

Where the Hills Sing: The Music and Dance of Assam

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*There are places you visit. And then there are places you feel.
Assam is one of them.*

Beyond the famous tea gardens and misty river valleys, there is a culture built on rhythm - a state where music and dance are not separate from daily life but woven through it. Devotional songs sung in monasteries for six hundred years. Classical dance that survived inside river-island monasteries when the outside world forgot about it. Folk traditions carried by the communities who work the tea gardens. And a modern music scene whose voices are known across India.

To understand Assam, you have to listen to it.

Sattriya: A Classical Dance from a River Island

Sattriya is one of the eight classical dance forms officially recognised by India's Sangeet Natak Akademi - and it is the only one with a fully monastic origin. It was created in the 15th century by the saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardev as part of his Neo-Vaishnavite movement, a Bhakti-era tradition centred on devotion to Krishna.

For more than 500 years, Sattriya was performed almost exclusively by celibate male monks called bhokots, inside the satras - the monasteries Sankardev and his disciples established across Assam, most famously on Majuli, the world's largest inhabited river island. Only in the second half of the 20th century did the form move out of the satras and onto public stages. Sangeet Natak Akademi formally recognised it as a classical Indian dance in November 2000.

A Sattriya performance is built on the rhythmic conversation between the khol - a distinctive two-faced clay-and-wood drum - and the brass taal cymbals, set against the devotional songs known as Borgeet, composed by Sankardev and his disciple Madhavdev. Visitors to Majuli today can still watch this tradition practised exactly as it has been for centuries, in the same prayer halls where it began.

Borgeet and the Sound of the Satras

If Sattriya is the body of Assam's devotional tradition, Borgeet is its voice.

Borgeet - literally 'great songs' - are devotional compositions written by Sankardev and Madhavdev in the 15th and 16th centuries, set to specific ragas and talas. They are sung in the satras every day as part of monastic worship, and the tradition has been preserved across generations of monks. To sit in a namghar (prayer hall) on Majuli at dusk and hear Borgeet sung is to experience a musical lineage that has run unbroken for half a millennium.

Bihu: The Music of Spring

No conversation about Assamese music can skip Bihu - but Bihu is one expression of the state's musical life, not the whole of it.

The Bihu most visitors encounter is Rongali (or Bohag) Bihu, celebrated in mid-April to mark the Assamese new year. The deep beat of the dhol drum, the high call of the pepa horn carved from buffalo horn, the wooden gogona jaw harp, and the rhythmic taal cymbals form the backbone of the sound. Women in mekhela sador dance the Bihu Naas while men play and sing the Bihugeet - folk songs whose oldest verses speak openly of love, courtship, and the cycles of the land.

During Bohag Bihu, small groups of men called husoris go house to house singing blessings to each family, receiving food and offerings in return. Two other Bihus mark different points in the agricultural year: the somber Kongali Bihu in October, when oil lamps are lit in the paddy fields, and the harvest feast of Bhogali Bihu in January.

Jhumur and the Music of the Tea Gardens

Walk into any tea-garden village in Upper Assam during a celebration and you will hear something quite different from Bihu.

Jhumur is the song and dance tradition of Assam's tea-garden communities - the descendants of workers brought to Assam from regions of present-day Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal in the late 19th century. The rhythms carry traces of those original homelands, but more than a century in Assam has given Jhumur its own character. Performed in lines and circles, accompanied by madal drums and dhols, the songs touch on love, labour, longing, and the particular life of the gardens.

Jhumur is one of the most important and underrecognised musical traditions in Assam. To hear it performed by the people whose history is bound up in it is to hear a side of the state most outside visitors never encounter.

Goalpariya Lokgeet and Other Folk Streams

West of the Brahmaputra heartland, the Goalpara region has its own folk tradition: Goalpariya lokgeet, the songs of mahout elephant-keepers, boatmen, and farmers. The genre was carried to a national audience in the 20th century by the legendary singer Pratima Barua Pandey, whose recordings of Hastir Kanya and other folk songs remain touchstones of Assamese music.

Kamrupi lokgeet from the western Assam belt, Bongeet, Tokari geet, Ojapali narrative storytelling - the state's folk repertoire runs much deeper than any single visit can cover. Each region of Assam has its own songs, its own instruments, its own performance traditions.

A Living Modern Scene

Assamese music is not only history. It is also one of the most vibrant contemporary scenes in eastern India.

Bhupen Hazarika, the late polymath singer-songwriter, brought Assamese music to a national and international stage with songs that drew on folk traditions and addressed humanism, social justice, and the Brahmaputra itself. Zubeen Garg has shaped Assamese pop and film music for decades. Angarag 'Papon' Mahanta has carried Borgeet and folk forms into contemporary fusion and Bollywood playback.

Younger artists working in indie, fusion, and electronic music are now drawing on Borgeet ragas, Bihu rhythms, and Jhumur melodies in ways that keep the older traditions in conversation with the present.

Hearing It in Person

Recordings can only carry so much. The dhol drum sounds different when it is played three feet from you. Borgeet feels different when you hear it inside a namghar on Majuli. Jhumur means something different when it is sung by the people whose grandparents sang it before them, in the village where they live.

This is what makes Assam a place to experience rather than simply visit.

Experience the Music and Soul of Assam

At Purvi Discovery, our journeys are designed to bring travellers into the cultural life of Assam - from Sattriya performances in the satras of Majuli to Jhumur evenings in the tea-garden villages, and from Bihu celebrations in spring to the everyday music that fills homes and prayer halls.

Get in touch

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