

Ankiya Bhaona and Its Impact on the Socio-Cultural Life of Assam

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ABSTRACT: Sankardeva was the pioneer of the Cultural renaissance of medieval Assam and Ankiya Bhaona was one of his notable creations. Ankiya Naat denotes one-act plays while Ankiya Bhaona is the performance of these plays. This theatrical form became increasingly popular with the masses, centering around the themes from the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. Though this institution is used as a channel to propagate religious faith, but it played a revolutionary role in the cultural renaissance of medieval Assam through its impact on each dimension of Assamese Society including Language, Literature and Culture. These contributions of Ankiya Bhaona are discussed in this paper.

Keywords : Ankiya Bhaona, Assam, Assamese, Culture, Society, Sankardeva

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the unique and powerful creations of Sankardeva for propagation of Neo- Vaishnavism in Assam is Ankiya naat (traditional Assamese one act plays) and staging of this naat (drama) is known as Ankiya Bhaona. Sankardeva (1449-1568) was the pioneer of the cultural renaissance of Medieval Assam who introduced Neo-Vaishnavism. He was not only a propagator of a religious ideology but also had huge contributions to the socio-religious and the cultural life of medieval Assam. Sankardeva introduced Ankiya Bhaona as a medium of spreading the Vaisnavite ideology among the upper as well as root level of Assamese Society and he gave importance to the interest of the common people. Actually, his writings represent his liberal and humanistic Social perspective to build a progressive society and the Ankiya Bhaona represents his ideology and objectives in proper sense. India has a great history of Sanskrit drama. Sanskrit dramas/plays were written and performed basically among the elite class and therefore most of the people of the society deprived of the artistic pleasure of so-called elite culture. In this situation, Sankardeva realized that Ankiya Bhaona should be released from the limitation of Sanskrit drama to make it popular among the society. Though he took some elements from Sanskrit drama he followed traditional Indian and Assamese dramatic forms as models and he was followed by his immediate disciple Madhabdeva and other writer. And so, as an art-form Ankiya Bhaona became capable of making a huge impact on Assamese Society from medieval era to till date. In this paper it is tried to focus on the impact of Ankiya Bhaona on the cultural and social life of Assam.

1.1 Aims and objectives of the Study

- Most of the Studies on Ankiya Naat focused only on the literary and cultural value of Ankiya Naat. But in this study it is aimed to find its impact on Assamese society through sociological perspective.
- Sankardev was the pioneer of The Cultural Renaissance of Medieval Assam and Ankiya Bhaona was one of his notable creations, which has a great contribution towards each dimension of Assamese Culture and Society. These contributions of Ankiya Bhaona are discussed in this paper.
- Ankiya Bhaona is a great tradition of Assam. It should be preserved and practiced. The study is aimed at increasing consciousness of the people about the importance of Ankiya bhaona in Assamese Culture.

1.2 Methodology

This paper is based on secondary data collected from different sources like research papers, research articles etc. published in journals, periodicals, books and internet. The paper is descriptive in nature which is based on historical method of research.

II. ANKIYA NAAT AND ANKIYA BHAONA – AN INTRODUCTION

Ankiya Naat is a kind of Religious one-act play with special art-form which is written in Vaisnavite period in Assam. Sankardeva started the history of Assamese drama and staged in early 16th Century. The plays written by Sankardeva are Chihna Yatra, Kaliya Daman, Patni Prasad, Keligopal, Rukmini Haran, Parijat Haran and Ram Bijay. After Sankardeva, his disciple Madhabdeva's contribution towards this field was highly

remarkable. It is to be mentioned that Sankardeva did not name those plays as Ankiya Naat himself. His followers used this term to indicate the new dramatic tradition of Assam.

Performance of Ankiya Naat is called Ankiya Bhaona. Bhaona means Acting. It is a theatrical form introduced for the first time by Sankardeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses, centering around the themes from the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana. Chihnayatra, performed and organized by Sankardeva was the first bhaona-performance. After finishing schooling Sankardeva performed this play in 1468 BC. Chinayatra brought about a new era in the cultural history of India. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. There is no any evidence of drama tradition in regional Indian Language before Sankardeva. According to Charat Puthi (Hagiography of Vaisnava Saints), This Bhaona was held for seven days and seven nights and the performance of Sankardeva delighted the audience utmost. During the time of introduction of Ankiya Naat in Assam by Shankardev and Madhabdev most of the people were illiterate. As they were unable to read the texts they enjoyed the performances a lot and got influenced by them greatly. As a performing Art, Ankiya Naat has a huge impact on Assamese Society. In Charita Puthi, the Charitkar mentioned about a lot of Yatra-Bhaona. According to Charita Puthi Madhabdeva organised Din Bhaona (Bhaona performed during day-time) and Rati Bhaona (Bhaona performed during Night-time) on the occasion of Guru Kirtana (Special Recitation Program to worship the Spiritual teacher). In Ahom Era, Ankiya Bhaona got immense popularity in the Assamese Society. As mentioned in the book Asamiya Natya Sahityar Jilingoni in the Ahom Era, Ankiya Bhaona became vastly popular and was organized frequently. During the reign of Ahom Emperor Swargodeu Rajeswar Singha, the king of Kachar and Manipur visited the Ahom Kingdom and in their respect Ravana Badha Bhaona was performed in the palace. In this play Deka Baruah (One of the Ministers of Ahom Kingdom) performed as Ostad. Approximately seven hundred audiences gathered there. In Gaurinath Singha's Period (1780-1795) Padmavati Haran Bhaona was performed in king's palace. The organizer of that bhaona was the son of Na-Gohain (Minister). The Mahanta (saint) of Bareghar Satra (Religious institution) performed Rukmini Haran Bhaona in presence of King Kamaleswar Singha, which had been performed for four days.

The Vaisnavite Satra institution of Assam played a vital role in spreading Ankiya Bhaona. 'In Assamese Vaisnavism, xatra has over the years evolved to mean a monastery or a habitat where Vaishnavites reside or gather to recite and listen to prayers to the lord and participate in religious and cultural activities.' Maheswar Neog narrated in his book Sankardeva-The great Integrator as - In Satras as well as in villages, the large prayer hall (Nam-Ghar) serves the purposes of the stage for dramatic performance (Bhaona) and of the auditorium where there are movable walls of a prayer hall made of bamboo and reed, such walls are removed and the roof on the sides in extended with post temporary sheds in order to provide space in addition to the aisles. If, however, the walls cannot be removed, a large pandal (rabha), generally of an oblong shape, is raised in an open field. Madhabdeva has such a rabha raised in a field near Sundaridiya where Govardhan-Yatra was to be represented.

Following the tradition of Sankardeva, later it became compulsory to write a naat (play) for every Satradhikar (Head of the Satra) and Ankiya Bhaonas were frequently performed. Before Modern proscenium theatre Ankiya Naats were one of the powerful media of enjoyment and popular field to practice music, dance and recitation. After beginning of the Modern drama and proscenium stage the rate of performance of Ankiya Bhaona decreased, but still Ankiya Bhaona has a huge impact on the rural society of Assam. On the other hand, Assamese Bhaona (where the script of the Bhaona is written in Assamese Language) also performed with Ankiya Bhaona simultaneously. Now-a-days several organizations and Satras play vital roles in organizing Ankiya Bhaona. Bhaona of Nagaon district of Assam and Barechaharia Bhaona of Jamugurihaat (in Sonitpur district of Assam) are examples of such Bhaona. A lot of State level Naat-Bhaona Samaruhas (Exhibition of Bhaona) are also organized to preserve and practice the great tradition. Various efforts have been made by Sangeet Natak Akademi Sattriya Kendra, Asom Satra Mahasabha and the Srimanta Sankardev Foundation to popularize the traditional Ankiya Bhaona by organizing annual Bhaona festivals.

III. IMPACT OF ANKIYA BHAONA ON SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF ASSAM

The main objective of Ankiya Bhaona is to attract the audience of Assam toward religious and devotional aspects by glorifying lord Krishna or Bishnu projecting his deeds through visual media. Ankiya Bhaona entertains the audience and attracts their minds towards the Religious faith of Vaisnavite Bhagawati Dharma (Religion). Though this institution is used as a channel to propagate religious faith the impact of this culture is found in each and every dimension of socio-cultural life of Assam as follows:

3.1 Religious and Moral Impact

It has already mentioned that the main objective of Ankiya Bhaona was to spread neo-vaisnavism and therefore Anikiya Bhaona is considered as a religious act. Sankardeva was born in an unstable period of history. In Assam, the 15th century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. On the other hand

constant friction and conflict of supremacy among powers was the order of the day. Saktisim bordering on extreme Tantricism, was also widely prevalent. The followers of these cults were all found indulging in evil practices like animal and sometimes even human sacrifices. Against this backdrop Sankardeva appeared on the scene and introduced Neo-Vaisnavite Philosophy. To popularize the philosophy he used various art-forms including Ankiya Bhaona and this medium instantly became popular among the society and started spreading the Vaisnavite philosophy of humanity and brotherhood. On the other hand the performance of the Bhaona attracted people in large numbers and may have served as a vehicle for value education, which was imbibed by young and old, and helped form the moral fabric of society at that time.

3.2 Impact on Social-Structure

The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement initiated by Sankardeva in Assam in the latter half of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in Literature as well as in the vocal and visual Arts. The movement was unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of impact. It started a missionary note by working on uplifting the backward classes and minimization of rigors of caste distinctions. The peripheral groups including the so-called untouchables and backward classes and tribes were taken into the new fraternity. People from all tribes and caste took part in the Bhaona performance. The most notable creation of Sankardeva was Namghar (Prayer hall), which he used for praying and chanting the lord. He practiced Bhaona observation and religious discussion in the Namghar. Gradually it became the nerve centre of the rural culture of Assam. It may be noted that the Neo-Vaishnavism which was propagated by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva was based on the egalitarian philosophy. However, point to fact that the neo-Vaishnavism wanted to make a society based on the ideal of caste equality and harmony. Sankardeva also vigorously opposed to the untouchability. It may be noted that while Sankardeva wanted to preach his religious-cum-social agenda among the masses, the society of Assam had composed with various heterogeneous tribes and castes. Therefore, the society had been a fertile field for Sankardeva and his Vaishnavism followers to preach their ideology. Moreover, Sankardeva, who preached a doctrine of “universal social brotherhood”, created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse castes, communities, and creeds. Sankardeva’s objective to make a society of equality and harmony is reflected in Ankiya Bhaona. Bhaona unites the people in Namghar or Satra and teach them to work friendly where there is no place for caste discrimination. Anybody from any ethnic group or caste can take part in Bhaona. The role of Namghar in Assamese Society is highly remarkable. In his book Sankardeva Bimal Phukan mentioned Naam Ghar or Kirtana Ghar as single most outstanding legacy for the Assamese people. An epitome of simplicity Naam Ghar has been the cornerstone of Assam’s socio-religious structure for over half a millennium. The corporate life of an Assamese village moves cantering round the village Namghar. The Namghar become the centre of cultural activities and in making Namghar the centre Ankiya Bhaona has an important role.

3.3 Linguistic Impact:

One of the specific characteristics of Ankiya Bhaona was use of Brajavali language. The language was created by mixing the Maithili and Awahatti words with those of the Assamese language in its mode and style of spoken and written expressions. However some slight influence of Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Brajabhasa is also noticed in Brajavali language. By listening and practicing the Brajavali language the people of Assam got knowledge about the North Indian Languages and lots of North Indian words entered in Assamese vocabulary.

3.4 Impact on Social Status

In Assamese Society, Ankiya Naat Bhaona also became a medium to gain social status. The artists of Bhaona got high respect in the society and gradually some artistic communities based on Ankiya culture were formed in Assam. One of such communities was Kirtania aatoi. People belonging to this community were involved in recitation. Several surnames of Assamese society were created such as Gayan, Bayan, Borbayan, Pathak based on the Neo-Vaisnavite culture. To become a Satradhikar it was compulsory to write an Ankiya Naat in some Satras. It shows how Ankiya Naat-Bhaona had an important role in the society.

3.5 Impact on Rural-Economy

Ankiya Bhaona has a positive impact on rural economy of Assam. Artists were involved in producing equipments, accessories, cosmetics, masks, costumes and musical instruments and such other things that are required for the plays. On the basis of these equipments some small industry were formed and the people got the economic opportunities. Even in the present day scenario, Ankiya Bhaona provides sources of earning to some people in the society. Based on this institution, groups of musicians Gayana-Bayana (Instrument players) were also formed who performed in different programs.

3.6 Impact on dance-form

Different types of dance-form (Nas) s are used in Ankiya Bhaona such as Gayan Bayan, Sutradhari Nas, Gosai Prebesh Nas etc. Sankardeva drew elements from various folk and ethnic traditions around him, and refined them to create dance form. One of the eight principal classical Indian dances, Xatriya dance is originated from Ankiya Bhaona.

Xatriya dance began primarily as an accompaniment to Sankardeva's ankiya nat. Like kuchipudi and kathakali, xatriya dance is born of the dramatic tradition, the characters use dance movements to illustrate various bhavas (sentiment) and rasas(flavor). The abhinaya (acting) is indispensable but bhakti is the object or goal of the entire performance. Besides Xatriya dance form the Gayan Bayan dance has also an important place in Assamese culture. In this way, Ankiya Bhaona created a new trend of Assamese dance based on classical and ethnic dance-form.

3.7 Impact on Music

Music is an integral part of Ankiya Bhaona. In his six plays, Sankardeva includes one hundred and nineteen songs like Bhatima, Borgeet etc. Sankardeva introduced raga-based classical music form in Assam through Ankiya Bhaona and other medium. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva used classical pan-Indian ragas in their compositions. Together, that worked with more than thirty ragas, the more popular ones being Dhanashri, Asowari, Kalyan, Gauri and Basanta. Bargeet, The devotional songs composed by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva create a new trend in the history of music in Assam.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is seen that the impact of Ankiya Bhaona on the socio-religious and cultural life of medieval Assam is noteworthy. Ankiya Bhaona played a revolutionary role in the cultural renaissance of medieval Assam through its impact on each dimension of Assamese Society including Language, Literature and Culture. Deep study in this field may discover new dimension of Cultural history of Assam.

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