

Gems of Assamese Poetry

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The age of Mahapurush Srimant Sankardev (1449 – 1569) and Mahapurush Madhabdev (1489 – 1596) was an age when ‘Assam blossomed like a lotus of thousand petals’ (as remarked by Prof. Vasudev Sharan Agarwal). The lyrics of the unique songs called *Borgeet* composed by Sankardev and Madhabdev brim with a rare resplendence in their original Assamese language. They are, in essence, truly the ‘gems’ of Assamese poetry.

The pre-eminent scholar, Dr Banikanta Kakati termed the *Borgeets* as ‘Noble Numbers’ while Kaliram Medhi, the distinguished litterateur, called them ‘Songs Celestial’. The devotional *Borgeets* led to the formation of a new school of Indian Classical Music in Assam bearing a distinctive identity of its own. The lyrics of the *Borgeets* were composed in the Brajawali form of the Assamese language and their contents are primarily a glorification of Lord Krishna. Madhabdev, the chief apostle of Sankardev, too, contributed substantially in the development of the society and culture, language and literature of Assam maintaining an exemplary inextricable bond with his mentor in every field of activity. He successfully retained the characteristics of the *Borgeet* tradition in his individual efforts too.

The distinguished musicologist and exponent of *Borgeet*, Bapchandra Mahanta has recorded a total of 192 *Borgeets* in his invaluable collection, *Prabandhagaanan Paramparat Borgeet* with elaborate notes, meanings and a comprehensive introduction tracing the tradition of *Borgeets* from *Prabandhagaan*. Thirty-five of these *Borgeets* were composed by Sankardev and the remaining one hundred and fifty-seven by Madhabdev. The collection includes four unpublished *Borgeets* of Madhabdev recovered from the *Sachipat* (aquilariaagollocha or eaglewood tree) texts of Thukubil Sattra. The following couple of *Borgeets* are a humble attempt on my part to render them in English:

At Thy feet

by Sankardev

Raga : Kedar

Refrain : I pray for my life, O' Lord
Prostrate at thy feet
Save me from being rooted out
By the venom of earthly life

Verse : Fleeting is company, wealth and youth
Wife, son all are in vain
Everything in life is so transient
As true and worthy, what do I embrace

As drops of water on lotus leaves
Not for a moment is the mind still
No fear have I for fleeting joys, O' Lord
Till I behold Thy supreme feet

Sankara says, O' Hrishikesh
Tide me over this ocean of woes
Lord of wisdom, guide me, instil the urge
Along the path of supreme bliss

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Original: *Pawe pori hari*

Quit your slumber, Lord
by Madhabdev

Raga : Shyam

Quit your slumber Kamalapati, wake up, it's dawn
Rise Govinda, let me behold your moonlike face
The eastern horizon is softly glowing alive
Sunlight emerges piercing the fading darkness

The lotus blooms with bees hovering around
The curd-churning women of Braja sing your paeans
Dama and Sudama keep calling you aloud
Look there, even Balarama has woken up and arrived

Nanda has gone to the pen, the drovers for the tending
Surabhi needs the grazing-ground, wake up Gopal
Get ready with cream and butter, the cane and the flute
The calf has to be untethered, the cow moos

Madhava exclaims, "What devotion has bestowed you, Mother
With the Lord of the Three Worlds as your protector!"

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Original: Tejore Kamalapati
(Incidentally the Borgeet resembles a sonnet)

Krishna Dulal Barua is a prominent translator and writer based in Nagaon, Assam. He received the Katha Award for translation in 2005.