
Lotus in hands, lotus in feet, it's lotuses all over.
With a golden wrapper adorning his body
Madan sits in court with twelve hundred gods.
All the twelve months were shared by the gods
Except the month of Chaitra which was left neglected.
'If I worship you, O Madan Thākur,  
The octogenarian that I am, I can give sprightly jumps.'  
In the Kali age a son is born to the māli,  
He does not know the right from the left,  
The parents chose the name Malagiri for him.  

The piece about cotton narrates how Mahāprabhu gets the land ploughed by Bhim for the cultivation of cotton, how Bhim plants cotton, how the plants grow and how the staples are collected—

Obeisance to Bāsukā on the right and Khatripāl on the left,  
Mahāprabhu gets the land ploughed by Bhim,  
Bhim ploughs the land and harrows it,  
On it does he plant the cotton seeds  
After planting the seeds, Bhim moves aside.  
In three days the cotton seeds sprout  
And then come out three leaves.  
Come the branches, the flowers and the staple,  
On the god's orders, it is made into cloth ... etc. etc.

The piece on hemp declares that formerly there was no hemp in this land and it was Gorakhmāth who brought seeds in a bag.  
These seeds were sown in the fields and hemp grew abundantly. When fully grown, the plants were cut, the fore-parts were taken, roasted and made into powder. Sweet balls (lāru, nāru) were prepared with the powder. Then there is the enumeration of numerous names of gods, men and other objects who consumed hemp and its effect on them.

I bow down in the four directions—north, south, east and west  
There was no hemp in this land, and it is Gorakhnath who brought i

---

2. It is not clear who is meant by Mahāprabhu—Great T'aster.  
3. Though there is no specific reference, it is likely that Gorakhmāth is the famous yogin of the Nath cult.
The seeds were brought in a bag, the hemp was carried on the head. Those seeds were sown in the fields all around. Hemp grows in the months of Aswin and Kartik. There's no ploughing, there's no harrowing, but it grows cloud-coloured... etc.

There is also an interesting piece about the planting of flowers by Kanai i.e., Krishna:

If you want to have fun, O young Kanai,
Prepare the flower garden in Gokul.
On hearing this, the young Kanai didn't wait,
He brought the bull Basu and yoked it.
He ploughed the land once and harrowed it twice.
He uprooted the kella and duba grasses.
Narad prepared the embankments and the god plants the flowers.

After planting the flowers Kanai stayed hidden.
In the name of Hari, the flowers are abloom and,
it's all moonlight as it were.
The perfume has attracted the black bees who are buzzing,
The perfume has also brought the gods from heaven.

The song about the creation of the world that we have found is too disjointed and fragmentary to give any coherent meaning and so we refrain from reproducing it.

We have already noted that the Bas Puja songs are also called jag gan and the expert jag gan singers are called jaguars. There are many jag songs especially those connected with the clothing and washing rites that about in free and uninhibited references to the sex organs and the sex act. Here again there are two kinds: mildly obscene (mihi jag/payar/bas) and luridly obscene (mota jag/payar/bas). These songs are irreproducible.
Since patently obscene words and expressions are a speciality of the Hudum Puja songs, it is most difficult to collect such songs, and of those that are available, much is not reproducible.

We are reproducing below a few specimens:

Hudum gets married, he receives seven bighás of land as dowry.
Hudum gets married, he receives seven pair of bullocks as dowry,
... etc.

Come, O heartless cloud, look back at me.
Without you, my womanly heart is torn and split.
O you cruel cloud,
O you heartless cloud ... etc.

O you, vagrant cloud, you've burnt me in fire,
Why have you left the land forsaking me, the woman?

Send rain, O cloud, my body is unwashed and dirty;
Let it be washed, O cloud, do send down rain.
Hudum Deo, O Hudum Deo, give me a little water,
I am 'unclean' and am husking paddy thus unclean.

Come, O hariyā cloud, come across the mountains,
I shall bind you down with the hair of my head.
Come, O dark cloud, come across the mountains,
I shall keep you down with my necklace.

Hudum songs are thus essentially rain songs, and though sung in a different context they represent the same kind of sentiments as the rain songs of other parts of India, such as the Chhou-masa of Bihar. It may also be recalled here that though not generally connected with nudity or obscenity as in case of Hudum Puja songs,
the rain-giving clouds have traditionally been associated in Indian literature, both classical and folk, with the anguish and desire of the love-stricken woman separated from her object of desire and seem to stand for an erotic symbolism.

VIII Songs of Vaishnava Inspiration

We have seen that although Vaishnavism is professed by the majority of the Hindus of Goalpara, orthodox Vaishnavism does not have many strict adherents in the district. Consequently the number of folksongs inspired by Vaishnavism is rather limited. In the western parts of the district, most of the songs of Vaishnava association sung by the local people are Bengali kirtans. Bengali kirtans are also sung in certain parts of Eastern Goalpara where Bengal Vaishnavism is influential. However, in those parts of the district where Assam Vaishnavism has its hold, congregational devotional songs (nām) of the Assam Vaishnava school are widely sung. Of course many of these songs are drawn from Assamese Vaishnava scriptures and do not contain any local folk-element. But there are some compositions of anonymous authorship which at once reflect the simplicity and spontaneity of the folk-mind and also bear a local stamp. The two most important categories of such songs are the jhāli-māṭi songs and the gupuni nāms.

(a) Jhāli-Māṭi Songs

These are a special class of devotional songs, largely woven round Vaishnava themes, that are popular by that name almost exclusively around Abhayapuri in the eastern part of the district on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. They are so called because they are
sung to the accompaniment of two musical instruments known as jhāli and māti, the former being a pair of cymbals and the latter a drum resembling the khol. However, neither of the instruments is of the ordinary shape and size. The cymbals called jhāli are much bigger, flatter and thinner than those ordinarily played with the khol; and the drum itself is peculiar in shape - gradually tapering from the bigger to the smaller head instead of being fatter at the middle as in the ordinary khol. The distinctive character of the jhāli-māti songs is not confined to the peculiar instruments accompanying them but is also reflected in the musical pattern, both melodic and rhythmic.

It may be noted here that similar songs are sung in some other parts of the district to the west of the Abhayapuri region but nowhere else are they called jhāli-māti, nor are they accompanied by the peculiar musical instruments. They are simply called kirtan and are sung to the accompaniment of ordinary kholc and cymbals, especially at funeral processions and at shrāddha ceremonies.

The jhāli-māti songs are woven around a number of themes, and in the village of Srijangram where we came across the largest collection of such songs, they are customarily grouped under different heads, such as guru-parichay or guru-bandana, pahatīya, gestha, Rādher-bilap, dehā-bichāri and smashān-chaliya.

Of the various types of songs mentioned above, the majority are of Vaishnava inspiration. Some of the latter bear clear marks of the influence of Bengal Vaishnavism. A few are either directly addressed to Chaitanya or are concerned with his renunciation of
the material world and his acceptance of the life of an ascetic, as will be seen from the following fragments:

Shave my head, dear Madhu, says the Lord.

Pity, Nimaś is leaving as an ascetic,
Nimaś is leaving as a mendicant.

O my child Nimaś,
You are going to embrace a mendicant’s life
Leaving your mother.

Most of the other songs have Krishna as the central theme. While pahatiyā songs (pahatiyā = pertaining to the morning, apparently derived from Skt. prabhatā) describe the morning activities of the boy Krishna, gothā songs deal with the exploits of Krishna as the cowherd of Vrindavana. These are favourite themes of many Assamese Vaishnava composers, and compositions like the ones under discussion abound all over Assam.¹

1. It will be interesting to put a few pieces of jhāli-māti compositions side by side with their parallels found in Kamrup and to observe the closeness of the resemblance:

The Goalpara version:

āgu bāro giyā Nanda, āgu bāro giya
bihānāi baraise Jādu, nāsil kiser lāriyā ...
anna hoil karkarā benjan hoil bāsi
ghana ātā dudher māje poril kāl māsi
selāy nā koichang Nanda becheya phelbo dhenu
sahare māriyā khāibo kole loiyā Kānu

The Kamrup version:

Nanda tumi āga bāri jāwā
eta rati nāsil Krishna he mor kisaka lāriyā ...
anna bhoila karakarā benjan bhoilā bāhi
ghana khira dādhi dūgāha tato paril mākhi
sibeli koisilu Nanda dhenu
nagare māgi khāibo kole laiyā Kānu
The songs of the class Rādher bilāp speak of the love dalliance of Radha with Krishna, a theme greatly favoured by composers inspired by Bengal Vaishnavism with its preoccupation with Radha, but generally frowned upon by Assam Vaishnavism. Nevertheless, there is a fairly big number of songs based on this very theme which are popular in other parts of Assam, especially in Kamrup. What is more, many of the songs under discussion either completely or in part, echo similar compositions not only of adjoining Kamrup in which case the dialects have much in common, but also occasionally compositions found in upper Assam, in which case the dialectal divergence is considerable.¹

The erotic overtone of some of the songs of this category is too prominent and the Krishna theme contained in them hardly serves as a sufficient cover to hide their underlying eroticism:

Radhā cannot walk because of the weight of her youth.
Kānāi jumps and catches the end of her cloth.

Also:

There are no branches at the top and no roots below,
The kamalā flowers are abloom in Rādhar's breast

¹. A piece from a jhāli-māti song of Goalpara:

phulare isani phulare bisani
    phulare e sajyā pāti
    phulare bāsate e nidrā nāsil
    purush bhomorā jāti

A piece from a Brīdābani nam of Upper Assam:

phulare isāti phulare bisāti
    phulare sajālo sajyā
    phulare sajyāte ghumati nāhile

Krishna hol bhagā Prīvā.
And;

Your milk is fine, your curds are fine
Fine is the juice of your two breasts ... etc.

Songs of the three other types, guru-bandanā (or guru-parichay) smashān-chālīvā and dehā-bichārī (or dehā-bhāngti), thematically belong to one single group. Generally couched in mystical language heavily laden with symbolism, these songs have their counterparts in the dehā-bichār songs of the rest of Assam and the deha-tattwa songs of Bengal. As a matter of fact, in the western parts of the district such songs are more popularly known as deha-tattwa. We shall therefore take up all such compositions together as belonging to a single category.

(b) Dehā-bichārī, Dehā-bhāngti and Deha-tattwa songs

Some songs of this class are extremely simple in form and content, speaking in a direct and unobtrusive style of the transitoriness of the human life and the futility of material ties:

As the water on an arum leave
Is fleeting and unsteady,
So also is human life;
Who knows when it comes to an end.

As the reaper cuts the paddy
And leaves the stalks in the field,
So also is the human body —
It's dead as soon as life passes away.

1. It may be pointed out that the language of some of the deha-tattwa songs is overwhelmingly Bengali-oriented and has little of local element. So it is difficult to accept them as true specimens of local folksongs. It is likely that they have been carried to these parts by mendicant singers from farther west in comparatively recent times and have been adopted by the local people.
O Hari, there's no relying on the body.
Who knows when they will catch it
And carry it away?

They will burn it down
And will even splash away the ashes;
The human body belonging to some household
Will thus float away in water.

Many of them contain riddle-like expressions, meaning something quite different from what is apparent from the words used:

For example:

I yoked the tiger and the goat
In the hope of farming;
The goat has gored the tiger to death,
The plough sits and laughs.

Again:

The younglings of the shol fish
Live on the sal tree
The herons catch and eat them.
The daughter goes to her father from her in-law's place
Even before the father is married.
The plough and the yoke
Sit on the head of the plough-rod.
Extending my hand I find,
The hole is inside the snake.

This type of enigmatic expression is believed to be the legacy of esoteric Tantric beliefs and practices associated with Buddhistic, Nath and Vaishnava Sahajiyas. The Tantrics consider the body to be symbolic of the universe and believe it to be the starting point in one's fight against worldly desires, leading to one's rise to a state of bliss. ¹

¹ Deh-bichar songs of other parts of Assam have a similar character. — See P. Goswami: Folk-Literature of Assam, pp. 62-64.
O Guruji, going to the temple!
In this body move the winds of the world,
In this body there are nine doors and fourteen sensory organs.
One has to find them in the body and take stock of them.

Further, according to the symbolisms of this philosophy,
the body is a boat, the mind its helm and the guru the sole guide.
This symbolism appears again and again in these songs:

The boat is of soft timber,
I do not know the tricks of trade.
In the ocean of the world,
Who will be my guide except my guru?

A few songs recall to mind the depth and sobriety of Assamese Vaishnava scriptures. The following piece is almost an echo of a composition by Madhavadeva:

What did I do on coming to this world?
I didn't worship Hari in this rare human life.
I was given hair, but O Hari, I didn't wear on it the sacred basil leaf.
I was given a mouth, but I did not sing the name of Hari.
I was given hands, but I did not cleanse my body.
I was given ears, but I did not listen to Hari's praise.
Like a deer I have only eaten grass.

Gupuni-nām: A very good example of religious compositions of local character is provided by the class of simple devotional songs known as gupuni-nām, mostly sung in praise of Lord Krishna by women devotees who identify themselves with gopinis (gupuni = gopini).

1. Similar songs in upper Assam are called Gopini Sabāhar Nām.
Most of these simple compositions are inspired by Assam Vaishnavism:

As one of these songs proclaims:

The Gita and the Bhagavata are the best of scriptures
The chanting of God's name is the best of holy deeds.
Daivaki-nandan is the highest of the gods,
I bow down at his feet.

This, in fact, is the essence of the ideal upheld/preached by Sankaradeva in this part of the country. And some songs contain references to this role of Sankaradeva:

We chant the Lord's name— Gobin, Gobin. \{Gobin=Govinda\}
When is the Lord coming down from Vaikuntha?
Sankar has opened the nām-shop \{name of God\}
And Nārad-muni is the salesman;
The people of Bhārat bestir themselves
On hearing the sound of nām.

Another song incorporates a popular saying eulogizing the three principal centres of Assam Vaishnavism. Still regarded with the highest of veneration by devout Vaishnavites of Assam, particularly of the Mahapurushiya sect:

Madhupur in \(\text{Cooch}\) Behar, Barpeta in Kamrup
And Kamalabari in upper Assam.

There are many other songs or pieces of songs which clearly speak of a common literary heritage with a folk bias, which parts of Goalpara share with the rest of Assam Valley. Although Goalpara's share of the common heritage does not seem to be plentiful today, whatever remains is a reminder of the times when the influence of
the neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Sankaradeva had been deeper and wider in these parts including areas of North Bengal. What is most remarkable is the fact that this influence has been not only geographically extensive but has been sufficiently powerful to permeate social life in general cutting across not only sectarian but even canonical divisions. And this has made for the development of a body of folk-literature with a common pattern which is shared by different sections of people, Hindus of all sects and even non-Hindus.

Of non-Hindu folk literature forming part of this common literary heritage, the best example is provided by the exquisite zikirs, 'devotional songs handed down from generation to generation among the Assamese Muslims', which 'embody the teachings of Islam, and are couched in the language and pattern of Assamese Vaishnava poetry.'

Thus we have the following two almost identical pieces, one from a gupuni-nām of Goalpara and the other from a zikir of upper Assam:

\[
\text{nāme gangājal bhakate nirmal} \\
\text{boi āse hridayar māje} \\
\text{(Gupuni-nām)}
\]

The Lord's name is [like] Ganges-water, it is pure in the devotee, And it is flowing through the heart.

\[
\text{nāme gangājal loboloi komal} \\
\text{boi āse hridayar māje} \\
\text{(Zikir)}
\]

The Lord's name is [like] Ganges-water, it is soft to take, And it is flowing through the heart.

1. S. A. Malik (ed): Asamiya Zikir Aru Jāri, — See Foreword by Dr S. K. Bhuyan.