

The Dramas of Sankaradeva: A Performing Art Par Excellence (As called *Ankiya Nat* or *Bhaona* in Assamese)

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 13 March 2019

Keywords

Sankaradeva, Performing, Art, *Bhaona*, Assamese, *Ankiya Nat*, Ahom.

ABSTRACT

The Vaishna saint, social reformer and a great playwright of Assam Sankaradeva was born in 1449 and became the polymath of 15th and 16th century. Sankaradeva was not only a saint, social reformer and playwright, but also was the inventor of various type of musical instruments and music composer. Similarly he was also recognized as the topmost executive and most original creator of Drama in Assamese culture. Sankaradeva used his literary works for evolution his Neo Vaishnava philosophy. He composed many literary works during his evolution. Among those, his great work Kritan Ghosha and Gunamala are may be mentionable. Sankaradeva wrote many dramas are like Cihna Yatra, Patni-prasad, Kalia-daman, Keli-gopal, Rukmini-haran, Parijat-haran, Sriram-Vijaya. Sankaradeva's dramas or as one act play called *Ankiya Nat* in Assamese literature. First dramatic spectacle presented by Sankaradeva was known as Cihna Yatra. It has been presented on stage by Sankaradeva himself in 1468. Sankaradeva has a great impact on Assamese drama or *Ankiya Nat*. The main feature of Sankaradeva's plays its style of presentation. These dramas are reflected by the presentation of paintings of seven Vaikunthas. Sankaradeva uses a way of explanation through his drama's actions which presented the deeper sense of Vaikuntha. Sankaradeva presented his drama as a form of *Bhauna* in Assamese society. And this paper is revealed how Sankaradeva's dramas played a vital role in reconstruction of Assamese literature. Sankaradeva make great effort to propogating importance of *Bhauna* in Assamese society. And also revealed the Sankaradeva's worked which created a great effort towards the uplifting mood of performing arts in and outside of Assam. Thus the paper is an attempting to reflect Sankaradeva's *Bhauna* in the present time as performing arts.

1. Introduction

The period covering the 14th and 16th century was a period of outburst in the field of religion and culture in Assam. It was a period when a religious resurgence was a pressing need. A novel kind of ideals on the liberal doctrine of *Bhakti* movement began to grow in different parts of India.

Kayasthas by broth, in Bordowa of Nagaon district of Assam, *Sankaradeva* (1449-1568) dreamt of a new shape in the religious, socio-cultural and literary life of the people of Assam. *Sankaradeva* started the revolution and his associates Madhavadeva made him glitter like the Moon amongst the twinkling Stars. It was a time when the *Sakta* religion strongly occupied a place among the leading men of the Hindu Society. The Ahom kings were perfectly *Sakta* devotees at that time. He met people who were *Saktas*, he argued with people who defended *Saktism*. So there was no atmosphere in the soil to sow the seed of Vaishnavism safely and certainly. His associates also had to suffer the fates of pains of failures on many occasions.

For this he started religious movement leading to manifold expressions in Art, Culture and Literature. Thus he made an attempt to Introduce Assam to India and whole of India to Assam. There are poets and composers, there are saints and religious preachers, there are musical masters and social reformers, but *Sankaradeva* was the genius in whom all these great qualities were rolled into one. Throughout his life *Sankaradeva* waged a relentless crusade against social evils like untouchability, casteism and religious persecution and

taught the lesson of Unity and Brotherhood. *Sankaradeva's* Vaishnavite movement aimed attaching the common people simple ways of living, equality of all men in the field of religion and practicing non-violence. At the same time, he through the simple way of congregational prayer (*Nam*) to one Supreme God in the form of Krishna, attempted to simplify the complicated and elaborate systems of rituals and practices suggested by Brahmanism to exploit common people in all possible ways.

At the age of nineteen, *Sankaradeva* conceptualized '*Sihna Yatra*' drama later in called *Bhaona*. With elements of age old puppetry items, *Deodhani*, *Ojapali Nitrya*, *Dhulia-Khulia Nacha* and *Kusangan* he was successful in creating a performing art form which could be performed by people with ease and finesse. The dramas of *Sankaradeva* are *Patni-Prasada*, *Kali-Damana*, *Keli-Gopal*, *Rukmini-Harana*, *Parijata-Harana* and *Ram-Vijaya*.

2. The Aim & Importance of the Study

The dramatic performance known as *Bhaona* (from the Sanskrit *Bhava*=Sentiment) introduced for the first time by *Sankaradeva* became increasingly popular with the progress of times. It has all the salient features of a performing art. The *Bhaona* performance at the beginning not only served as the medium of religious propaganda but also came to be a source of pleasure and recreation. Of late, however, the *Bhaona* performance has ceased to function as the medium of religious propaganda but its utility in giving aesthetic pleasure as a performing art to the modern day audience has not decreased.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the importance of *Bhaona* in the present time as a performing art. The study is also plans to at underscore the importance of *Bhaona* in Assamese Culture life by enumerating its ingredients and thereby making more people aware of this performing art in and outside Assam.

3. Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data gathered from sources like books, magazines, research papers, and the internet. The researcher has used historical technique of research combining both analytical and descriptive method.

4. Discussion

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica Performance Art is, "a time-based art form that typically features a live presentation to an audience or to onlookers (as on a /stage street) and draws on such arts as acting, poetry, music, dance, and painting. It is generally an event rather than an artefact, by nature ephemeral, though it is often recorded on video and by means of still photography."It can range from vocal and instrumental music, dance and theatre to pantomime, sung verse and beyond. It includes numerous cultural expressions that reflect men's imagination and that are also found, to a great extent, in many other indefinable cultural heritage domains. The most important performing art of *Sankaradeva*

known as '*Bhaona*' (called as *Ankia Nat* in its written form) is a unique mixture of Sanskrit drama, local performing art forms and various folk traditions of India prevailing at that period time. *Ankia Nat* or *Bhaona* transcends time and space and still performed with same fervour as it was done at its inception. Dramatis personae are culled from mythology yet made relevant with apt socio-cultural ethos. As a result the '*Nats*' were vibrant representation of contemporary milieus out served as a beacon in those/the time of social turmoil. It is a combination of different techniques and methods. The elements used since the selection of the *Ankia Nat* till the end of the performance of the *Bhaona* are known as art and craft of performance. The propagation of the greatness of Lord Krishna, Rama is the chief aim of any *Bhaona* performance. By incorporating various elements like selection of the spot for the performance, selection of performers, *Nat Mela* (starting the rehearsal), *Khola* (stage for the performance), *Aarkapor* (Pati/ Apati of Sanskrit drama, a white cloth screen used in front of the *Gayan –Bayan*), *Agnigargh* (bamboo torch at a height through which performers enter), *Ariyas* bigger flames emitting flash-light effects over the performing area), *Gayan-Bayan* (Singers and instrumental musicians), *Sutradhar* (Producer & running commentator of a *Bhaona* performance), *Sloka* (Hymn), *Geet* (song), *badya* (musical instruments), makeup of the performers, lighting system, actors and together with the audience make *Bhaona* a Performing Art Par Excellence.

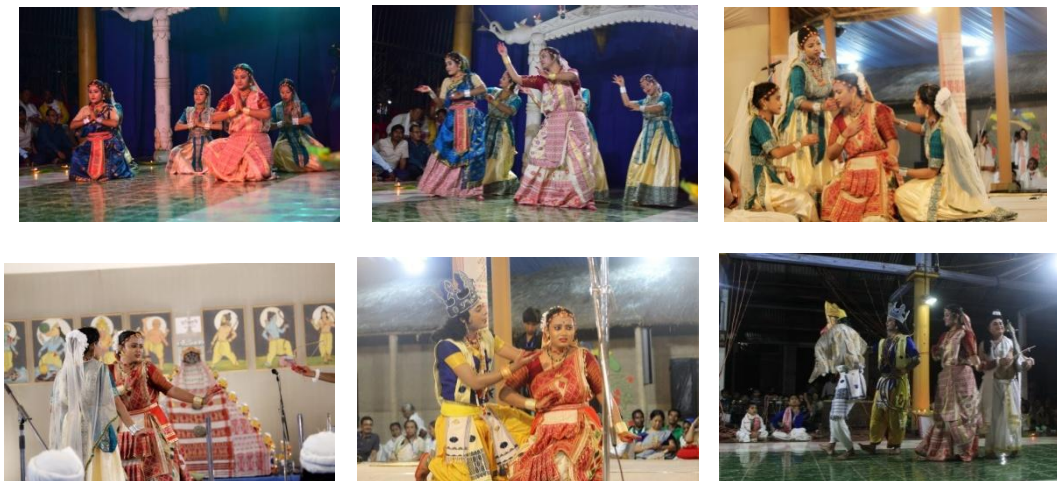


Fig.1 Performing Ankiya nat "Parijat Harana"

5. Place of Performance

Centres of such dramatic compositions and performances have been the *Sattras* (religious monasteries functioning as a living organizations for propagating and diffusing vaishnavite ideas), Written more with a religious motive than for any other reason, *Bhaona* performances were staged in the village *Namghar*, the prayer-hall on festive occasions like *Janmastami*, *Nandotsava*, *Dol-yatra*, *Rasa-purnima* and on Saints' days, *Bhada* month and during *Bihu* etc. Occasionally temporary sheds or *rabhas* are constructed for the *Bhaona* performance.

Nat Mela: (Opening function or starting the rehearsal)

Nat Mela is nothing but a ritualistic opening of the *Bhaona* rehearsal by selecting an auspicious day and offering

four betel nut and four betel leaf (*Tamula-Pana*) in *Sarai* (a platter or tray mounted on a leg).

Aakhora (Rehearsal):

After the day of the *Nat Mela* each evening is spent by the performers rehearsing the *bhaona* till the final performance. The final day's rehearsal is known as *Bor Aakhora* (final rehearsal). On the day of the *Bor Aakhora* too betel nut and betel leaf (*tamula-pana*) are offered to God for Blessing.

Bhaona Khola (stage of the drama):

The *Namghar* is a two-roofed thatched structure generally measuring more than fifty in length and is rectangular in shape like *Vikrista* as mentioned in the *Natyasastra*. Near by it, on one end is built a small house called *Manikuta* resembling *Garbhagriha* of a Hindu temple where an image or a scripture

is kept upon a *Singhasana* or a wooden throne. There are two sides of a *Manikut*. The side close to the entrance, forms the general auditorium called *Ranga Mandapa* where audience sit on mats or on the ground. Of the two rows of pillars, in the middle of the hall, seats near some are reserved for special visitors. About two thirds of the space between the rows of pillars makes the stage or *Ranga Bhumi*, and it has no raised platform.

Gayan-Bayan (Singers and instrumental musicians):

Before the opening of the performance the *Gayan-bayan* enter the *Khola* either in two separate groups or one after another. The performers become the cynosure of eyes as bright light radiates from the burning of *Aariyas* (cloth pieces soaked with oil and bound on the end of small bamboo or wooden stick). Number of the *Aariyas* vary from *Khola* to *Khola* from 6 to 21 depending upon the size of the stage .



Fig.2 Performance of Gayan-Bayan

Aar Kapor (Pati/ Apati of Sanskrit drama, a Borakapora or chelang kapora/white cloth screen used in front of the Gayan –Bayan):

In front of the *Gayan-bayan* two persons hold a white cloth screen and the same is withdrawn as soon as the *Gayan-*

Bayan is seated on their respective position. Other players also enter the *Khola* by lifting the *Aar Kapor*.

Agnigargh (A fire- arch):

A fire- arch called *Agnigargh* with nine lit earthen lamps is raised at the opposite end of *Guru Asana* .Nine earthen lamps metaphorically represent the nine *Bhaktis* of a vaisnavite devotee. Below this, a white curtain already mentioned as *Aar Kapor* is held by two persons. From behind the curtain the *Bar Bayan* (main singer) sings alas after which the curtain is removed and the *Gayan Bayan* begin their concert.



Fig.3 Agnigargh

Sutradhara (Producer & running commentator of a Bhaona performance):

The word *Sutradhara* was obviously derived from the Sanskrit drama. But the functions of *Sutradhara* in a *Bhaona* are different from those of his counterpart in a Sanskrit drama .Unlike his Sanskrit counterpart, he appears on the stage after the preliminaries are over and remains on the *Khola* from the start till the end of the performance and conducts the whole show with songs ,dances and commentaries. He recites the *Nandi* and other hymns, explains the purpose of the *Bhaona* performance, introduces the players, announces their entrances and exits and fills the gap in the action of the act by singing, dancing and narrating those parts of the performance which cannot be exhibited on the *Khola*.



Fig.4 Performance of Sutradhara

Sloka (Hymn), Geet (song), Bhattima (panegyric) and Badya (musical instruments):

The most striking feature in an Assamese *Bhaona* lies in the co-ordination and harmony if the four elements- song, rhythmic representation by dance, melody emanating from appropriate instruments, and dialogue. The lyrical nature of the *Ankia Nat* is abound in songs and verses of various forms. In a *Bhaona* performance all the characters move rhythmically from the start to end, in the form of dancing with appropriate steps, gestures and abhinaya postures. The entire narration of the story progresses through dances, and dancing is considered as one of the best art for awakening feeling or *Bhavas* (feelings). This dramatic performance consists mainly of the movements of the limbs, rhythm forming an essential part. The *Bhattimas* as we have seen some times are inserted in the *Bhaona* (dramas). But there are three kinds of *Bhattima* which are *Deva-Bhattima*, *Nat Bhattima* and *Raj Bhattima* etc.

An important feature of the *Bhaona* performance is the use of (*Mukha*)Masks. Masks are used by actors to represent characters other than human beings. They are normally meant to represent such appearances like ten heads of *Ravana*, the beak of the bird *Godura* and so on.

6. Language

The *Ankia Nats* were written in folk language which has been called Assamese *Brajabuli*; a curious mixture of Assamese, Hindi and Maithali. The intention was to make his art available and understood to a greater Pan Indian audience.

7. Conclusion

Sankaradeva's *Eak Saran Dharma* (religion which worships only one God, Krishna or Vishnu) greatly contributed to the growth and development of art and literature in Assam. *Bhaona*, religious spectacle, was one of its main off-shoots,

and it grew up in the wake of the spiritual tradition and the particular sentiment and temperament of the Assamese people. Unlike its Sanskrit counterpart which demanded a cultivated, critical and experienced audience, and which didn't admit the mass, the *Bhaona* performance of Assam is a type by itself, and an out and out a popular representation that breaks all social barriers and not only impart fun and frolic to the village folk with occasional recreation and diversion, but also acquaints them with the episodes from the epics and the *Puranas*.

In an age of artistic confinement to the privileged, when learning was innately for the rich and the famous, the *Bhaona* served as a powerful agency for disseminating religious and

ethical ideas to the common people as it is in itself the biggest achievement of *Sankaradeva's* dramatic representation.

In a word, it may be safe to say that *Sankaradeva's Bhaona* performance has been for more than five hundred years a source of delightful, inspiration, consolation and wisdom to the people of Assam. In spite of a changed outlook, shifting of ideals and birth of new literary forms, *Sankaradeva's Bhaona* performance has come to stay with us as a standard yardstick of grand poetical performance. Even today his *Ankiya Nats* are performed as *Bhaona*, *Bargits* are sung and *Kavyas* are read with delight and profit. We, the Assamese people, treasure them as a part of our cultural and spiritual legacy.

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