



# Songs and Singers: Exploring the Cultural and Industrial Nuances of Assamese Songs

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## Abstract

The primary objective of the study was to explore the experiences of the singers of Assam, and how the production and reception of Assamese songs influence their journey as artists, and understand the cultural and industrial influences in this journey. The study was conducted using secondary data in the form of audience statistics on the various songs performed by Assamese Singers, and pre-recorded interviews wherein the artists have candidly shared their experiences as artists in the Assamese cultural industry.

## Key Areas of Study

Songs, Singers, Assam, Assamese Culture, Cultural Industry, Entrepreneurship, Tradition

## Introduction

Culture is an element of human society that pervasively influences almost every aspect of human behavior. This all-encompassing nature of culture as made it difficult to attach a definition to the concept of culture, however, Tylor made one of the earliest attempts and defined culture as “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society”. For the current study, culture has been operationalized based on Sojka and Tansuhaj’s triple approach of language, material goods/artefacts, and beliefs/value systems (Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2006). The reason for adopting this approach for the study is that while language provides the tools and means of expressing and understanding the world around us, the material components reflect the physical manifestations of culture, and the belief systems reflect the internal world of the people and the values they hold towards these manifestations and its utilization.

The current study also adopts Kire and Rajkumar’s (2017) towards culture as they have enumerated the following characteristics of culture:

**Culture is invented/constructed.** Various traditions and practices are products and byproducts of the social circumstances and over time become a part and parcel of the culture.

**Culture is learned.** One is not born with their cultural values and practices, but rather they learn them through the process of socialization.

**Culture is shared.** Culture is not something that is unique to an individual; it is shared by all who share the various threads of linkage like place of origin, current locality, etc.

**Cultures are similar but different.** Even if culture is a shared phenomenon, there exists major and minor different iterations across the globe.

**Culture is not static.** As we the people are changing over time, so does our culture along with us; especially with concepts like globalization and cross-acculturation cultures across the globe have undergone changes.

## Cultural Industry

When an industry caters to the cultural elements, it is bound to be highly influenced by the cultural shifts across regions; sub-cultural differences being known to create market segmentation, which is a powerful

factor influencing producer and consumer behavior equally (Yakup, Mucahit, & Reyhan, 2011). The products of the cultural and creative industry entail a fair amount of intuition with regard to the market and how to capture it. However, this intuition is backed by understandings of market data and patterns (Wierrenga, 2016).

The cultural and creative industry is known to commonly consist of the following elements: Performing arts, Visual arts, Crafts, Creative design, Digital arts, and Creative lifestyle

There are multiple forces which influence one into entering the cultural and creative industry like: resource consumption, market potential, culture improvement, regional development, local characteristic, tourist attraction, and employment opportunity (Huang, et al., 2009)

**Characteristics of the cultural industry.** The cultural industry is known to exhibit the following characteristics:

***Random nature of the utilization value.*** With the dynamic nature of taste and preferences of the consumers, producers in the cultural industry have to keep up with the varied tastes over time and location.

***Limited possibilities to produce consumer goods.*** Products of the cultural industry are unique to the creator and hence replicability is limited; whether it be a song, dance, painting, or any other item of art, the original creator retains the recipe for the original work no matter how much it is passed on (Oana & Tocan, 2013)

## Culture and Art

The meaning of the term “culture” can be reflected in the social experiences, art exhibitions, or everyday practices. Many cultural and creative industries are established in a similar way; the development of brands creates a shared or homogenous cultural experience among a group of people, producing similar beliefs, traditions, values, and so on (Chen, 2019).

Cultural capital is both physical capital (in the form of paintings, architecture, etc.) and intellectual capital (in the form of ideas) (Throsby, 1995). Culture, along with art, are two forces of human society that almost go hand-in-hand; influencing each other in various ways, and it is important for educators to teach the new generation that art impacts the society (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). One perceives art by drawing similarities to familiar experiences that they have undergone and this perception can occur on a dual level; physical (surface level perception) and metaphorical (metaphysical perception) levels. Art is usually perceived

in the cultural context that it exists in and to objectively understand the perception of the artist, it is essential to understand the context in which the artist made the art (Bourdieu, 1968). Here it is important to note how one perceives something is influenced by the attitude one holds towards a particular phenomenon; whether they hold positive, negative, or neutral views (Fazio & Williams, 1986).

Art is a microcosm of the culture it belongs to and hence, the culture of a time and place is mirrored in the art (Kaeppler, 1978). The study of art can be traced back to the times of Plato (373 BC) when he attempted to study art and where it existed in an ideal state. Moving forward in time, Karl Marx believed that the production of art was influenced by the industrial trends of that time and area (Chalmers, 1973). What is considered to be artistic has evolved through the passage of time for art has evolved to reflect the evolving culture of its creation, and what is considered to be art in one culture, might not necessarily be considered so in another (Appadurai, 1986; DiMaggio, 1987; Kaeppler, 1978). Processes like globalization has led to agglomeration of culture, which in-turn has influenced the current state of art (DiMaggio, 1987), which is a hybrid of Eastern and Western cultures, and understanding this hybridization facilitates a greater cross-cultural understanding (Papastergiadis, 2005).

### Defining Art

The Collins dictionary defines “Art” as something which requires certain amount of skill to be created, and once produced, attracts appreciation from the audience, and includes music, dance, acting, literature, painting, etc. while it defines an “Artist” as someone who is highly skilled at a particular art and engages in that art as a hobby or profession (Collins Dictionary, N.A).

When it comes to perspectives held by people regarding art, these have been interpreted and defined in multiple ways by various thinkers and philosophers (Dickie, 1969). While Oscar Wilde (2004) who considered art to be a medium of expression, described it as the most powerful form of individualism, Leo Tolstoy (1896), who worked greatly towards global peace, believed that it was a means through which humankind connected and moved towards a greater good, Frank Lloyd Wright (1901), who considered art to be something that was created or produced, said that it was a product of labor, Mark Rollins (2004) believed that art is not just a creative expression on behalf of the artist but also a scientific process as it involves the sensory and cognitive faculties of the artist for the creation of a piece of art, and Robin Collingwood (1925) proposed that art serves



the purpose of inspiring people to protect their community. However, it is to be kept in mind that attaching a definition to art poses a risk of limiting its creative possibilities for a definition becomes a lens through which art is viewed (Dutton, 2006).

### **Art and Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in shaping the world economy in the direction of betterment. The creative industry in particular is an integral part of today's economy for it plays the role of integrating art, culture, technology, social innovation, and business and it is steady growing into a profitable industry (Roberts, N.A). To financially sustain themselves in the industry, the approach artists usually opt for is of entrepreneurship, which is not always about raking in profits, but also a socio-cultural agency (Kuhlke, Schramme, & Kooyman (Ed), 2015).

But who is an entrepreneur? Known to the common man as a businessman, the Cambridge English dictionary defines an entrepreneur as "Someone who starts their own business, especially when this involves seeing a new opportunity". However, many believe that entrepreneurship goes beyond just business and involves innovative thought and action that impact the greater society (United Nations, 2018). The current study stands in line with this perspective by the UN.

**What makes an artist an entrepreneur?** Artists can be considered to be entrepreneurs for they are known to display fundamental traits of an entrepreneur; i.e., having the ability to take risks, being tolerant to ambiguity, and having a strong internally directed locus of control (Poorsoltan, 2012). In the quest of profit making, some enter the mainstream, while others opt to remain unorthodox and focus more on their creative freedom of expression. However, regardless of whether one's motive is to maximize profits, or to pursue creative excellence, unlike entrepreneurs in other industries, entrepreneurs in the creative industry need to create their own opportunities (Kuhlke, Schramme, & Kooyman (Ed), 2015). Artists usually hold multiple job positions to be able to be financially secure and very few artists are capable of dedicating their entire life exclusively to art, some artists, usually the ones who enter the mainstream, are able to capitalize on their art using their entrepreneurial skills and make a decent living through art (Poorsoltan, 2012). As an entrepreneur, an artist engages in commercializing their art as greater commercial value has been known to boost salability in the cultural industry (Qin, Song, Tian, 2019).

**Artist as an entrepreneur.** Unlike other entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative industry are unique as they share the following characteristics:

***Blurring of demarcation line between production and consumption.*** In the creative industry, since the industry is highly governed by the consumer trends (Kaeppeler, 1978), artists often put themselves in the shoes of customers to understand them better.

***Blurring of demarcation line between work and non-work.*** Artists, being creative individuals, often draw inspiration from everyday life and most of them use their “non-work” time to fuel their creativity.

***Combination of individualistic values and collaborative working.*** Artists as individuals have their own set of skills and talents, however they are also observed collaborate with other artists to take their work to greater heights (e.g., music bands, theatre troops, movie production houses, and the like).

***Being members of a wider creative community.*** Through a mix of competition and cooperation, the cultural industry thrives and sustains the individual artists (Wilson & Stokes, 2002)

### **Platforms for Artists**

In today's world, social media has proven to be a powerful medium of artists to connect with the right customer segment, and helps them in their marketing process; be it for research, branding, sales promotion, or customer relationship management. It is observed that sites like Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used online platforms as they have the highest consumer reach in the world of internet (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

### **Consumer Behavior and Cultural Industry**

Consumer behavior or the form of behavior displayed by individuals while searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that are expected to satisfy their needs (Patil & Bakkappa, 2012) is highly influenced by the culture the consumer is placed in (Patil & Bakkappa, 2012). Culture is generally accepted by marketing theorists as one of the underlying determinants of consumer behavior and one of the key cultural elements that influences consumer behavior is the values held by the people; a shift in the values can lead to a shift in consumer behavior (Henry, 1976).

Warren, Barsky, and McGraw (2018), proposed that when engaging in consumer behavior, an individual has one or more of the three primary goals: Hedonic goals or the need to feel good, utilitarian goals or to complete a particular motive, and social goals or the need to experience status and power in the society. They

also proposed that engaging in positive emotion inducing experiences like humor generally facilitates hedonic goals by helping the consumer overcome stress and anxiety, makes utilitarian goals more enjoyable, boosts aspects of mental health, and helps consumers bond and strengthen social relationships. The cultural industry plays a significant role in creating a sense of belongingness among the consumers and thus, helps in the fulfillment of the third goal of social experience. With changes in the creative trends, the behavior of both consumers and producers changes over time (Santagata, 2012). This trend is commonly observed with regard to popular songs and singers changing among the masses over time with changing trends and this shift is important to be taken into consideration because of the rapidly evolving socio-cultural scenario of today's world (e.g., comparing the generation to which the author belongs, with the generation that came before him, and the generation that came after him, there have been a multitude of additions and elimination of cultural nuances).

Thus, examining the various cultural factors of a region can reflect the consumption patterns of the region as consumers in different socio-cultural structures have different tendencies of consumer needs and values, thus, for an artist, it is important to be conscious of the culture-based trends like region specific demands (Chiv et. al., 2012; Kire & Rajkumar, 2017). Apart from the socio-cultural factors, it is also important for an artist to take into consideration the differences arising out of differences in social class to be able to cater to tastes and preferences; especially with increased rates of globalization and competition across sectors, the importance of recognizing consumers as a point of focus is also increasing (Yakup, Mucahit, & Reyhan, 2011).

**Consumer ethnocentrism.** Consumer behavior being a socio-cultural phenomenon, and since this study focuses on the cultural industry, it is important to understand, Consumer Ethnocentrism, which refers to the beliefs held by consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign made products. Hence consumers with high ethnocentric sentiments refuse to buy any imported products and even stop others from doing so. Ethnocentric sentiments comprise of the following components:

**Affective reaction.** An individual with ethnocentric sentiments experiences positive and negative emotions towards objects from their own culture and objects from outside their own culture respectively.

**Cognitive bias.** Consciously or unconsciously, an individual with ethnocentric sentiments believe that the products of their own culture are superior to the products from other cultures.

**Behavioral preference.** The emotions and thoughts in turn influence the behavioral patterns of the individual with ethnocentric sentiments and this is reflected in their buying behavior and other consumer-oriented behavior (Sharma, 2015).

### Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior

From a consumer's perspective, following are some of the commonly observed factors that an artist needs to be aware of to gain an insider's perspective and provide products and services to suit the tastes and preferences of their target audience:

**Product attitude.** The product attitude means that an acquired or predisposed mental state regarding a product with some degree of negativity which is perceived from a social or personal stimulus.

**Purchase intention.** The willingness of a customer to buy a certain product or a certain service is known as purchase intention.

**Perceived novelty.** Perceived novelty is the quality of being new, or following from that, of being striking, original or unusual.

**Perceived sustainability.** Perceived sustainability of TCPs (Traditional Cultural Properties) as it relates to sustainable development, has to do with the maintaining of cultural beliefs, cultural practices, heritage conservation, culture as its own entity, and attempts to answer the question of whether or not any given cultures will exist in the context of the future.

**Perceived resilience.** Perceived resilience of TCPs is the ability of one culture to successfully cope with a crisis and to return to pre-crisis status quickly (of one culture towards crisis) (Qin, Song, & Tian, 2019).

### Artists and Consumers of Cultural Production

Being artistic is a skill to look at things and problems through a lens of creativity (Bolman & Terrence, 2008), and an artist provides not only a creative lens to their audience, enabling them to experience through new perspectives (Sayre, 2013), but also an inspiration to challenge the norms and raise critical questions (Szekely, 1978). An artist produces their art to fuel their own passion, to appease the gods, and/or selling to the consumers, who are a powerful determining force that influences the art created by the artist (Kaeppeler, 1978). The relationship between an artist and a consumer is cyclic in nature; the consumers determine the type



of art produced by the artist, the art produced by the artist influences the consumer, they spread the word within their community, interest is generated among prospective consumers, and artists create art to cater to this interest (Adler, 1985). However, unlike Adler, who equated a consumer to a customer, the current study sees a consumer as someone who experiences the art created by an artist, regardless of whether they are paying for it or not.

Through common observation, we can notice that an artist either produces art (paintings, songs, dances, etc.) or craft (masks, mats, fabric, pottery, handicraft, etc.). In case of the former, even though the consumer has the privilege of experiencing the art first hand (in cases of live performances), it is more of a niche market, while in case of the latter, it is more mainstream and is available in the larger market.

With regard to consumers in the cultural industry, the question that arises is whether they are influenced by the same factors as in any other industry (as discussed above), or any other factors play a role here? One of the major influencers of consumer behavior in the cultural industry are the socio-emotional elements of culture that are known to impact the manner an individual perceives; a greater emotional connect is more likely to attract an individual than most other factors (for example, a person living away from their hometown is more likely to attend a concert by an artist from their hometown than anybody else who is not from the same place as they share an emotional connect).

The cultural atmosphere in a society is accumulated over time through the consumption of cultural services and is diminished through depreciation. Using cultural capital (e.g., cultural heritage, paintings, music scores), cultural services are provided by the cultural services industry (e.g., museums, opera houses); cultural capital is enlarged by new cultural goods created by individuals. In turn, the individual's utilities are positively affected by the cultural services they consume, the cultural goods they create, the cultural atmosphere, and the cultural capital accumulated in society (Cheng, 2006).

### **Cultural Landscape of Assam**

Assam acts as a cultural gateway for the rest of India with Southeast Asia, and being free from Islamic rule, Assamese art and culture, unlike that of the rest of the country, is free from its influence (Dasgupta, 1982). The land is a melting pot of cultures and subcultures and this is prominently visible in her myriad art forms; whether it is dances like Xatriya, Bodo, Bihu, etc. or theatre like Bhaoriya, Oja-Pali, Dhuliya, etc. or painting

like Xatriya style, Ahom style, etc. or music like Bihu, Borgeet, Naam, etc. or any other art form like textile, and artifact making using materials like bamboo, cane, brass and bell metal. One of the primary factors adding to this richness is the tribal population, who comprise a major portion of the population of the land for they bring in unique flavors into the table (Hussain, 1992). However, despite being culturally so rich, most of the mainstream population are unaware of this richness due to lack of publicity on the national and international platform (Dasgupta, 1982; Das & Acharjee, 2013).

With the change in preferences, we also notice a shift in the cultural map (Boyd & Richardson, 1996). Historically speaking, priests, scholars, and artists were patronized during the Ahom dynasty, which led to the introduction of elements of other cultures into Assamese art and culture (Sharma, 2011). This trend persists even as the society matures, tastes and preferences of the people also evolves; from the Pre-Ahom times to the modern times, there have been an evolution of culture in the state, and this is reflected in her art forms, which along with the traditional and folk forms, modern renditions like Fusion, Assamese Films, etc. have also been adopted.

**Categories of art (material vs. performance).** Art can take the form of both material creation (like paintings, handicraft, pottery, etc.) and performance (like dance, theatre, music, etc.). In Assam both the forms of art can be found, as it is seen in the subsequent sections.

**Performance.** Major performance-based arts in Assam include dances like Xatriya, Bodo, Bihu, etc., theatre like Bhaoriya, Oja-Pali, Dhuliya, etc., painting like Xatriya style, Ahom style, etc., and music like Bihu, Borgeet, Naam, etc.

A semi-dramatic form of performing arts, Ojapali, which is a mixture of theatre, music, and dance, is one of the ancient Assamese art forms. It draws similarities with many other traditions across the nation and plays an educative role from a socio-religious perspective. It primarily consists of two subsets; epic based, which are devoted to Lords Vishnu and Krishna, and non-epic based which are devoted to the snake goddess, Manasa (Devi, 2012).

A form of epic based Ojapali, Satriya Ojapali was introduced by Srimanta Sankardev and has a strong religious connotation. This art form has been preserved to the current day by the Satras through verbally

handing down through generations. The primary instruments played in this form of Ojapli include the Bina, Benu, and Mridangam (Baruah, 2016).

Performance arts allow the performers to present their art live to their audience, which allows the audience to interact with the artists and in turn provides the artists the opportunity to modify their art on the go to match the reaction of their audience.

**Material.** Among the material components of the cultural industry of Assam, one of the major products is from the silk industry. Primarily comprising of Eri, Muga, and Mulberry silk, the silk industry of Assam is an integral part of both the cultural and tourism industries of the state. This industry is a source of employment for the various stakeholders of this industry; i.e., farmers, weavers, etc. Culturally, this industry is strongly associated with Bihu as most of the attires worn during this festival are predominantly made of silk.

Apart from the silk industry, following are other products the artisans of Assam are famous for:

**Mask-making.** Used for Bhaonas, Raas festivals, and also as an independent product to be sold in the market, these masks are made of bamboo and paper.

**Pottery.** One of the primary products of the cottage industry in Majuli, pottery feeds around five thousand mouths. Using a unique wheel-less technique, this island produces over twenty-six various kinds of earthen pots which serve various purposes like storage, prayers, rituals, drinking, etc.

**Boat-making.** Having been passed on for generations, boat-making is an art that supports around three thousand families who make boats for passengers, cargo, and fishing (Nath, 2016).

For purpose of the current study, the focus shall be on performance art for unlike material art, where the artist produces and sells it in the market, where there might not be any direct interaction with their consumers, performances allow greater engagement between the artists and the consumers as they consume the art in real-time. Even though with modern technology, performances can be recorded and broadcasted, it still provides a greater sense of engagement to both the producer and consumer.

### **Platforms in Assam.**

Assam, while adopting the trends of modernization, has stayed true to her roots. Hence, being rich in its heritage, provides its artists not only the modern avenues of the recent times, but more culturally ingrained opportunities as well.

**Traditional platforms.** The biggest festival of Assam is Bihu which is celebrated thrice across the agricultural cycle of the year; Magh or Bhogali Bihu is celebrated in the month of January, Bohag or Rongali Bihu is celebrated in the month of April, and Kati or Kongali Bihu is observed during the month of October (unlike the other two Bihus this one is not celebrated due to this period being one of scarcity) (Nath, 2016). It is a festival that is not limited to the Assamese community, rather it is celebrated with equal fervor among all the people in Assam, among whom it is known by different names. The unique thing about this festival is that unlike many others, it revolves more around celebrating and/or revering the crop cycle, livestock, and the changing seasons. Another unique thing about this festival is that the month of the particular Bihu (Magh, Bohag, or Kati) can be identified through the Bihu songs sung during that period they provide an elaborate description of the seasons during which the particular Bihu is celebrated along with the seasonal flora, fauna, and the everyday activities respective of that season. It is also important to note that the perspective towards this festival has changed over time; as compared to the period of mid-nineteenth century, when it was looked at as a primitive ritual for the peasants, now it has evolved to be considered as symbolic of Assamese pride. It is not only the perception towards the festival that has seen a change, but the various practices observed during the festival also have become more ritualistic and symbolic in nature as both the ecological and cultural settings have changed over the time (e.g., creation of a ‘Bhela Ghor’, burning of a ‘Meji’, and the like) (Barua, 2009).

Apart from Bihu, Assam is also home to many other festivals like Janmastami, Phakua (celebrated as Holi in other parts of the country), Raas Mahotsav, Guru Tithis (birth ceremonies of Vaisnavite saints like Sankardev and Madhavdev), Ali Aye Ligang, Porag, etc. (Nath, 2016). A major component of these festivals is the songs and dances performed during these festivals and they bring forth the nuances of the various tribal and non-tribal populations that live in the region (Goswami, 1967).

During these festivals it is an opportunity for the artists and the artisans to display their arts and crafts to the public, and enjoy a healthy market to earn a living as well.

**Modern platforms.** With the evolution of times, the cultural industry of Assam has adopted less traditional platforms for the artists to perform, like public stages (make-shift arrangements), dedicated theatres, carnivals, and with the boom of tele media, performers have got a chance to showcase their talent through radio and television. One of the biggest revolutions of the recent times is the revolution brought by social media,



which has become an integral part of today's world and hence it has the potential to prove itself as a powerful tool to understand people. By analyzing the content shared by people and the activities one performs on online social media platforms researchers can conduct quantitative and qualitative studies to identify characteristic patterns of people and the perceptions and ideas held by them. However, social media can help not only the consumers, but with the emergence of cultural and creative industries, many studies have begun to explore the advantages and disadvantages of using these platforms in this industry, that relies highly on the interaction of the producers with the consumers (Chen, 2019). This can be seen in the form of artists going live on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

### **Songs of Assam**

Assam is a land that is musically blessed; whether it be folk songs, or religious hymns, or classical melodies, or modern iterations, people of the land have explored multiple genres with regard to music. Whether it be for festivities like Bihu, or for theatre performances like Bhaonas, or for religious ceremonies at Namghars, or for movies, or for standalone performances, Assamese singers have been singing for multiple occasions.

More often than not, Assamese songs, especially folk songs are known to be a reflection of the society and the times of its composition (Hazarika, 2018) and compositions by artists like Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Angarag 'Papon' Mahanta, Zubeen Garg, and the like, and songs like "Manuhe Manuhor Baabe", by Bhupen Hazarika, "Bura Luit", "Jontro", and others have become iconic as they are representations of the human society and the landscape of Assam that hold true even today.

The current study focuses on the songs this land has composed and the experiences of the singers as composers and as performers of these songs.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Approach**

The current study adopted a social constructivist paradigm or the line of thought that believes that reality is constructed by the beliefs and values held by the society, and that it is constructed together by the people of the society (Amineh & Asl, 2015). The rationale for adopting this paradigm lies on the fact that

culture is a socially constructed phenomena (Kire & Rajkumar, 2017), and the current study was set in the cultural context of Assam.

## Research Design

The current study adopted a blend of exploratory design and case study design. The rationale for adopting an exploratory design was that it allowed the researcher to be open to various possibilities and because of the fact that very few researches has been done on the cultural industry of Assam on a global platform and leaves plenty of room to explore the nuances of this highly culturally rich region (Sharma, 2011). And the rationale for adopting the case study approach was that a significant amount of research has been done in the field of culture and about the concept of cultural industry, and this study shall dive deep into the case of cultural industry in Assam. Thus, the current study intended to explore the case of cultural industry in the state of Assam.

## Research Methods

To do justice to the social constructivist paradigm that the study adopted, the study adhered primarily to a qualitative approach to the methodology implemented as it enabled the researcher to highlight the nuances among the artists of the state, and their subjective experiences. However to understand the trends, quantitative aspects were also incorporated.

## Sample

Using the purposive method of sampling, the current study considered Assamese singers who compose their own music as part of the study.

## Research Activities

Since culture is known to be a factor that influences the perception of the people, which in turn influences their consumer behavior (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014), the study adopted a convergent approach to understand the interaction of music (the art), singers (the artist), and the consumers in a holistic sense. The current study, was conducted in three phases.

**Phase 1.** During the first phase, the focus was on the audience of Assamese music. Trend analysis of iconic songs by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Jayanta Hazarika, Zubeen Garg, Angarag 'Papon' Mahanta, and other prolific singers to understand the impact the songs have had on the people of the land was done. For this, the researcher observed the views and comments on the songs available on the social media platform of YouTube. The rationale for choosing YouTube as the platform to explore was that among all the social media platforms, YouTube is the only platform where official music labels list out their tracks and the artists also use this platform to showcase their complete tracks. The researcher considered all the copies of a song, except remixes and renditions by other singers.

**Phase 2.** During this phase, the focus of the research was on the singers as artists and content creators. This phase explored their journey as performers and how the interaction with their audience impacts them on a human level. The researcher analyzed pre-recorded interview conversations with 12 eminent Assamese singers who compose their own music to understand their journey as members of the cultural industry of Assam (links to the resources can be found in Appendix 1).

**Phase 3.** During the final phase, focus was on the convergence of the consumer and performer experiences to gain a holistic understanding of the impact songs have on the lives of both the performer and the audience.

### Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyze the interview content and descriptive statistics was used to understand the trends of the content studied for the research.

### Results and Findings

Over the ages Assamese songs and music have gone through different phases of evolution and transformation marked by the national, humanitarian and aesthetic spirit of the Assamese people. And now the Assamese songs have broken the confinement of time and place, and claimed a universal pedestal.

### Art Specific Inquiry

*Charyapada*, which can be dated back to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, can be considered as the oldest Assamese song recorded in written format. However, the oldest genre of Assamese music that gained mass appeal would

be the Borgeet format, a form of Assamese music pioneered by the Vaishnava saint, Sankardev. From then, the music of the land has evolved by leaps and bound. The transition can be mainly seen as spiritual to patriotic and love for the land to romance to graphic depiction of social scenarios (Konwar & Deka, 2015). From the current study, it was found that the audience primarily access the musical content in the form of digital format from the internet (either downloading or streaming using services like Spotify and YouTube), but the demand for live performances still exists as people enjoy the experience of attending concerts. Romantic and patriotic songs are seen to have the highest level of popularity, especially among the youth.

### **Content Specific Inquiry**

With regard to the content, findings indicate that one thing that has remained constant over the decades is that the artists primarily draw inspiration for their work from the geo-political environment around them. Hence, even though while artists like Jayanta Hazarika and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika highlighted the youth joining the Assam movement, and singers of the current generation like Zubeen Garg compose songs on corruption and the fast-paced life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, certain themes like romance and appreciation of natural beauty have remained constant till date. It has also been observed that even though artists like Dr. Bhupen Hazarika did compose their work in multiple languages like Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and English, newer generations of singers are more actively experimenting with fusion and creating forms of Assamese music that have a mass appeal on a national and international scale. Shankuraj Konwar took it a step forward when he sang “Hiya Tho”, a song that has gibberish lyrics and a tune that resembles the hymns of the Namghars of Assam, for the critically acclaimed web series, Panchayat.

### **Audience Specific Inquiry**

It is observed that songs focusing on themes that either highlight the pride of the land or touches upon powerful emotions like romance have the highest viewership regardless of the singer who sang the song. It is also observed that the songs of artists like Dr. Bhupen Hazarika and Bishnu Prasad Rabha strike a sense of pride among the listeners, especially among Assamese listeners who are not in Assam (and likely been away from their motherland for a substantial amount of time). Among the singers of the new generation like Zubeen Garg,



Angarag Papon Mahanta, Neel Akash Das, and Shankuraj Konwar, it is observed that a substantial segment of their audience does not know Assamese, but still appreciate their songs and regularly keep themselves (the audience) updated with their latest songs. This is most likely because of their presence in Bollywood and other Hindi content in mainstream entertainment.

### Culture Specific Inquiry

It is observed that the socio-cultural environment has been a source of inspiration for the content of all the artists. Another aspect of culture that play a huge role for the artists are the festivals like Bihu and Namami Brahmaputra. The primary reason why these festivals are highly sought after by the artists is because these festivals are an excuse for the public to come out of their houses and bond with their loved ones, and where there is a presence of public in large numbers, is always a ripe opportunity for artists to present their content. Singer, composer, and music director, Zubeen Garg did raise the point that Bihu is a musical and cultural festival that should not be bound by any linguistic barriers and should be a platform for every artist and their artforms. This is a sentiment that arose for he had been criticized for singing Hindi songs during Bihu celebrations.

### Artist Specific Inquiry

The artists from the various ages are seen to have strived to bring Assamese music to a global platform. To do so, they have adopted various means like national and international concerts, national and international collaborations, and ensuring that their work are able to live up to the evolving tastes of their audience.

**Personality sketch.** All the artists considered for the study are passionate about their profession and always keep a student mentality that allows them to constantly upgrade themselves. Almost all the artists are seen to have a sense of perfectionism that they display differently; while some focus on quality over quantity, some are conscious of about being linguistically correct, while others challenge themselves to come up with unique content. The artists are also seen to hold great reverence for their gurus and mentors who helped them become who they are.

**Mental health.** Many of the artists, including Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Angarag Papon Mahanta, Zubeen Garg, and Manjyotsna Mahanta expressed the significance of taking care of one's mental health and how important it is for artists to be emotionally intelligent and develop emotional resilience. It has also been observed that stress is a significant concern among artists and some of the practices shared by the artists include positive affirmations and cognitive restructuring.

**Relationship with other artists.** All the artists have unanimously expressed the need to collaborate and the importance of teamwork. It is also observed that senior artists adopt the role of mentors for the younger generation. During his time, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika used to scout for new talent and provide them opportunities to come to the forefront, and during current times, this responsibility is shouldered by artists like Zubeen Garg, Joi Barua, and Angarag Papon Mahanta, who have cemented their presence over the years.

**Social responsibility.** All the artists have acknowledged that it is their responsibility and moral obligation to use their art and their status to bring for positive change in the society. Stalwarts like Jayanta Hazarika and Dr. Bhupen used their influence to inspire people during the Assam Movement. Even though there might not be as big a cause to strive for during the current times, the artists of the current generation stand for causes like environmental protection, anti-corruption, and preservation of Assamese culture. Nilotpal Bora had expressed that he hopes to help his listeners cope better in life through his work.

**Artist as an entrepreneur.** Even though Zubeen Garg explicitly mentioned that because of his poor business acumen, he prefers not to consider music as his profession, all the artists, including Zubeen himself, have displayed strong entrepreneurial traits. New age artists like Dikshu Sarma and Shankuraj Konwar also highlighted the power of social media as a tool for reaching out to one's audience and making their work visible on a global scale.

**Challenges.** One of the challenges shared by the artists is of visibility. To address this concern, the remedy provided is to proactively reach out the audience and make one's work visible to them, for if the audience is not aware of their creation, their hard-work will continue to go unnoticed. Another challenge that was highlighted was that of rejection, by either the audience, or by production houses, and for this the remedy that was provided was to change one's attitude towards failure and see every experience as an opportunity to learn and grow. Another challenge brought out was of making a mark and being unique. For this, most of the

artists expressed that they have adopted experimentation to create new musical artforms and cross-cultural collaborations have also helped them overcome their creative blocks.

### **Platform Specific Inquiry**

Bihu and Durga Puja have always been the two biggest festivals as musical extravaganzas are organized. In 2017, a new cultural festival, Namami Brahmaputra was launched to celebrate the mighty Brahmaputra, and this festival has been a major platform for the artists to showcase their work. Another major platform that has been known to showcase the talent of the Assamese artists is the Prag Cine Awards organized by the Assamese news channel, Prag News, which also is known to highlight the works of eminent as well as upcoming artists of the land.

**The age of internet.** As observed during the data collection phase of the current study, and also as expressed by many artists, YouTube has become, especially during this period of lockdown one of the biggest platforms for an artist to showcase their talent and reach out to a global audience. With the advent of the age of internet, platforms like Spotify and Saavn have become a powerful medium to display their art. Following the trend, Tezpur based organization, Xomoy, has recently launched their app, Baahi to exclusively cater to Assamese artists and Assamese music.

**Training the new generation.** Even though not a platform to perform, artists have acknowledged the importance of setting up training institutes to provide a platform to the upcoming singers to receive nurturance and tutelage from the best in the industry.

### **Future scope of research**

The lockdown conditions prevented the researcher from exploring the first-hand experiences of the audiences and this leaves a scope for future research to explore; the subjective experiences of consuming various forms of Assamese music. The current study considered YouTube as a platform, future research can explore other social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Future research can also explore the perspective of the shareholder of the other pillars of the cultural industry, i.e., the production houses, news agencies, festivals like Namami Brahmaputra, and online platforms like Baahi.

## Conclusion

Assamese music has been an integral component of the Assamese culture and the artists have played a pivotal role in establishing music as a tool for positive social change. As time progresses, a greater section of the national and international population is not only getting a taste of Assamese music, but also appreciating it, and soon, through the new age artists, Assamese music will reach the same status as English and Hindi music. The researcher simply hopes that dreams that the artists considered for the study see are fulfilled soon.

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