



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact factor: 4.295

(Volume 4, Issue 6)

Available online at: [www.ijariit.com](http://www.ijariit.com)

## Development of modern music in Assam: Guwahati (GMC), a mosaic of cultural fusion and diffusion

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### ABSTRACT

*This article deals with an overview of the origin and development of modern music in Guwahati (GMC), Assam. Development of modern music in the region reveals a long mythology and history. The development of modern music is tried to establish on lights of diversity, cultural fusion, social identity, globalization and travel of popular sounds. The article is based on secondary source of data as well as primary data. Other sources of data collection are various articles on music published in magazines, blogs and books, listening to songs from music albums, both print and electronic media. Some external links also were used like conversations and personal interviews with some experts in the area. The survey for collection of primary data in the study is done online with the help of Google Forms. As per the topic of the study a number of stakeholders related to modern music in the study area were considered. The survey schedule was prepared in Google Forms (a facility to create and operate online surveys) which was online between 30th September, 2018 to 31st October, 2018. The stakeholders like lyricists, composers, musicians, technicians, producers, promoters, singers and listeners were recruited via e-mails, Whats App with prior confirmation over mobile messages or phone calls. The musicians and other stakeholders related to music are very mobile and elusive, so difficult to find them and apply conventional surveys. To overcome this practical hurdle of collection of data smart survey technique i.e. online survey has been applied in the study as nowadays almost all stakeholders are highly engaged in internet.*

**Keywords**— Ethnic music, Culture, Fusion, Diffusion, Identity, Globalization

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Assam, a state situated in the Northeastern region of India is a platter of incredible cultures and landscapes. Guwahati (GMC) the only metro in Assam is the gateway as well as the hub of modern music influenced by diverse array of styles shared by folk music of the region, ethnic music of the hilly people surrounding the state and influenced by the music of its neighboring countries like Thailand, Myanmar and other far eastern countries. The descending scale of the ethnic music in region distinguishes it from any other Indian folk or raga-based music. Another significant characteristic of native music of the region (including Bihu songs, Mising, Karbi and Boro songs etc.) is, these are structured and sung to the pentatonic scale similar to traditional music from East Asia. It provides an indication of cultural diffusion between East Asia and Assam in ancient times.

### 2. HISTORY OF MUSIC IN ASSAM

The history of music in Assam claims that it is a blend of one thousand years old folk music tradition, about five hundred years old tradition of written drama-songs, nearly three hundred years old tradition of Indian classical music which started since Swargadeo Rudra Singha's rule (1696-1714), about one thousand years old history of composing *charjyapada*'s and nearly two thousand years old raga-based classical music *ojapali*. *Borgeet* which is another form of Assamese classical music composed by Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardeva and Madhabdeva which provided a new dimension to the music of the area. Then in the sixteenth century (according to some 17th-century), Aajan Fakir (Sufi saint and poet Hazrat Shah Miran) came to Assam from Baghdad and added a new flavour to the music in Assam by introducing *Zikir and Zari* (types of spiritual songs). It was the fusion of Islamic religious style of music with folk music in Assam.

Along with British Colonial rule (1826-1947, after the Treaty of Yandabu.), the advent of Christian Missionaries to Assam and created a new style of Gospel songs on the notes of western music to spread their religion. After that, another significant entry in Assamese culture started from Bengal (then West Bangle and Bangladesh together). Bengali songs and music (khemta songs, songs of Shyamlal and Dwijendralal, Atul Prasad, Shyama sangeet, Bengali kirtans, and jatras et.al) ruled over the domain of music in Assam until 1883.

Looking back to the gradual development of modern music in the region, it is evident that it is quite a recent development from the 19<sup>th</sup> century only. The base for this is provided by the agglomeration of various styles of folk music, ragas and raginis, a fusion of foreign style of music with local styles in Assam from time to time as stated above.



Fig. 1: The melody of Bihu song ‘Morilong morilong lagise’ based on the pentatonic scale

### 3. MODERN MUSIC IN ASSAM

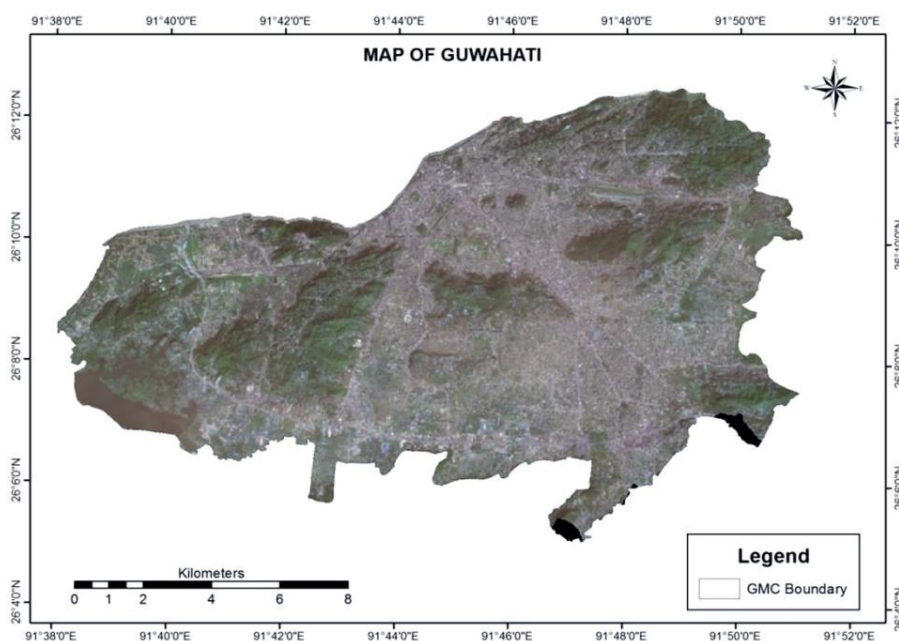
The trend of modern music in the region actually started in 1883, when Satyanath Bora published *Geetabali*, the very first book on Assamese songs in then Bengali tunes. So Satyanath Bora can be considered as the first composer of Assamese modern songs. Other contributors of that time were Bhaktaram Dutta (*Pranay-gaan*, 1901) and Benudhar Rajkhowa (*Banhi*, 1906). They offered their contribution to modern music in Assam with a strong sense of nationalism. Because at that time irrespective of regional boundaries all over India nationalism was at its peak. Lakshmiram Baruah who was a contemporary of Satyanath Bora laid another milestone in this area. His works *Sangeet sadhana* and *Sangeet kosh* bears the signature of his expertise on raag-based music as well as on folk music. He created a new genre of Assamese music, by experimenting with different Indian classical and folk styles. Two significant songs composed by Lakshmiram Baruah were “Aji hkhubha din kinu bitupon” based on Imon raag and “kiyonu biyat baje ajiu premor banhi.” based on Bhairabi raga.

During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another revolutionary trend setter in the history of modern music in Assam was Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhury (1885 born). He revolutionized then Assamese society with his great compositions with strong national feeling in songs like-“Aji bondu ki chandere samagata virata , Nara-narayana rupa, Nara-narayana rupa”( it was sung as opening song at Indian National Congress Committee held in 1926 at Pandu). Before going into the details it is worth mentioning that Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbarua was the founder of modern Assamese culture. This paved the way for modern music in Assam.

Simply modern songs are those which have a lyricist, composer and which are not tuned to a particular raag-ragini or taal. With that idea real modern music in Assam started with the immense contribution and unconditional efforts by Jyotiprasad Agarwala(1903-1951), Parvati Prasad Baruah(1904-1964) and Bishnu Prasad Rabha(1909-1969). Lyrics, subject matter of songs and tunes composed by these great talents gave a new dimension to music in Assam. The foundation for the development of music and film sector as an industry in the region was laid by the tireless efforts of Jyotiprasad Agarwala in this era only. Aforementioned pioneers composed a new style of songs and common people named them as Jyoti sangeet, Parvati sangeet and Rabha sangeet. During this phase along with music, other means of performing arts also developed namely- drama, movies and radio. At this point of time, the development of modern music in Assam can be categorized under four heads- 1. Pure modern songs, 2. Drama songs, 3. Movie songs and 4. Radio songs (as mentioned by Dr Anil Saikia in his article “Akhomia Adhunik Geetor Dukmukali Kalor Keigorakiman Geetika”).

During this phase, geographical and environmental elements started playing a major essence in songs of the region. For example, “Hkheuji hkheuji hkheuji o, hkheuji dharani dhunia,” explaining the nature in a direct portrayal, “Bilot tirebirai podumor pahi oi, patot tirebirai pani,”(by renowned composer Kamalananda Bhattacharyya) was a lucid romanticism never experienced by Assamese composers ever before. The lyricists of Assam at that particular point of time were educated through western ideals in the colleges of Calcutta. The western writers and the romantic poets of the English language heavily influenced these composers. That clearly indicates the travel of ideas beyond the geographical borders of the countries and emergence of a modern world through assimilation of thoughts imported from the west by cultural diffusion with regional ramification. As a result of which through modern music with all the above mentioned characteristics, Assamese society found a new and modern identity of its own in terms of its culture, language and above all as a region. Diffusion is one of the most powerful driving factors in cultural change leading to geographic change. It is a culture, which determines expansion or spread of a region, and music is one of its major drivers.

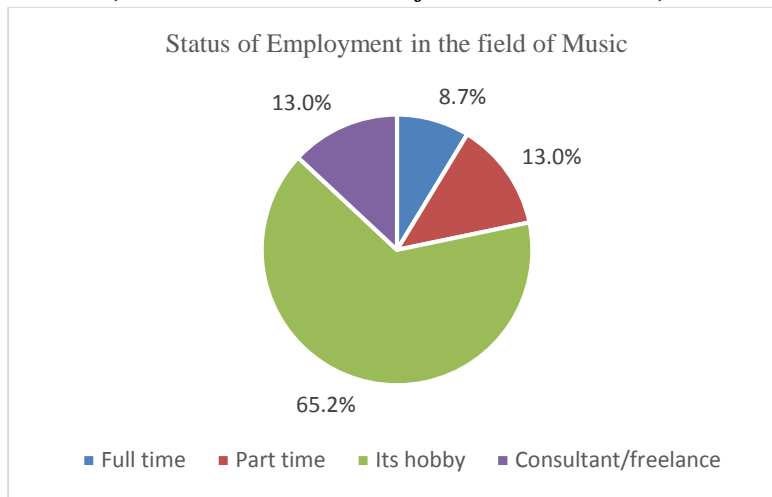
A new chapter in this area was added with the entry of Dr Bhupen Hazarika(in 1939), with a new style both in terms of composition and tune of songs of nationalism and modern music with the flavours of the west. Due to his tireless efforts, modern songs in Assam have crossed its geographical boundary and were recognized in other regions of India and abroad as well. Dr Hazarika’s works expanded the scope of movie songs as well as radio songs in terms of Music based industry in Assam. His brother and contemporary Jayanta Hazarika was one of the pioneers who truly westernized music of Assam. Influence of western music to Assamese tunes, the inclusion of western instruments like guitar, mandolin, triple, African drums, were significant in the music of Assam during this era. New techniques of recording songs in studios and radio stations and new compositions created waves of modern styles in the Assamese society. Other musical legends during this phase were Brazen Baruah, Dipali Borthakur, Hemanta Dutta, Jyotish Bhattacharya, Kula Barua, Jitu-Tapan and many more.



**Fig. 2: Map of Guwahati (GMC) the hub of modern music during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Assam**

#### **4. PRESENT STATUS OF MODERN MUSIC IN GUWAHATI (GMC), ASSAM**

Then towards the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new and fresh trend started in music scenario that brought modern hi-technology and digitized music in the region. Noted singer, composer Jitul Sonowal was the pioneer of this trend in Assam. Later Zubeen Garg with his album called 'Anamika' created a new sensation in the music world of Assam. Since 1992 to date, he is being recognized as a trendsetter who not only experimented with the fusion of western and regional music but also contributed to reviving the traditional songs and styles of music in Assam. With his efforts, modern music in the region got an extended platform at global scale. Some of his contemporaries are a singer, composer Tarali Sharma and Papon Angarag Mahanta. Papon introduced another style on experimental basis called 'folktronica', a combination of folk music and electronic music. This phase of modern music is the result of globalization. It is global 'mediascapes' (Appadurai 1990), the process of musical fragmentation and diversification within countries (*Sound tracks, popular music, identity and space*, by John Connell and Chris Gibson). Media corporations distribute popular sounds across the world beyond their original place and globalization made this mobility of sounds possible. Different reactions to globalization can be observed, some musicians are fascinated by new sounds while some others returned to roots. In case of music in Assam also as a result sub-cultures developed- a new corporate culture emerged due to production and marketing of music (based on commercial logic of media) on the other hand audience culture developed which is based on listeners, fans and critics. This is the new trend of modern music in Assam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is a mosaic of its various indigenous traditional style of music with a variety of popular sounds and styles travelled from all over the world specifically from the west.



**Fig. 3: Status of employment in the field of music**  
The online survey, 2018

As shown in the above diagram...presently only 8.7% professionals are full time engaged in the field of modern music in the study area whereas 65.2% consider it as their hobby, 13.0% engage themselves as part time musicians and 13.0% provide consultancy service in the field.

**Table 1: Percentage of musical occupation in the study area**

Primary musical occupation	Percentage
Lyricist	13.0%
Singer	34.8%
Composer	8.7%
Musician	17.4%
Technician	8.7%
All	17.4%

The online survey, 2018

From the online survey, it was found that 13.0% of respondents are engaged as lyricists, 34.8% as singers, 8.7% as composers, 17.4% as musicians and 8.7% as technicians. 17.4% declare to engage themselves in all the categories.

The above discussion reflects the result that quite a good number of people are engaged in the modern music field in the study area to earn their bread and butter. The digital world is providing them with the scope and platform to show case their talents as well as to do experiments in the fusion and discussion of modern music in the study area.

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