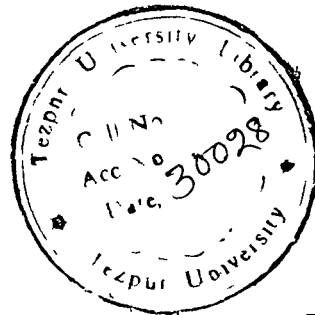
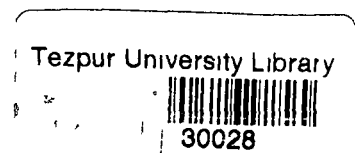


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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
IN THE PERFORMANCE OF BHĀONĀ: A STUDY WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MĀTRBHĀṢĀR BHĀONĀ

*A thesis submitted for the award of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

by

MAYURI BORDOLOI



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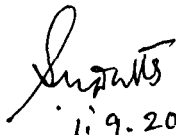
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Certificate

Certified that this thesis, 'CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF BHĀONĀ: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MĀTRBHĀṢAR BHĀONĀ' submitted by Ms. Mayuri Bordoloi, M.A., for the award of the Ph.D. Degree, is a bonafide record of the research work done by her under my supervision during her period of study at Tezpur University for the Degree, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or other similar title, and that it is her original work done independently. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged in the thesis.


1.9.2004
(Sunil Kumar Dutta)

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The common scholarly convention of writing Romanized Sanskrit texts is followed in this work for transliteration of Assamese and Sanskrit words. However, such words, where diacritical marks are used, exclude the names of places and persons other than Vaisnavite Gurus. In case of direct references, such words are reproduced as they appear in the original texts.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic activity is one of the cultural universals of mankind. As such, the art of drama or theatre is as old as human civilization and, the written history of this art is the history of mankind¹. It envelops an entire gamut of human activities. 'Lokasya Charitam'---human life in all its complexity---is considered to be the subject of drama².

A 'drama', as a performing art, is an execution of actions with dialogues, representing a composition in verse or prose which intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions. It, irrespective of its form, sacred or secular, has never failed to make its powerful appeal to man. Every nation and every race have their own dramatic history, and, so has India.

India has a rich cultural legacy with multiplicity of traditions comprising a multitude of patterns of performing arts, which are instable in nature with the tendency of change over the period

of time. This vast spectrum of performance genres is a reflection of its linguistic, cultural and religious diversities. In spite of the fact, the number and complexities of the genres have been sustained by a remarkable historical continuity.

There are many layers of influences which shape the complex cultural profile of India. They are: the classical tradition which is ascribed to the Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*; the rites and rituals as practices belonging to ancient belief systems; the folk cultures welded to village settings and finally; the modern or urban environment. Although, it is not easy to categorize the traditions of Indian dramatic performance in any absolute form, however, an attempt has been made to classify as the following, viz., the classical, the ritual, the devotional, the folk popular and the modern. But, these are not independent; any form of performance may combine features of other forms. For instance, a particular folk or classical genre may have devotional or ritual characteristics.

The study of a cultural event, as universal and as multifarious as the Indian dramatic art with its pervasive influences it exercises on a society, is always of great significance.

The present study is an attempt to investigate the dramatic performance of Assam, known as, *Añkīyā Bhāonā* ---its continuity and changes in the recent period. Special emphasis has been given to *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* as its significant emergent form of the recent period. In brief, this study deals with the historical background of the Assamese dramatic tradition .with the evolution of *Añkīyā Bhāonā* followed by the development of *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*.

Assam has a distinctive place in the milieu of the traditional performing arts of India. The *Añkīyā Bhāonā* as a devotional performance was initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, the preceptor of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. He created this art form as a medium of propagating his faith. It is known as *Añkīyā*, as it is a one-act play. The *Añkīyā Nāṭ* designates the script and the term, *Bhāonā* refer to the 'representation of a drama'. Śaṅkaradeva proved his rare stroke of genius with the blending of religious with the artistic. Moreover, his genius skill is also revealed by the fact that, in his *Añkīyā Nāṭs*, he could evolve a dramatic form that combined in itself the traditions of classical Sanskrit drama as well as indigenous dramatic and semi-dramatic modes.

This dramatic tradition has been maintained and developed by the Vaiṣṇavite leaders following Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the latter being the principal disciple of the former.

In the later periods, many transformations became apparent in this performance tradition. The consequence of the new developments within the tradition is the evolution of a variety of forms. And, *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* is such an emergent form that developed as a result of gradual infiltration of secular elements and other changes along with the change of language in the traditional practice.

Today, the diversity in the dramatic tradition is innumerable and, is at present, existing in a multilayered situation. In a performance study, the concept of emergence is important to comprehend the exclusivity in the performance within the context as a generalized cultural system in a community³. This 'emergent quality⁴' is very well perceivable in the performance of *Bhāonā*.

This study, deals with the changes that crop up into the tradition of *Aṅkīyā Bhāonā*, since its evolution till the recent period and the factors that determine such changes and its implication. In

brief, the study is an endeavor to reflect the present scenario of the performance-tradition.

It is a comparative study, where changes and the diversifications within the traditional form have been identified with the analysis of the past and the present tradition as well as its prevalence in a varied platform.

The study is based mainly on first-hand field observations rather than secondary sources. A number of written *Nāṭs* (scripts) has been collected and live performances of *Bhāonā* have been observed with audio and photographic documentations. The study also involved in-depth interviews and discussions with persons who are engaged to this tradition either actively or passively.

Bhāonā is more prevalent in the upper and central part of Assam. Therefore, the field of this study covers the places from the districts of Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar and Dibrugarh. Both rural and urban areas are taken into consideration while selecting the places, as, rural areas are supposed to be comparatively less influenced by any contemporary change than the urban areas which are more inclined to changes. Thus, to have an over-all estimate of

the changes in the tradition, a random selection of the places---both rural and urban has been made as the field of study.

The study of a performance and, that's too, in a transitional period, is actually a challenge. In fact, it is difficult to make a concrete interpretation of an issue which have both the traditional continuity and the contemporary changes.

In spite of the complexities that typify the performance-tradition of *Bhāonā*, the study is an attempt to make a perception of the traditional continuity with the continuous transformations.

Notes

¹ Siddheswar Chattopaddhyay, *Theatre in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993) 81.

² M.L. Varadpande, *Traditions of Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1978) 6.

³ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1984) 37.

⁴ *ibid*, 37.

Chapter 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DRAMATIC TRADITION OF ASSAM

In the dramatic history of Assam, the *Ankīyā Bhāonā*, created by Śaṅkaradeva, the preceptor of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, has great significance. He has greatly contributed to the growth of Assamese art and literature. *Ankīyā Bhāonā*, the dramatic compositions and the religious spectacle was one of his unique creations and the greatest hallmark at the level of his artistic creativity. It is conceived as a form of social art and as a medium of propagation of the Bhakti movement initiated by him. This highly stylized art form, combining music, dance and drama, plays a pivotal role in the history of the dramatic art as well as in the socio-cultural sphere of Assam. There have been no specific specimens of full-fledged drama, prior to the advent of Śaṅkaradeva, although, it is said that the tradition of performing art might have been there from the very old time. The drama proper has started with the evolution of *Ankīyā Nāṭ*, as such, he is

regarded as the father of the Assamese drama and dramaturgy¹. Besides propagating the faith among the masses, *Añkīyā Bhāonā*, stands as the touchstone for the tradition of drama in Assam.

Assam had a glorious heritage of performing art which is nurtured and maintained till today. Before the evolution of *Añkīyā Bhāonā*, the people of Assam were not entirely deprived of the entertainment of performing art. There are evidences of the existence of various indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic art forms prevailed in earlier Assam. Such forms are the *Ojā-pāli*, *Kuśān Gān*, *Bhāri Gān*, *Dhuliyā Bhāonā*, *Khuliyā Bhāonā*, *Putalā-nāc* (Puppetry), *Deodhani* performance and *Naṭ-naṭī nāc*. Many scholars are of the view that, Śaṅkaradeva drew inspiration from many of these indigenous forms, which can be traced back to much earlier times. In this connection, Dr. Kesavananda Deva Goswami says:

“Sankardeva seemed to have made a synthetic texture from those elements in shaping his dramatic representations. A fine binding of those existing forms with his own imagination made this institution quite novel and most attractive.”²

Kaliram Medhi in the 'Introduction' of *Aṅkāvalī*, has laid stress on the influence of these indigenous performances particularly, the *Ojā-pāli* upon the evolution of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā*. Many other scholars are also of the view that the influence of *Ojā-pāli* upon the *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* is greater than that of other forms.

Ojā-pāli is a performance of choral singing of a party of not less than five members consisting of an *Ojā*, one *dāinā pāli* as the chief assistant and the other *pālis*. The *Ojā* recites verses from the scriptures with gestures and body movements, while the *pālis* repeat the verses of the *Ojā* with a regular rhythm of cymbals and the feet. The *dāinā pāli* adds humour and make witty retorts to the performance. The *Ojā-pāli* has been broadly classified into two varieties --- the *Biyāh gowā Ojā-pāli* and the *Śuknanī Ojā-pāli*. The former is related to Vaiṣṇavism and the latter to the *Manasā* cult or Snake worship. There are certain facts which indicate that Śaṅkaradeva might have been influenced by the institution of *Ojā-pāli*. The role of *Sūtradhār* of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* can be said as a prototype of the *Bāyan* of *Putalā-nāc*, *Ojā* of *Ojā-*

pāli and *Mūl* or *Giddāl* of *Kuśan-gān* performance. He introduces the play and the characters and conducts it through songs, dances and commentaries by remaining in the performance from the beginning till end. His functions are more akin to the *Ojā* of *Ojā-pāli* as a singer, a dancer and a director all combined in one. The dress of a *Sūtradhār* also resembles to that of an *Ojā* which consists of a white turban, a long sleeved *jāmā* or shirt and a *ghūri* or skirt tied to the waist with a waist strip. Likeness can also be drawn out with the absence of raised platform on both the performances. Besides, both the performances are lyrical and are based on music (vocal and instrumental) which is a continuous element in them. *Kathā Guru Carit*³ also gives the evidence of the prevalence of *Ojā-pāli* in the pre-Śaṅkarite period, i.e. before 15th century A.D.

The reference of the term *Pāṅcālikā Vihāra* in the 89th chapter of the *Kālikā Purāṇ* (10th -11th Century A.D.) points to the existence of *Putalā nāc* in the ancient Assam. It is likely, because, *pāṅcālikā* is an equivalent word for *putalā* (puppet). Most probably, the tradition of *ojā-pāli* developed later than that of *putalā nāc*⁴. The *ojā* and the

ḍāinā-pāli resemble the *bāyan* and *ḍāinā-pāli* of *putalā nāc* and most probably, the term *pāṅcāli* (text that provides storyline to the performance of *ojā-pāli*) is related to the term *pāṅcālikā* which is also an signal of the preponderance of Puppetry over *ojā-pāli*. Similar musical preludes as *dhemālis* of *Anīkiyā Bhāonā* constitute a part of the performances of *putalā nāc* and *Kuśān Gān*. *Kuśān Gān* is another form of folk performance of the Goalpara region with dramatic element has an ancient tradition in Assam. Song, dance dialogues are also predominant feature in this institution, where themes of Ramayana are enacted. The troupe of this performance consists of fourteen to fifteen members leaded by *mūl* or *giddāl*. And the other members are called as *duwarī*, *pāil* mostly resembles the *ḍāinā-pāli* and the *pālis* of *ojā-pāli*. The musical accompaniment is given by the members known as *bāin* similar to *bāyan*, and *seṅgrā* is the dancer of the group. The element of humor to the performance is provided by songs called as, *payār* and *chātkā*.

Bhāri-gān is another folk performance of pre-Śaṅkarite period, prevalent in the south Goalpara region of Assam.

Aṅkiyā Bhāonā has also likeness with *Dhuliyā-Bhāonā*. The *dhemālis* of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* resemble the performance of dancing and singing in chorus in accompaniment with the playing of drums of the *Dhuliyā-Bhāonā*. It is a characteristic feature of both the performances. Moreover, the use of mask is also a common feature. Both the performances have comical relief provided by *bahuwā* of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* and the clown of *Dhuliyā-Bhāonā*.

Śaṅkaradeva blended into the religious sentiments with the artistic in his creation of *Aṅkiyā Nāts*, which is the medium of propagation of his faith. The religious perception of these plays is borne by the story of genesis of ancient theatre, preserved in the Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* which suggests the origin of Indian dance, drama and music, and is mostly associated with religion. Religion plays a pivotal role in the ancient drama-tradition of India, which has been conferred by the sacred status of the Veda (*Nāṭyaveda*). Even the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the most celebrated work of the Bhakti tradition, extols *abhinaya* or playing of the deeds of Lord Kṛṣṇa as one of the principle paths of devotion to the Lord. With such a background in

view, it can be taken into consideration that Śaṅkaradeva was inspired by the Indian classical tradition of drama associated with religion. Thus, in the line of Classical Indian tradition, Śaṅkaradeva preserved the sacredness and religiosity in his dramatic compositions. It can not also be denied that Sanskrit was widely studied and cultivated in the ancient Assam. This can be substantiated with the presence of Sanskrit drama and poetry in the curricula of the educational institutions known as *ṭol* or *pāṭhśālā*. The *Mahānāṭaka*, popularly known as the *Hanumān Nāṭaka* was a part of the study. There are also evidences of performance of this drama to entertain the honourable guests.

Scholars like Harichandra Bhattacharyya, referring to Carit (biography)s of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva by the biographers like Daityāri Thākur, Rāmcharan Thākur etc, maintains that, "one Jagadis Misra who came to Assam from the western part of India was entertained by Śaṅkaradeva with the performance of a Sanskrit drama called Mahānāṭakam of Madhusudan Misra (also known as Hanumān Nāṭak)". Dr. Bhattacharya has also pointed to the reference

of this drama in the Sanskrit Grammar, *Prayoga Ratnamālā Vyākaraṇa* by Puruṣottam⁵.

Dr. Maheswar Neog, while indicating the influences of local institutions of dramatic nature, such as, *Putalā nāc*, *Ojā-pāli* etc. on *Añkīya Nāṭ*, also laid stress upon the influences of Sanskrit dramas like *Mahānāṭaka* or *Hanumān Nāṭaka* and *Prabodhacandrodaya* of Krisna Mishra⁶.

The following features are analogous in both the performances of *Mahānāṭakam* and *Añkīyā Nāṭ* as shown by Dr. Harischandra Bhattacharyya:

- i) absence of acts and scenes
- ii) abundance of verses
- iii) absence of the character viduṣaka
- iv) sporadic use of prose

Furthermore, there is no *Prastāvanā* (Introduction) and the regular *Nāndī Śloka* is replaced by a *Maṅgalā śloka* in *Vipra-patnī-prasāda* (the first *Añkīyā Nāṭ* of Śaṅkardeva), which resembles the nature of *Mahānāṭakam*.

Besides, evidences are also found about the practice of the arts of music and dance in the copper plate grants, writing of the traveler, Hieun Tsang to this part of the region and the Sanskrit

works of the early period. Hieun Tsang was entertained with songs and dances when he stayed in Kāmrupa as an honoured guest of the king Bhāskarvarmana (7th Century A.D.).

The copper plate inscriptions of King Vanamāla (8th-9th Century A.D.) refer to temple dances. In the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, references are found about the prevalence of dance and music in ancient Assam. In the writings of Mādhava Kandali and Haribar Vipra, references of *Nāṭ* and *Bhāṭ* are found. That the temple performances were made by the *Naṭ* and the *Naṭīs* in the Mādhava temple of Hājo, Pari-haresvar temple of Dubi and Biśvanāth Śiva temple is found in history.⁷ Following is the comment on *Naṭ* and *Naṭīs* by Harishchandra Bhattacharyya:

“The *Naṭ* and *Naṭīs* (male dancers and female dancers) occupied a dignified position in Assam since days of yore. King Siva Singha (1714-1744) married Phulesvari who was just a *Naṭī* of some Siva temple. She was raised to the status of the chief queen. Even now the *Naṭs* of Hajo (Kamrup) are enjoying temple-land rent-free, in lieu of which they are to worship the temple-deity

by dancing, specially on the occasions of some particular ceremonies, e.g., Bihu, Phakua, etc. They are confined not to the Hajo temple only; in the past they used to depute artists from among them to some other places also to show their performances of their histrionic art. Thus, there was formed a separate community with them, some of which are still met with at Dergaon (Sibsagar District) and Dubi (Kamrup). Of course, the practice of dancing is no longer in vogue. The community is known as Naṭ Kalitā.”⁸

Although, such performance-tradition existed in ancient Assam, there are no evidences of its influences on the creation of *Añkīyā Bhāona*.

Prabodhacandrodaya (of Krishna Misra, 11th century), another Sanskrit drama of allegorical in nature, consists of six acts was also popular in Assam in the pre-Śaṅkarite period⁹. As mentioned in the *Kathā Guru Carit*, Śaṅkaradeva studied ‘Prabodha Candra’ in his early age. Although such dramas did not have any perceptible influence upon the *Añkīyā*

Nāṭs, yet, the avoidance of the scenes of marriage, death bathing, fighting etc. seems to have been encouraged from these dramas.

In the words of Bhattacharya, "Gīta Govinda of Jaydeva, though not a drama, also seems to lend materials in some respects to the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*; traces of the same are noticed especially in some songs and *Bhaṭimās*."¹⁰

An earlier play in 'Sanskṛt-Prākṛt-Maithilī' is the *Pārijāt Haraṇ* by Umapati Upadhaya of Mithila is also said to have influence on *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*. Kaliram Medhi makes mention of this one-act play in his preface to *Aṅkāvalī*. According to him, Śaṅkaradeva might have got the idea of producing his one-act plays from Umapati's *Pārijāt Haraṇ*. Dr. Krishnanarayan Prasad Magadha also advocates the probability of the Umapati's influence on Śaṅkaradeva¹¹. But, the exact time of Umapati is a matter of controversy. According to Dr. J.C. Misra, Umapati flourished during the reign of Maharaja Raghavsinha (1704-1740)¹². If this fact is taken into account, the probability of Śaṅkaradeva being influenced by Umapati can be nullified.

In tracing the direct influence of the Sanskrit drama on the *Añkīyā Nāṭs*, the following elements can be taken into account:

- (a) Singing of the *Nāndī* verse in Sanskrit by the *Śūtradhāra*
- (b) Dominance of the role played by *Śūtradhāra*
- (c) Recitation of *Prarocanā Śloka*
- (d) Performance of the ritualistic task of introducing the play (*prastāvanā*) by the *Sūtradhāra*
- (e) Recitation of the *Muktimañgala Bhaṭimā* (benedictory ode) towards the end of the play
- (f) diffusion of Sanskrit *ślokas* with a plaintive motif

Besides, the *dhemālis* of *Añkīyā Nāṭ* resemble the *purvaraṅga*, the preliminaries, mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and, similar to the Sanskrit plays it does not form a part of the drama proper. The typical passages intermixed with prose passages, greater attention to recitation in the dramatic performance, singing, accompanying music, dance movement and pantomime was known to Sanskrit drama from the 5th -8th centuries. The seeds of a fuller use

of music were never the less present in Sanskrit drama even in the early period, as is borne out of the fact that *Caturbhani* of the 5th century A.D. clearly refers to a form of theatre called the *Saṅgītaka* in his *Ubhayabhisāṅka*. Dr. Jagadis Chandra Mathur provides reference of *Saṅgītaka* as the influential cause of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*¹³. Again, Dr. Krishna Prasad Magadha in his 'Śaṅkaradev: Sāhityakār Aur Bicārak', mentioned five traditions, of which *Saṅgītaka* is the probable tradition which is regarded to be one of the inspiring source for Śaṅkaradeva to develop *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*¹⁴.

Apart from the Sanskritic and indigenous influences, Śaṅkaradeva's plays seem to have been effected by the dramatic arts of Medieval India. Although, there is no direct similarity between *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* and other dramatic forms of India, the evolution of *Jananāṭyas* out of the decadent Sanskrit dramas combined with elements of local cultures came to possess a few similar characteristics. Among them a few have been noted as follows:

- (a) predominance of dances and songs

- (b) simplicity of the introduction of the play and its subject matter
- (c) minimum use of dialogues
- (d) dominance of the role played by the *Sūtradhāra*
- (e) use of masks
- (f) the entrance and exit of the characters with dancing movements accompanied by music
- (g) use of *Nāndī Śloka* and *Muktimaṅgala Bhaṭimā* at the beginning and at the end of the play
- (h) dominance of mythological themes and religious motifs etc.

Śaṅkaradeva during his pilgrimage visited many places of the northern and central India. It is supposed that he might have experienced a number of theatre forms prevalent in those regions, which had its impact later, on his compositions. It has close affinities with *Yakshagāna* of Karnataka, *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Bhāgavata Melā* and *Terrukuṭṭu* of Tamil Nadu, *Bhāvāi* of Gujarat, *Lalit* of Maharashtra, *Rāslilā* and *Rāmlilā* of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and *Yātrās* of West Bengal.

Aṅkiyā Nāṭs with the association of religion has much that fall in the line of the above mentioned dramas of the other parts of India. The use of *Brajabuli*, has given it a large Indian character. Its vaiṣṇavite base particularly linked with the *Rāmlīlā* and the *Rāslīlā* forms. On the other-hand, its dramatic structure and mode of presentation are close parallels of the *Bhāgavata Melā*, forms of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and to an extent even of the *Yātrā* of Bengal and Orissa. Moreover, its dance styles and some aspects of costuming have affinities with Manipur, for instance, the typical and elegant dress of *Sūtradhāra* has much likeness with the dress of *Māiba* and *Māibi* (priest and priestess) of Manipur. The contents and techniques of music are close to the *Dhrupada* singing of Northern India. Besides, as the affinity of dance technique, the *cālis* of Assam are akin to Manipur. The *cālis* or the *natuwā nāc* is one of the richest dance styles in the *Bhāonā* performance which is also evident in the other classical dance styles of India.

As mentioned earlier, the *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs* has its resemblance with the performance of *Ojā Pāli* and also to that of the dramatic arts of Medieval India.

S. N. Sharma has rightly pointed to the similarities between the performances of *Kuṭṭu*, later came to be known as *Kuṭiyāttam* of Kerala and *Dhop-Kirtan* of Bengal with *Ojā Pāli*. He further said that, as the institution of *Kuṭṭu* developed to the form of *Kuṭiyāttam*, where all the characters concerned appear on the stage with proper make-up costume and recite and act, following the rules of dramaturgy instead of the role of *Chākiyār* of *Kuṭṭu* who impersonates all the characters of the story through recitation of verses and actions showing the *bhāva* in accordance with the rules of *Abhinaya* laid down in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Śaṅkaradeva also might have made changes and developed the institution of *Ojā Pāli* according to the norms of Sanskrit dramatic tradition to make his *Anīkiyā Nāṭs*¹⁵.

The evolution of *Anīkiyā Nāṭ* and its origin is still a matter of controversy. Śaṅkaradeva's first play *Cihna Yātrā*, [A detailed description is provided in the next chapter] is said to have been written at the age of nineteen, before he went abroad on pilgrimage. This is quite irrelevant and not convincing to the view, that he had been

inspired by other dramatic traditions of India, while he was traveling.

Śaṅkaradeva's creation of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭ* is actually a mark in the dramatic history of Assam. With his sole motto to infuse the devotional temperament among the masses, to enlighten with the teachings of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, he created *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*, definitely stimulated by the then prevalent semi-dramatic indigenous institutions and Sanskritic dramatic tradition, to which he was well acquainted with from his childhood. In this regard Bhattacharyya opines "that as regards the language (Brajabuli) only, the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs* owe their origin to some Maithili works of Vidyapati or other early poets, while in other respect they are genuine Assamese productions based partly on Sanskrit plays and partly on the Assamese semi-dramas already in vogue in Assam since early days."¹⁶

It can be concluded with the words of Kapila Vatsyayan, stated on the uniqueness of *Bhāonā* performance, that,

"A single Bhaona performance thus combines harmoniously diverse elements of culture, which is why it is difficult to apply to

it readymade classifications like *Margi* or *Desi*, or *Natyadharmi* or *Lokadharmi*. As we have repeatedly stated, it is typical of the Indian cultural phenomenon that a dramatic form identified with a particular region has often interesting links not only with genres and styles within the region, but also with those which have flourished outside that region. ... And yet, it is by no means a mixture of all these: it has a distinct personality of its own, which is unquestionably Assamese, coherent and unique."¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 1.
- ² Kesavananda Deva Goswami, "Ankiya Bhaona", *Glimpses of the Vaisnava Heritage of Assam* (2001): 108.
- ³ Biographies, in Assamese verse and prose, of the Vaisnava saints with the accounts on the history of Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam
- ⁴ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 3.
- ⁵ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 4.
- ⁶ Maheswar Neog, *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam* (Guwahati: LBS, 1988) 247-251.
- ⁷ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 1.
- ⁸ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 32.
- ⁹ *ibid*, 5. and Maheswar Neog, (1988) 247.
- ¹⁰ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 6.
- ¹¹ Badan Chandra Saikia, "Ankiyā Nāṭakar Utsa Bicār", *Śāṅkarī Sāhityar Samikkhyā* (Nagaon: Sankardev Sangha, 1998) 99.
- ¹² Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 6.
- ¹³ Badan Chandra Saikia, (1998) 99.
- ¹⁴ *ibid*, 97.
- ¹⁵ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 7.
- ¹⁶ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 8.
- ¹⁷ Kapila Vatsyayan, *Traditional India Theatre: Multiple Streams* (New Delhi: NBT, 1980) 109.

Chapter 3

ŚAṆKARADEVA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DRAMATIC TRADITION OF ASSAM AND THE EVOLUTION OF AṆKĪYĀ BHĀONĀ

Śaṅkaradeva, the versatile genius and the initiator of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism has brought into remarkable cultural renaissance in Assam during the 15th-16th century A.D. He preached the principles of monotheism, when the practices of worship of many Gods and Goddesses were at rife in Assam. His Bhakti cult has contributed to bring into harmony in the religious sphere and so to the philosophies of the people. In order to enlighten the people with the teachings of *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, he with his artistic bent of mind created the (i) *Bargīts* -- the raga-based system of devotional music, (ii) the *Aṅkīyā Bhāonā* - the religious spectacle with the element of drama and above all, (iii) the *Satra* - the monastery or institution where all the religious activities are practiced and serve as the educative centre.

Śaṅkaradeva, urged by the sole desire of propagating his religion of *ekaśaraṇa* with its emphasis on the oneness of God and on the master-servant relationship between the devotee and the object of devotion, found out as an effective method of religious preaching in the form of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*. As mentioned earlier, Śaṅkaradeva is regarded as the father of Assamese drama and dramaturgy. His *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* is a unique dramatic form that combined in itself the tradition of classical Sanskrit drama as well as popular dramatic and semi dramatic modes as his rare stroke of genius. However, it is generally accepted that, pure art can not be made the medium of propagation of any particular philosophy or religion or faith. Śaṅkaradeva's *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* can be regarded as a challenge to such assumptions. The great Vaiṣṇava Guru never deviates from his primary aim which was to sing the glory of Lord Krishna and to express the feelings of utmost devotion to the Supreme Lord. The most significant fact in his success of evolving such dramatic art is his way of transforming his devotional emotions into fine works of art.

Another notable phenomenon is that, while creating this genre of art, Śaṅkaradeva was well

aware of the illiterate masses. And so, he must have convinced about the efficacy of the medium, as the *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* for providing both instruction, as well as, entertainment to the audience.

Further, his genius is revealed by the fact that, in his *Nāṭs*, he could evolve such a dramatic form where he could beautifully blend the flavour of both classical Sanskrit dramatic as well as local dramatic and semi-dramatic modes.

Eventually, these *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs* are a type by themselves. They have certain distinctive characteristics of their own. The *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* is the staging of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*. Before composing the *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*, Śaṅkaradeva composed *Cihna Yātrā*, the first dramatic representation with painted scenery of seven *Vaikunṭhas*¹.

Cihna Yātrā: A number of views regarding the date and the presentation of the *Cihna Yātra* are prevalent. In the words of H. Bahttacharya, "From the biographers of Sankardev and Madhavdev it is learnt that Sankardev had it performed after he returned from his journey outside Assam. Ramacarana Thakur, however, writes that Sankardeva had it performed at the age of nineteen before he went

abroad."² According to the biographers once at the request of the Bhuyans, the preceptor of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith prepared the pictorial depiction of *Sapta Vaikuṇṭha* (seven heavens), and based on the description given in the tenth chapter (*skandha*) of *Śrīmadbhāgavata*. The painted scenery was done on a *tulāpāt* or cotton-made-paper to represent the seven celestial abodes or *Vaikuṇṭhas* of God *Nārāyaṇa*. Rāmacarana in his *Bhakti Ratna*, makes mention of eight *Vaikuṇṭhas*: *Sāntanu*, *Cid-vilāsa*, *Tṛiṇi* (*Triveṇi*), *Ambaru-vālahā*, *Brahma-vālahā*, *Puspa-vālahā*, *Kanaka-danda*, and *Pañkaja*. However, the *Vaiṣṇava Kirtan* presents a different set of seven *Vaikuṇṭhas*: *Sveta Vilāsa*, *Sāntanu Vilāsa*, *Puspa Vilāsa*, *Pankaja Vilāsa*, *Kanakadatta*, *Sanātana*, *Goloka*. On the other hand, according to *Kathā Guru Carit* there are thirty-five *Vaikuṇṭhas*³ and Śaṅkaradeva enumerates thirty.

The exact date of this performance, as mentioned earlier is a matter of controversy. According to the *Carit Puthis*, Śaṅkaradeva had it performed after he returned from his journey from outside Assam. But, Ramcaran Thakur mentioned that, Śaṅkaradeva had performed *Cihna Yātrā* at the age of

nineteen, before he went abroad. This seems more probable than the other. Because, the title *Cihna Yātrā* is quite different from the titles of his other plays, where there is the particular reference of the subject matter. However, emphasis is given on 'scene depiction', for which it is probably called as *Cihna Yātrā*. Furthermore, the use of Brajabuli language in his other plays, but not in *Cihna Yātrā* is also a pointer to the fact that, had he written it after his journey abroad, he would have used the Brajabuli language as in his other plays.

The pictures were displayed to the accompaniment of the musical instruments and dance. Śaṅkaradeva had specially made different musical instruments for the purpose. For instance, number of *mṛdaṅgas* or drums was made by the potters of Kapilmukh and the cobblers of a village named Salmara⁴. The several varieties of cymbals (*maṇḍirā*, *khutitāl*, *bartāl*) were also made to his order. The whole show was divided into seven parts, following each other in quick succession and with one *Viṣṇu* and *Sūtradhāra* for each part. This performance is a class by itself. Through this Śaṅkaradeva, could leave a devotional and bewildering impact upon the

people. He realized the importance of such a performance as the medium of propagation of his religious principles. But painting of vast number of pictures to depict each stage of several stories was rather a difficult task. It is supposed that considering the fact he might have created the *Añkīyā Nāṭs*, delineating the characters with the addition of dialogues.

Different terms to mean Assamese drama:

Since ancient time, there are many equivalent terms for Assamese drama. Some of them are: *Nāṭak*, *Nāṭ*, *Yātrā*, *Jhumurā*, *Nāṭikā*, *Giti-Nāṭ*, *Giti Nāṭikā*, *Saṅgītālekhyā*, *Rūpaka*, *Añka*, *Añkīyā Nāṭ*.

Nāṭak or *Nāṭ*, is a commonly used in Assamese to mean a drama of any kind. *Rūpaka* is a general term in Sanskrit for all kinds of dramas. Usually, *Rūpaka* is divided into ten classes. And, one of the classes, is called as *Nāṭaka* (pronounced as *Nāṭak* in Assamese), "which has for its subject-matter a well known story, for its hero a celebrated person of exalted nature (*Udātta*) and which describes the character of a person descending from a royal seer, divine protection (for him), his many super-human powers and exploits, such as, success

(in different undertakings) and amorous pastimes, and which has an appropriate number of Acts (*Añka*) and introductory scenes (*Praveśaka*)”⁵. *Rūpaka* is also sometimes used in modern Assamese to mean allegorical dramas⁶. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva used the words *Nāṭ*, *Nāṭak* and *Yātrā* indifferently to mean a drama. H. Bhattacharya says, “The popular meaning of the word *Yātrā* (or *Jātrā*) in Asamese is however the performance of a play in open air as opposed to theatre performed in conformity with the modern stage technique.”⁷ According to H.N. Dasgupta, “A *jātrā* resembles a drama in good many things in its outward form, but a *jātrā* has no scene, curtain or stage, and there is more abundance of songs in a *jātrā* than in a drama.”⁸ Through ages, *Yātrās* are popularly known performance in West-Bengal.

Nāṭikā is a four-act play with the predominance of music, song and dance in a theme of love and romance rather than philosophical. In the words of H. Bhattacharya, “...there is a total absence of this type of plays in early Assamese literature in as much as the writers were always confined to the life-episodes of *Rāma* or *Kṛṣṇa* only. It is but a production of the modern age and no longer retains

its old connotation in the field of Assamese dramatic literature⁹.

Giti-Nāṭ, *Giti-Nāṭikā* and *Saṅgītālekkhya* are modern Assamese dramas with the abundance of song and dance. These resemble the *Jhumurās*. The dramas of Mādhavadeva are classed as *Jhumurās*. But this term is not found in his dramas. The copyists generally used the term at the end of the *Nāṭs*, in the manners like "iti Pimparā Gucuwā Jhumurā", "Cor Dhorā Jhumurā" etc. This term is also found in the *Carit Puthis*. Mādhavadeva himself used the term *Nāṭ* and *Yātrā* for his dramas. Songs predominate in his dramas. There are many references that indicate the term to have been somehow related to music and song. There exists a kind of raga, named *jhumāri*, it is also known to be a kind of song accompanied by dance in Hindi¹⁰. Again, in Assamese *jhumuri* is an eight-syllable metre used in Vaiṣṇava poetry, in Bengal there is a musical piece, named *jhumur*¹¹.

The *Carit Puthis* mentioned the term *Aṅka*, to mean the one-act plays of the Vaiṣṇavite playwrights. It is not known exactly who is responsible for such application of the word but, Daityāri, Ramānanda and Rāmacaraṇa use the term to describe the

Śaṅkaradeva's plays¹². The biographers might have felt essential to maintain a difference between the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva and other later playwrights. Therefore, in order to sustain the honour and dignity of the form devised by Śaṅkaradeva, the biographers called this distinctive set of plays and their performances as *aṅkas*, *aṅkiyā-nāṭs* and *aṅkiyā-bhāonā*¹³.

There is a lot of controversy regarding the significance of the term *Aṅka* and *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*. In Sanskrit, *aṅka* or *utsrstikanka* is a single act piece, with a legendary subject, sometimes developed through the dramatist's skill, the first and last junctures only, a common hero, the pathetic sentiment, and the lamentations of women and only verbal descriptions of fights¹⁴. But, the *Aṅkas* of the Vaiṣṇavite playwrights do not strictly conform to the requirements of the Sanskrit *aṅka* or *utsristikanka*. Again, it has different connotations as sometimes it is indicated as 'enactment' or dramatic performance and at other times it means a 'dramatic compositions'¹⁵.

The *Aṅka* with the suffix 'iyā', i.e., *Aṅkiyā* is now, generally used to designate both the drama and

the compositions. The enactment of such a kind of drama is called as *Ankiyā Nāṭ* or *Ankiyā Bhāṇā*. The term *Ankiyā Nāṭ* was neither used by the earliest playwrights themselves nor was mentioned in the body of the dramatic texts. In his works, to mean drama, Śaṅkaradeva used the words like *nāṭa*, *nāṭaka* and *yātrā*¹⁶ and Mādhavadeva applied the words *nāṭ* and *jātrā*¹⁷. The epithet 'ankiyā' is a "popular application, indicating the Śaṅkarite variety of play, as opposed to the later, decadent drama, which lack both the technical and linguistic beauty and peculiarity of the early drama"¹⁸.

Opinions vary regarding the application of the term 'ankiyā'. In the words of Dr. K. D. Goswami,

In a restricted way, the word ankiya (and more popularly but erroneously, ankiya nat) is used to mean six dramas of Sankardeva and only one of Madhavdeva, other dramatic works of tiny volume by Madhavadeva are called 'jhumura' a word which is diverse to be defined fully. But in a broader sense Ankiya means any dramatic compositions which followed the form and technique of Sankardeva's works.

In the orthodox Vaisnava circle, the phrase 'bara anka' (twelve dramas -six of Sankardeva and six of Madhavdeva) is there. Enactment of this traditional type of drama is called ankiya bhaona in a loose sense.¹⁹

Ankiyā Bhāonā is the representations of the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, and some other plays of the later *Mahantas*, which have a special and superior way of music, called *ankiyā bājanā*²⁰. Dr. Pradipjyoti Mahanta calls an *Ankiyā Bhāonā* "a complete paradigm" or "enactment of a complete drama beginning with the nandi to the muktimangala, perfect with all paraphernalia of Sankardeva play."²¹

The six dramas composed by Śaṅkaradeva are: *Kāliyā Damaṇa*, *Rukminī Haraṇa*, *Pārijāt Haraṇa*, *Keli Gopāla*, *Patni Prasāda* and *Śr Ram Bijaya*. As mentioned earlier, the dramatic works of Mādhavadeva are popularly known as *Jhumurās*. They are: *Arjun Bhanjana Yātrā*, *Cor Dharā*, *Pimparā Gocuwā*, *Bhūmi Lutiwā*, *Bhojan Behāra*, *Brahma Mohan*, *Rās Jhumarā*, *Bhūṣaṇa Haraṇa* and *Kotarā Khelā*.

'*Bhāonā*' (*Bhāwnā* or *Bhāvanā*) is an Assamese term, which means 'representation of a drama'²². It means a 'show', an outward manifestation; technically however it means 'the performance of an Ankiya Nat'²³. It is the same word as the Sanskrit *bhavana* (from *bhavayati*), 'producing, displaying, manifesting, imagining', etc., with perhaps slight semantic variation²⁴.

The term '*bhāo*' or '*bhāw*' is an individual role of the drama which too derived from the Sanskrit term '*bhāva*' means 'state of being, conduct, gesture, etc., 'again with slight semantic variation. '*Bhāwariyā*' is the general term in Assamese for the dramatis personae or the actors. The term is derived from the word '*bhāvata*' which means one who produces '*bhāwa*' or emotions in the mind of the audience. The actors have also been referred as '*narṭaka*' or '*naṭuwā*' or '*naṭa*' as they have to dance and enact the actions of others.

Bhāonā is a socio-religious ceremony. With its religious association, it is regarded as a medium of earning piety and *sāadhanā* or exercise of the bhakti religion²⁵. Śaṅkaradeva framed this kind of performance to moralize the ideals of the Bhakti

religion and thus performed with unparalleled devotion as a distinct part of the ritualistic observances. For its ritualistic significance, Professor Maheswar Neog rightly calls it a 'ritual play'²⁶.

Characteristics of *Ankīyā Nāṭ*:

The *Ankīyā Nāṭ* is a unique dramatic form that combined in itself the tradition of classical Sanskrit drama as well as popular dramatic and semi-dramatic modes as the rare stroke of genius of Śaṅkaradeva. *Ankīyā Nāṭs*, while providing the devotional instructions of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism also acts as an entertaining medium of the masses.

Eventually, this genre of dramatic art is a type by itself. They have certain distinctive characteristics of their own. Some of these are mentioned as follows:

- (a) Dominance of the role played by *Śūtradhāra*
- (b) Importance of the use of poetic songs, *ślokas* and *payāras*
- (c) Use of Brajabuli language
- (d) Use of lyrical prose
- (e) Existence of songs and dances

Although the role of *Śūtradhāra* is moulded according to the classical Sanskrit tradition, it has its own style that on the one hand suits the indigenous Assamese traditional culture and on the other is beneficial to the audience to understand and appreciate this new form of art. Unlike the Sanskrit drama the role of *Śūtradhāra* does not end with *Prastāvanā*. In fact, he plays the pivotal part from the very beginning till the end. He stays in the *Raṅgamañca* through the whole Nat. The main functions of *Śūtradhāra* include:

- (a) He sings the *Nāndī Śloka* and *Bhaṭimā* in the praise of the hero.
- (b) He announces the main feature of the plot and performs the short introduction of the play.
- (c) He announces the entrance of the dramatis personae and the chorus sing a song
- (d) The incidents and situations of the play as described by him through songs and verses with gestures.
- (e) The incidents which cannot be shown in the stage are presented to the audience in a short description of them

(f) He ends the play with a *Mukti-maṅgala*
Bhaṭimā.

Thus, *Śūtradhāra* plays the intermediary role between the audience and the dramatis personae. Moreover, the intervals in between the stages of *Śūtradhāra*'s singing are marked by dances to different rhythms which may be described as *nṛtta* only as they are based on rhythms alone (*nṛtta tāla layaśrayam*) and then seem to have lost most of their pantomimic significance (*bhāvaśrayam nṛtyam*). The *Bhaṭimā* singing is punctuated by gestures, (*hasta, hātdiyā* or *hastakarma*) which brings the subject-matter of the drama close to the audience's mind. Although, he announces his exit, he does not retire from the stage, but takes charge of the stage direction till the end of the play. Thus, the *Śūtradhāra* in *Ankīyā Nāṭs* has a many-faceted role as a dancer, singer, director and interpreter, who conducts the whole show with dances, songs and explanatory commentary.

Another noteworthy characteristic of an *Ankīyā Nāṭ* is its essential lyrical nature. In the plays through a plethora of songs and verses the playwrights underline the message of the play. Many

situations and incidents are suggested by mere machinery of descriptive verses uttered by the *Śūtradhāra*. Minor incidents, feelings and sentiments are given expressions to by the songs. They usually unfold the subject matter of an incident of a play. Here the writer appears more as a poet and composer than as a dramatist does. And his play is not a drama in the real sense, but a 'lyrico-dramatic spectacle'. These songs bear special characteristics, and are called as '*añkar-gīt*' and *bhaṭimā*. Some of the melodies are: *Sindhurā*, *Suhāi*, *Sr Sr Gaurī*, *Varāri Vasanta*, etc. The *bhaṭimā* serves mainly as epilogues and prologues. *Añkiyā Bhāonā* opens with preliminaries prescribed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, viz., *Nāndī*, *Prarocaṇā* and *Prastāvanā*. The songs of *Añkiyā Nāṭ* can be categorized into four types:

- (a) Bhakti based highly dignified *Bhaṭimā*.
- (b) *Rāg* that relates the story of the play based on rhythms.
- (c) Descriptive *Payāra* and *Capay*
- (d) *Gītas* of entrance (*prastāvanā*)

Apart from its lyrical value, the songs have literary value also. They include a refrain, as it

bears particular ragas, some kind of *alaṅkāra* such as, *anuprāsa*, *yamaka*, etc. to relegate the *rāsa*.

Another characteristic of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* is its language. The plays are written in an artificial idiom, known as, *Brajabuli*. It is a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili and Hindi and with a tincture of other elements, which is characterized by flexibility, phonetic sweetness and malleability. The idiom offers the medium for the prose dialogues and the *Śūtradhāra*'s narration. It is also employed in the songs.

Given below a few specimens of such language:

1. *he param iswara: tohāri pada prahāre:
svāmi mari jāi: onhi durjane: tohāka
nājāni daṅsala: ihāka doṣa bāreka
maraka gosāñi: tohāri ago khudra
pataṅga: āheka māri kon jasa sādhaba:
dekho svāmika dhātu prāṇ rahe nāhi: jata
lāge mane śāsti pāvala. [Kālyādamaṇa]²⁷*
2. *hāmu kata tapa kariye: devaka bare:
br̥daha bayasata: kṛṣṇaka putra pāva: sohi
prāṇaputra: br̥kha pariye: kheneke mari
jai: gosāñika barese eravala: toho ki*

nimitte mānuṣa bheli: rākhasato adhika:
āpun putraka khāite cāwala: kṛṣṇaka
nakhāi hāmāka khāwa.[Arjjunabhañjana]²⁸

It is noteworthy fact that, Assamese brajabuli language, as far as the grammar is concerned, is analogous to the brajabuli of other parts of India, but it was framed in Assamese structure. The language was prevalent in Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. And it also provided a link with Vṛndāban and thus with the language of Braja. This language possesses the elements of dignity and intelligibility. In the Sanskrit plays, it was customary for the chief actors to speak in Sanskrit and the minor and female characters in Prakrit. It is supposed that Śaṅkaradeva followed the middle course by using the mixed language, where the dignity of the characters was preserved.

The fourth significant characteristic of *Añkīyā Nāṭ* is the use of prose in lyrical nature. It is said to be the first specimen of Assamese prose. The dialogue, which was introduced mainly to elaborate the lyrical sentiments in prose, is very thin, though extremely numerical.

The other striking feature in *Ankiyā Bhāonā* is the predominance of songs and dances. References have been made of the lyrical nature of *Ankiyā Nāṭ* which abounds in songs and verses of varied forms. In such plays all the characters move rhythmically from beginning to the end, in the form of dancing with appropriate steps, gestures and *abhinaya* postures. In short, the whole narration of the story progress through dances. The *Śūtradhāra* plays the role of the main dancer. After the recitation of the *Nāndī* verse the *Śūtradhāra* interprets the story and sentiments embodied in the *śloka* by proper dance style. This is repeated by the *Śūtradhāra* throughout the play. The major three dance forms of an *Ankiyā Bhāonā* are *Śūtradhāraī nāc*, *Kṛṣṇa nāc* and *Gopī nāc*. The other forms of dances are the *Rāsa nāc*, *Naṭuwā* or *Cāli nāc*, all are more or less adopted from classical texts of dance.

Before the recital of the *Nāndī* verse, a *Bhāonā* displays a prolonged series of dances by the *Gāyan Bāyan* party leaded by *Śūtradhāra*. This is called as '*dhemāli*' or '*raṅga*'. It consists of invocative and devotional nature of singing and dancing by the *Gāyan Bāyan* party, with the accompaniment of *khol*

(drum) and *tāl* (cymbal). The number of such *dhemālis* differs from place to place and with *satras* of various sects. So, it is difficult to ascertain the the exact number of *dhemālis*. According to Maheswar Neog, there are at least twelve *dhemālis*. Some of them are: *Saru-dhemāli* (minor preliminary), *Bar-dhemāli* (major preliminary), *Ghoṣa-dhemāli* (preliminary with *ghoṣa* songs), *Na-dhemāli* (new preliminary), *Naṭa-dhemāli* (dance preliminary), *Co-dhemāli* (mask preliminary), *Deva-dhemāli* (the gods' preliminary), *Rāga-dhemāli* (preliminary of melodies), *Garuḍa-mardana-dhemāli*, *Barpetiyā-dhemāli* (preliminary connected with Barpeta), *Cāhini* ("intermediary stroke on musical instruments in between two concerts²⁹") and *Guru-ghāt* ("concert in honour of the religious preceptor³⁰"). The lat two are counted as *dhemāli* only in certain *Satras*. Sometimes these preliminaries continue for several hours unceasingly before the actual performance of the play.

The *dhemāli* or musical prelude very much resembles *purvaraṅga*, the preliminaries mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and like the Sanskrit plays it does not form a part of the drama proper. At the end of

the performance, the instrumental music and dance are repeated. The end of an incident in the play is also marked by the playing of the orchestral music and dance of the *Śūtradhāra* that serves a welcome relief.

Another significant feature is that, these plays have no act or scene divisions. Most of the dramatic personae enter the stage, i.e., the oblong space available at the middle of the *Nāmghar* or prayer hall, surrounded almost on all sides by the audiences (except the eastern most part, which is called as *Maṇikuṭ*, the sacred place of a *Nāmghar*), at the very beginning, and the action sweeps on at a stretch till the end of the performance.

Besides, another additional characteristic of an *Ankiyā Bhāonā* is that there is no background scenery, like those said to have been there in the *Cihna Yātrā* performance. These Vaiṣṇava dramas which are being represented in an arena like stage opens on all sides, no permanent background could be used. The *Caritas* also do not however, account for the discarding of painted background after the performance of *Cihna Yātrā*.

The white curtain (*Ānr Kāpor*) is used from time to time at the immediate entrance to the stage only in introducing to the orchestra and the chief actors and *Śūtradhāra*.

Again, Mask and effigies (*cho*), a class of green-room properties form a striking feature of *Ankīyā Nāṭ*.

The sequence of the performance of *Ankīyā Bhāonā*:

Contextually speaking, before the performance of a *Bhāonā*, a series of rituals are observed starting with *Nātmela*, which signifies a ceremonious opening of the play. This is observed at least fifteen days prior to the actual performance. This ritual consists of *Nāma-kīrttana* (congregational prayers), by the *Bhakats* and the performers, and the reading of the play. This is followed by the rehearsal in the successive days. The final rehearsal takes place before the careful scrutiny of a large audience on the preceding day of the actual performance which is called *Bar-ākharā*. The *Nāṭmelā* and the succeeding rehearsals are done in the *Nāmghar* in the evening times.

On the day of performance, offerings are made in the *Nāmghar* with *Nāma-kīrttana* for the wellbeing of the people as well as for the successful completion of the play. The performance of the play begins with the musical preliminaries, known as *dhemāli*, performed by the *Gāyan-Bāyan* (singers and instrumentalists). The number of *dhemālis* to be performed in such occasion varies from place to place and *satra* to *satra*.

These musical preliminaries are followed by the *Sūtradhāra*, who makes his entry behind a curtain (*Ānr Kāpor*) held by two persons. A fine arch called *Agnigarh* with nine lighted lamps is raised in the entrance. The *Sūtradhāra* sings the *Nāndi śloka* (verse) to announce the subject matter of the play and to appeal the audience's attention for the action of the play in the *Prarocanā śloka*. The *Sūtradhāra* then recites a *bhatimā* (a benedictory verse in vernacular) in praise of the hero. He also performs the ritualistic tasks of introducing the play in *Prastāvanā* verse. The *Sūtradhāra* dances with the singing of the verses to different rhythms which may be described as *Nṛtta*. The *Bhaṭimā* singing is performed by the expression of different gestures (*hastas*). After introducing the play, he announces

his retirement although he stays on the stage till the end directing the whole play. He then announces the entrance of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma as the case may be, followed by the chorus singing of *Praveśa-gīta*. Eventually, the play moves with the direction of *Sūtradhāra*. The entrance of every major character is preceded by a song. The play comes to its end with the *Mukti-maṅgala-bhaṭimā*.

Notes

- ¹ Maheswar Neog, *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam* (Guwahati: LBS, 1988) 17.
- ² Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 49.
- ³ Upendrachandra Lekharu, ed., *Kathā Guru Carit* (Nalbari: Dutta Barua, 1964) 36.
- ⁴ Maheswar Neog, (1988) 108.
- ⁵ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 1.
- ⁶ *ibid*, 3.
- ⁷ *ibid*, 2.
- ⁸ *ibid*, 2.
- ⁹ *ibid*, 2.
- ¹⁰ *ibid*, 3.
- ¹¹ Maheswar Neog, (1988) 262.
- ¹² *ibid*: 264.
- ¹³ Pradipjyoti Mahanta, "Bhaona: The Traditional Vaisnavite Theatre", *Glimpses of The Vaisnava Heritage of Assam* (Guwahati: Asam Satra Sangha, 1990)
- ¹⁴ *Sāhitya-Darpaṇa*, as quoted in Maheswar Neog, (1988) 264.
- ¹⁵ Kesavananda Deva Goswami, "Ankiya Bhaona", *Glimpses of the Vaisnava Heritage of Assam* (Guwahati: Asam Satra Mahasabha, 2001) 109.
- ¹⁶ *ibid*, 110.

- ¹⁷ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996), 11.
- ¹⁸ Maheswar Neog, (1988) 266.
- ¹⁹ Kesavananda Deva Goswami, (2001) 110.
- ²⁰ Maheswar Neog, *Bhaona, The Ritual Play of Assam* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1984) 53.
- ²¹ Pradipjyoti Mahanta, (1990)
- ²² Maheswar Neog, (1984) 1.
- ²³ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 32.
- ²⁴ *ibid*, 1.
- ²⁵ Maheswar Neog, (1984) 2.
- ²⁶ *ibid*, 2.
- ²⁷ Kaliram Medhi, ed., *Aṅkāvalī* (Guwahati: LBS, 1997) 18.
- ²⁸ *ibid*, 304-305.
- ²⁹ Maheswar Neog, (1984) 38.
- ³⁰ *ibid*, 38.

Chapter 4

THE DRAMATIC MOVEMENT IN THE POST-ŚĀṆKARITE ERA: EVOLUTION OF MĀTR̥BHĀṢĀR NĀṬ

It is a known fact that, every phenomenon changes with the change of time. A tradition invariably possesses a distinctive past, but in the course of time, changes occur inevitably into it. These changes are sometimes slow and imperceptible in degree, and at other times, it is phenomenal and speedy. Usually, changes take place either through metamorphosis or fusion. When a tradition gets metamorphosed, there is the possibility of loosing the identity of the so-called tradition, but if fusion occurs then the identity is more or less preserved to a large extent. In the process of fusion, some secular elements may get infused in the older tradition.

In the post-Śāṅkarite period, the tradition of *Bhāonā* has undergone many changes. During 17th-18th century A.D., following the tenets of *Śāṅkaradeva*, *Vaiṣṇavism* was holding its firm ground at Assam. In the process, *Satras* and *Nāmghars* form an integral part of the Assamese culture. The history and

development and continuation of the *Aṅkīyā Bhāonās* is closely linked with the establishment of several *Satras* in different parts of Assam and the long line of lineage of each of these *Satras*. It became an almost obligatory activity of the *Satrādhikār* (the head of the *Satra*) to write and present plays as a part of his initiation rites. The tradition of writing *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs* and presentation of the *Bhāonā* thus, became a substantial part of the activities of the *Satras*. The Vaiṣṇava leaders, following Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, composed a large number of plays based on the models set by the two Gurus. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva laid the strong foundation of the tradition of *Bhāonā* performance which was created in order to propagate the ideals of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. The tradition is still in the process of continuation, although, with many changes.

Bhāonās are performed on several occasions, such as on the *tithis* (death anniversary) of the two gurus or forefathers of the *Adhikār* of a *Satra*, on the Vaiṣṇavite festivals e.g., *ŚrīKṛṣṇa-Janmotsav* (birth-day of ŚrīKṛṣṇa), *Rās-yātrā*, *Dol-yātrā* or *Phākuwā* (*Holi* festival), etc. A performance of

Bhāonā is also offered in the *Nāmghars* as a part of some individual and public religious occasions such as, '*Nām-gowā*', '*Sabāh*', '*Barsabāh*' etc. As mentioned earlier, *Bhāonās* are regarded as a medium of 'earning piety' from the Almighty, so such performance is taken as an 'offering' to God and is a pious endeavor.

Even though, the subsequent plays were moulded in the framework of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*, they seem to lack the unique distinctiveness that marks the dramas of the two saint-poets. As mentioned earlier, the term *aṅka* or *aṅkiyā* has several connotations and is of later application. In spite of its identity as *Aṅkiyā*, even the plays of Mādhavadeva deviated from many conventions found in the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva. In some of his plays there are no *Nāndī* verses, no *Bhaṭimās*, no mention of the entrance of *Sūtradhāra*, no mention of the sound of the conch at the entrance of *Kṛṣṇa*¹. Songs abound in his plays. Although, Brajabuli used as the language of the plays, some verses and songs are in Assamese². His plays are more popularly known as *Jhumurās*.

During the 17th century these two gurus were followed by the other Mahantas in propagating the

cult, while cultivating the tradition of Bhāonā. Amongst a number of playwrights, a good number of plays have been authored by Gopāl Ātā, Dviija Bhūṣan, Rāmcaran Thākur, Daityārī Thākur, Jadumanidev. The significant plays of Gopāl Ātā are- *Uddhava Yāna*, *Janma Yātrā*; Ramcharan's *Kaṁsa Badh*; Daityārī's *Nṛsimha Yātrā* and *Syamanta Haraṇa*; Dviija Bhūṣan's *Ajāmil Upākhyān'*; Jadumanidev's *Phālgua Yātrā*. These authors imitated Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in their style, language and form to a large extent in their plays. There are also instances of borrowing some of the songs from them in verbatim³. Although the plays of these Mahantas have much close affinities with the plays of the Gurus, it is to be noted that, a new trend has been developed in the composition of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs* by Dviija Bhūṣan, Rāmcaran Thākur and Daityārī Thākur. In the *Ajāmil Upākhyān* of Dviija Bhūṣan, although the language used is Brajabuli, the verses are mostly in old Assamese language. The *payārs* of Rāmcaran Thākur's *Kaṁsa Badh*, Daityārī Thakur's *Syamanta Haraṇ* and *Nṛsimha Yātrā* are also in old Assamese.⁴

From the above examples it seems that, the standards of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* set by Śaṅkaradeva and

Mādhavadeva has been put to frequent variations in the hands of the later Gurus. Thus, the immediate followers, who either emulated or adhered to the basic ideals of the tradition, had also made slight but not negligible changes to their dramas.

In the later period, the performance of *Bhāonā* was not only confined to the four walls of Satras, but also made an entry into the courts of Āhom kings and to the *Namghars* outside the Satras. Gradually, it had its currency in every village and towns of Assam, esp. of Upper Assam. Although, the Vaisnava saints as Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Rāmcarāṇ, Daityārī Thākur etc. established the tradition of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* at Kamrup, later, it actually could not developed and flourished in this part of Assam. The tradition was alive for a period in a very feeble form only in the Barpeta Satra. Probably, the Koch kings could not encourage and patronize the tradition as was done by the Āhom kings in Upper Assam⁵, and, this might be the reason as to why the *Bhāonā* performance-tradition could not be rooted deeply in the Lower Assam compared to that of Upper Assam. But of-late, efforts have been taken to revive the performance-tradition in the Barpeta

Satra after a long period with the performance of *Rukmini-Haraṇa Nāṭ* on 14th September'03.⁶

Bhāonās change not only in the compositions but also in the level of performance. Gradually, it was performed with secular objectives rather than simply devotional. In the courts of Āhom kings an *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ* was performed on the occasions such as, *Abhiṣek* (initiation rites), victory of wars and in entertaining the guests. Entertaining honourable personalities with a performance of drama was practiced even by Śaṅkaradeva, who performed a *Mahānāṭ* for the pleasure of Jagadis Misra⁷. This practice was recurrent during the reign of Āhom Kings such as, Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769 A.D.), in the court of whom *Rāvaṇ Badh* was played in the honour of Cachar and Manipur kings; *Padmāwati Haraṇa bhāonā* was performed in the court of King Gouri Nāth Simha by the son of Na-Gosāin; in the days of Kamaleshwar Simha, the Mahantas of Bareghar Satra performed *Rukminī Haraṇ Nāṭ* and the Mahantas of Dihing-Namati Satra performed *Akruragamaṇ*⁸.

Following the basic form and technique this dramatic tradition underwent considerable changes in many aspects at various stages. As mentioned

earlier, changes creep into the tradition at a very early phase of its development. Mādhavadeva himself in his plays gave a distinctive identity of his own. Although Brajabuli is the language of his plays, influence of Assamese language is observable in *Chor-dharā nāṭ*, *Pimpara Gucuā nāṭ*. The succeeding generations of playwrights, who followed Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva also made changes in the line of language. Dr. S. N. Sarma demarcated two probable reasons for the change of language as, lack of sufficient knowledge of the Brajabuli language in the case of the later *Mahantas* and the preference given by the audience for the language of the popular scriptures, *Kīrttan and Daśam*, i.e., old Assamese rather than Brajabuli⁹. In the later period the language of Brajabuli was gradually fading away from the minds of the people. It became an unintelligible language for the commoners.

While performing in the village *Nāmghars* the writing of plays also came into the hands of commoners from the *Mahantas* of the *Satras*. Probably during the 18th-19th century this dramatic tradition took an inclination for many transformations to cater the popular needs. The standard set by the Gurus are seemed to be incompetently maintained. As

a result, numerous dramas evolved in the style of *Añkīyā Nāṭs*, which certainly can not be regarded as *Añkīyā Nāṭ*, nor are the performances as *Añkīyā Bhāonās*. These later developments are *Dhurā Bhāonā*, *Phaujīyā Bhāonā*, *Juri Bhāonā*, *Cukragānar Bhāonā*, *Bāresahariyā Bhāonā* or *Hezāri Bhāonā* and *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*.

A brief note on the types of *Bhāonā* that evolved during the 18th-19th century:

Dhurā Bhāonā: A 'pseudo-*bhāonā*'¹⁰ evolved after the coming of the British with the influence of Bengali *Dhūp-Kīrttan*. In this performance *Sūtradhār* has the main role to play, who dances to the songs and explanatory words about the subject-matter and plot of the play, with a whisk or *cowar* in his hand. Analogous to *Añkīyā Bhāonās* it has *ślokas*, *Īṣ bandanā*, *Guru-bandanā*, *Nāndī*, *Bhaṭimā*, *Praveśar* and *Prasthānar gīt* (songs of entry and exit), *bilāpas*, etc. It shows its distinction in the lyrics of the songs, dress, dances and hand gestures. Dialogues and prose pieces are completely absent instead verses and *payārs* are used. It is called as *Dhurā Bhāonā*, probably for the predominance of *dhurā*

songs. The language used here is old Assamese but not Brajabuli. This kind of *Bhāonā* is said to be originated in the Barpeta Satra and later it was developed in the Kamalabari Satra. According to Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma it is a folk form of *Bhāonā* performance¹¹.

Phaujīyā Bhāonā: With the influence of Bengali *Jātrā*, a kind of *Bhāonā* called as *Phaujīyā Bhāonā*, coming through Kochbehar and Barpeta, made its entry in Kamalabari Satra. The *Sūtradhāra* has the vital role to play in *Phaujīyā Bhāonā*. The language used here is a queer mixture of Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Srī Mathurā Dās Ātā of Barpeta Satra developed this kind of drama, who later on wrote dramas, employing language completely influenced by Bengali¹². This kind of *Bhāonā* was also practiced in the Āuniāṭī Satra which was simply known as '*Bhāonā*' with dialogues in the *amritākhyar* verse in Assamese language interspersed with Sanskrit words.

Jurī Bhāonā: This kind of *Bhāonā* gained its currency in the early part of 19th century in the Kamalabari Satra. In the days of Lakshmikanta Deva Goswami, a drama was performed in the Kamalabari Satra by the abbots of the Barpeta Satra. The drama was *Rāma Banabāsa* which was in Bengali language and

is called as 'pāla' rather than 'ṇāṭ'. Later in the style of this drama Chandrakanta Deva Goswami developed a kind of *Bhāonā* known as *Juri Bhāonā*. He wrote two plays *Rāma Banabāsa* and *Mahirāvaṇa Badha* and infused in them *juri* songs composed in *bandhā rāg* (i.e., sung in fixed rhythm or *tāl*). *Sūtradhāra* is absent in this kind of *Bhaona* and features like *bhaṭimā*, *ślokas*, etc. are also absent. There are at least two or three members in the group of *Juri Bhāonā* who sing the songs of an episode accompanied by a *dhulukī* (a small drum) and cymbals. The language used in it is Assamese.

Cukragāṇar Bhāonā: In this kind of *Bhāonā* also the *Sūtradhāra* has no role to play. Generally four youths performed the play with hand gestures (*hastas*). The language is Assamese and the directives used here are same as *Juri- Bhāonā*.

Barecahariyā and *Hezāri Bhāonā*: It is a kind of spectacular performance, where more than a dozen *Bhāonās* are performed in the same arena over one night or consecutively several nights. Such a kind of tradition of *Bhāonā* is prevalent in the Kaliabor region of Nagaon and Jamuguri of Sonitpur districts. In Kaliabor this form is known as *Hezāri Bhāonā*.

Hezāri or *Hejerīyā* is derived from the term 'hezar' which means 'a thousand' (a count of a *khel* or artisans guild employed during the Āhom regime) also known as '*Bora-kheliya*' (from *khel*) *Bhāonā*. And, the *Barecahariyā* (from *cahar*, 'a well-defined area; a village; a town') *Bhāonā* is a practice prevalent in Jamuguri area. The tradition of this institution is about two hundred years old, for it is said that the Āhom Governor Salāl Gohāin, posted at Satiya near Jumuguri, patronized this kind of *bhāonā*¹³. Later, the people of greater Jamuguri area have been promoting this traditional practice till today.

This performance is generally held in the dry season. A part of the paddy fields is cleared to prepare the ground and to make the stage. The plays are produced in a large *pandal* that consist of a central circular and many facet ground plan, covered by three-terraced structure at the centre, and the constituent *pandals* (*khalā*) for each play, radiating out from the central structure. A large holy pedestal that holds the *Bhāgawata Purāṇa* is kept in the central structure. The performance in all the *Khalās* start at the same time, each by a village or a group of villages with *gāyan-bāyan*. Similarly, *Sūtradhāra* appears in all the *khalās*. The parties

may select a drama either an *Añkīyā Nāṭ* or a latter-day piece, i.e., *Matṛbhāṣar Nāṭ*. This is a unique performance, a true multi-coloured spectacle.

Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā or *Asamīyā Bhāonā* is another emerging form of *Añkīyā Bhāonā* during the period of 17th-19th century. It is also simply known as *Bhāonā*. On the basis of its language, this form is termed as *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* or *Asamīyā Bhāonā*. The term '*Matṛbhāṣar*' means mother tongue (*Matṛ* = mother, *Bhāṣā* = language). In this kind of drama, the language used in the dialogues is the modern Assamese or old Assamese instead of the Brajabuli language of the Śaṅkarite dramas. Prof. Maheshwar Neog defined this form of *Bhāonā* as "dramas written by the later *Mahantas*, which may not have the sweet brajabuli idiom, but only the everyday Assamese speech for its language (and, therefore, sometimes called *matṛbhāṣar nāṭak* in recent times) and may not have the rich *añkīyā bājanā* to accompany it¹⁴". Kesavananda Deva Goswami defined *Matṛbhāṣar Nāṭ* as a later development of *Añkīyā Nāṭ*, a queer admixture of modern theatre with colloquial language and the use of Shakespearian blank verse¹⁵.

Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami treats the evolution of *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* as a recent development in the tradition of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* with many changes, apart from the change of language from Brajabuli to colloquial Assamese. According to him, *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* usually comprise of three to four *Aṅkas* (Scenes) instead of one *Aṅka* in *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā*. He also pointed to the diminishing function of *Sūtradhāra* in this kind *Bhāonā*¹⁶.

According to Dr. Pitambara Deva Goswami, although the Satras maintained the tradition of *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*, the change of language to colloquial Assamese was perceivable in the Satras of Upper Assam which was used in the dialogues in verse. This kind of *Bhāonā*, according to him was known simply as 'Bhāonā' and was practiced by the Āuniāṭī Satra. He further adds that in this kind of drama, the importance of *Sūtradhāra* diminishes; all the preliminaries are not performed by the *Gāyana* and *Bāyana*.¹⁷

The tradition of *Bhāonā* emerged in the Satras, developed in the course of time within it with many transformations. As mentioned earlier, the change of Brajabuli language into Assamese was first initiated

by Mādhavadeva and his later playwrights in some of the songs and verses. It is said that Āuniāṭī Satra first made the practice of writing *Nāṭs* in Assamese language instead of Brajabuli¹⁸. The founder *Satrādhikār* (Head of the *Satra*) of Āuniāṭī Satra translated the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* into Assamese, casting in the model of *Ankiyā Nāṭ*¹⁹.

Gradually, *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* met with many significant developments outside the *Satras*, when it was started to be practiced by the Non-*Satriyas*. People prefer the change of language as more communicable with the performance-tradition gaining its popularity both as an art-form and as an 'act of ritual'.

Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā, both its scripts and other dramatic aspects, has been treated by several playwrights and performers with their own creativities, in a variety of platforms with different objectives. This resulted in a widespread diversification within the genre.

Given below is a list of plays written during the period from 17th century to early 19th century. These names are taken from the collections of Gauhati University, Department of Historical and

Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, and from the catalogue compiled by B. C. Saikia²⁰.

Rāma Plays : Ahalyā haraṇa, Daśānaṇa (Rāvaṇa) Badh, Durvāṣa Bhojan, Kapindravijay (Mahirāvaṇa Badh), Lakshmaṇa digvijay, Lavaṇa-Daitya Badh, Lava-Kuṣar Juddha, Rāmar Asvamedh, Rāmar Svargāgamaṇ, Ram Banabash, Rāvaṇa Badh, Satashkandha Rāvaṇa Badh, Sahasraskandha Rāvaṇa Badh, Sitār Pātāl Gamaṇ, Sābitrī Uddhār, Sindhumuṇi Badh, Sitā Haraṇ, Sitā Barjjan, Sitār Ajodhyā Gamaṇ, Biravedhu Badh.

Mahābhārata Plays: Abhimaṇyu Badh, Asvakarṇa Badh, Bāghasūra Badh, Bhūmisvyambara, Bhisma Niryaṇ, Bhisma Bijaya, Droṇa Parba, Draupadi Haraṇa, Draupadi-Svayambara, Kālakunja-Shoshaka Badh, Karṇa Badh, Kulācala Badh, Kurmaival Badh, Kurukhetra Samar, Naridarva, Pāṇdava Banabāsa, Pāṇdava Bijay, Pāṇdava Svargārohan, Probāś Jātrā, Sindhurā Jātrā, Sudhanava Badh, Babrubāhana, Bijaysūr Badh, Birāṭ Parba, Bṛshaketu Badh.

Bhāgavata Plays: Ajāmila, Amṛta Manthan, Bali-Calan, Dakha Jajñya, Danda Parba, Dhruba Carita,

Hara Mohan, Hari-Harar Juddha, Jarāsandha Badh, Kāṃsa Badh, Kṛṣṇa Nirāyan, Kumār Haraṇa, Mākhā Bhāṅgā Jātrā, Nṛsimha Jātrā, Putaṇā Badh, Satya Haran, Śṛ Kṛṣṇar Baikunṭha Parāyan, Syamanta Haraṇa, Pāla Bhojana, Bakāsūra Badh, Bṛttasūr Badh.

Plays from Other Sources: *Parśurāmar Matr Hatyā, Haricandra Upākhyān.*

Apart from these plays, there are plenty of play-scripts which have been being preserved in many Satras.

The sources of the above-mentioned *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonās* are mostly Mahabharata and Ramayana rather than the *Bhāgavata*. Moreover, tales telling of fights and killings with love scenes became more popular in the later plays.

The dramas of the recent period which started from the early part of nineteenth century seem to be over-ridden with secular commitments. Importance has been given to melodramatic and other secular elements, making a medium of recreation and pleasure rather than attaining Spiritualism that envelops within the *Ankīyā Nāṭ*. As such every aspect of the tradition of this kind of *Bhāonā* has been

characterized by such attitudes. Thus, influences have been noticeable not only in the composition but also in the manner of presentation, level of performance and so on and so forth.

This emergent genre as termed as *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* was not characterized only with the change of language, but also with visible distinctions in other aspects of the performing tradition, which is discussed in Chapter 5. The term has been also accepted in the academic parlance, as evident from the writings of illustrious scholars like Dr. Maheswar Neog, Dr, Kesavananda Deva Goswami, Narayan Chandra Goswami, Dr. Pitambar Deva Goswami, Gajen Barua and others.

Nevertheless, in the popular parlance also, the term '*Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*' is well known to the commoners, both to the active performers and the audiences as well as the connoisseurs of this art form. In many cases, simply the term '*Bhāonā*', without the prefix '*Matṛbhāṣa*', is also used to designate the same genre. Other different terms, found to be used by the people in different places, to designate this particular category of the performance are, '*Kathā Bhāonā*' ('*Kathā*' meaning

prose), 'Abhinaya' (Abhinaya- literally means acting) or simply 'Nāṭ'.

The use of the term 'Kathā Bhāonā' in Biswanath Chariali of Sonitpur District seems to be significant. An explanation provided by an informant²¹ on the use of this term is that the *Bhāonā* performances using colloquial Assamese language in dialogues are less lyrical in nature in contrast to those *Aṅkiyā Bhāonās* of Brajabuli language. For this reason, the term 'Kathā Bhāonā', which implies, "Bhāonā in prose", is used to describe such performances.

The term 'Abhinaya' is used by the people of Latabua Gaon near Rupahi of Nagaon to mean a contemporary *Bhāonā* performance²².

In most of the remote areas of Sivasagar and Jorhat Districts, the term 'Nat' is also used to designate a performance of *Bhāonā* in this contemporary period. This term, otherwise refers to denote the scripts of a *Bhāonā* performance.

With the range of other developments, today, active association of different ethnic communities with this performance-tradition is also noticeable. They participate in the various activities of the influential Vaiṣṇavite culture, including the

performance of *Bhāonā*. This development is marked by the distinctive production of *Bhāonā* performances by such communities in their own style. In many cases, it has been observed of using either their own language or Assamese language (with code mixing) by such communities. Mention can be made in this connection about the Mishing communities of Majuli, and certain tea garden communities of Central Assam, Bodo, Sonowal Kachari, etc.

These developments are also taken into the realm of *Bhāonā* or *Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* in its wider extent, created in the warp of *Añkīyā Bhāonā*, with certainly many features in common which identify it with the tradition, along with its dissimilarities. This is discussed in details in Chapter 5.

Moreover, *Bhāonā* has also its impact in some of the regional dramatic performances of the Lower Assam in the later period. Such performances as indicated by Dr. Bhattacharyya, as "performances allied to *Bhāonā*".²³ They are mainly, *Pācatī*, *Apī-Oja-party* and *Nām-Bhāonā*, which are exclusively performed by women and, are associated to ceremonial occasions having ritualistic significance. *Bangāli Bhāonā* is also of such kind of performance prevalent in the Darrang district, is not in vogue now. Such

performances can not be called as full-fledged drama. They have elements which are analogous to the *Bhāonā* performance which pointed to the fact of its influences.

Notes

- ¹ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 24.
- ² Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 70.
- ³ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 27.
- ⁴ *ibid*, 28.
- ⁵ Satyendra Nath Sarma (1996) 93.
- ⁶ "Eśa bacharar pichat Barpetār Kīrtangharar Maṅikūṭgrhat 'Rukmiṇī Haran'" *Āmār Asam* 9 Sep, 2003.
- ⁷ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 5.
- ⁸ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 75.
- ⁹ *ibid*, 76.
- ¹⁰ Maheswar Neog, *Bhaona, The Ritual Play of Assam* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1984) 60.
- ¹¹ Nabin Chandra Sharma, "Asamiyā Loka Nāṭyar Paramparā: Uttaraṅ āru Udbhāvan", *Asamiyā Nāṭak: Paramparā āru Paribartan*, (Guwahati: LBS, 1996) 24.
- ¹² Biswa Barua, "Bhaona: Lokanāṭya, āru kisu prāsaṅgik kathā" *San̄karī Kalā Sāhityar Adyayan* (Jamuguri: Baresahariya Bhaona Mahotsav Ussjapan Samiti, 1998) 47-48.
- ¹³ Praphulladatta Goswami, *Festivals of Assam* (Guwahati: ABILAC, 1995) 43.
- ¹⁴ Maheswar Neog, (1984) 43.
- ¹⁵ Kesavananda Deva Goswami, "Ankiya Bhaona", *Glimpses of the Vaisnava Heritage of Assam* (Guwahati: Asam Satra Mahasabha, 2001) 111.
- ¹⁶ Narayan Chandra Goswami, *Asamat Bhāonār Paramparā* (Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1993) 13-18.

¹⁷ Pitambar Deva Goswami, personal interview, 02 Nov, 1998

¹⁸ Biswa Barua, (1998) 48.

¹⁹ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 83.

²⁰ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 86. and Maheswar Neog, (1984) 55-56.

²¹ Arup Saikia, personal interview, 23 Jul, 2004

²² Haren Kalita, personal interview, 24 Aug, 2002

²³ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 51.

Chapter 5

CHANGES IN BHĀONĀ: TRADITION VIS-À-VIS EMERGING TRENDS

Change is an irrefutable phenomenon. And, it is more apparent while studying a performance. A performance study is always away from the usual theory of 'idealism' that inherent in many of the structuralized studies. An inquiry on performance essentially focuses on what is actually performed and the context in which it is performed¹. No matter performing the same the text, every performance is a new creation, unique from all its versions². No two performances can ever be alike, even if it uses the same text or follow a 'traditional structured form'. In this regard, P. J. Claus and Frank J. Korom observe:

"A performance is a live presentation which is never repeated identically. It has a fleeting existence and is the product of a performer, an individual in the society. ... Performance studies make

little use of standard, idealized concept." ³

Performance is a mode of communicative behaviour and a type of communicative event⁴. It is an event for which the doer assumes responsibility to be evaluated as a bearer of tradition⁵. In short, performance is an 'act of expression' which is communicated through physical movement in dance, drama and verbal presentation in song, recitation and other modes. Richard Bauman describes 'performance' in his words as "reflexive---signification about signification---insofar as it calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system (physical movement in dance, language and tone in song and so on), making one at least conscious of its devices." Performance is presented to an audience and involves aesthetic sensibilities.

Performance studies emerged from sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking in the 1970's⁶.

The present study of the performance of *Bhāonā*, concerns with the changes that occur in the traditional practice, since its evolution. The

performance of *Bhāonā* is actually a socio-religious event that involves religiosity and mass participation. This 'traditional' affair initiated and structured by Śaṅkaradeva in the 16th century [Discussed in Chapter: 3], is presently in the transitional stage with observable changes in every aspects of the performance. With the recognition of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā* as the 'tradition', *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* is the 'emerging trend' in the tradition with its changing nature.

Both the phenomenon of continuity and change in the performance-tradition is simultaneously observable in *Bhāonā*. In the recent period, this performance-tradition is facing a complicated situation of varied identities due to the various transformations within the genre.

When a performance is the product or the creation of a performer, it is his communicative competence which is accountable to the audience. Thus, the 'act of expression' in the part of the performer is a matter to be evaluated by the audience as the relative skill and the effectiveness of the performer's display of competence⁷.

Besides the skill of performance, a performer of a traditional performance is always responsible

to a tradition. As said earlier, a performance is a 'communicative event' for which the doer assumes responsibility to be evaluated as a bearer of tradition.

As a matter of the fact, while evaluating a performance, the text in the context in which it is performed, the performer's competence along with the conventionalized structure or the tradition is the issues of concern. Claus & Korom have pointed to the fact as:

"Each performance in a performance tradition is a performance event. A term such as *performance configuration* may be used to refer to a description (like a score) of the assemblage of the performers and the acts they perform. *Performance context* may be used to refer to the physical, social and cultural setting of the event. A Performance tradition, to return to that definition, is then a concept like genre which identifies a given performance event as an instance of a particular kind." ⁸

A performance is expressive and emergent, it always creates --- an expression where creativity prevails in every aspect. Each performance has its own identity with the individual skill and tastes of the every person involved into it, within the varied contexts. Such creativity leads to the development of the 'emergent quality of performance'⁹, even though with a conventional form and content. In the words of Bauman, "The emergent quality of performance, resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of participants, within the context of particular situations."¹⁰

In case of *Bhāonā* at present, innovative changes are perceivable in the whole tradition which includes the text or script of the play as well as in every other aspects of the performance. As mentioned earlier, *Añkiyā Bhāonā* even in its initial days of evolution, has experienced many transformations when the tradition was practiced by the *Satra* people within their religious environment. [Discussed in Chapter 4]

Eventually, when this performing art tradition stepped out of the *Satras* and *Nāmghars*, it became more secular in character than devotional. Since

then, the traditional practice of *Bhāonā* has been moulding itself with the change of time. This is to mean that, many modifications emerged into the tradition in adaptations to the change of time. The standard set by the Gurus are seem to be sparsely maintained. The *Bhāonās* of recent period, i.e., the *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* adds novelty through subscription to popular sentiments and tastes.

Thus, changes to this performance-tradition are visible in many aspects as, the language of the play, written text or script of the play, theme of the play, presentation of the performance, objectives of performance, audience's participation and attitude, dance style, music, costume, make-up and other *cho*-effigies along with the place of performance.

Text

As mentioned earlier, the written text signifies the script of a *bhāonā* which is called as '*nāṭ*' and, its performance is actually '*bhāonā*'. Before, the writing of a play was confined to the abbots of the *Satras* following Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva but, later the laymen of villages and

towns started writing of plays. This change of playwrights brought obvious newness into the tradition, which includes the language, style of writing and themes of the play.

Language of the play

The dramas of the post-Śaṅkarite period compromises with the use of language and compositions. The sweet Brajabuli idiom used by Śaṅkaradeva and some of the succeeding Gurus in their dramas has been shifted to everyday Assamese speech as the language of the dialogues, especially, when the writing of the plays came into the hands of the Non-Satriyās as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Specimens of language from a few contemporary scripts are provided below:

- *Bhadrasen: Tomār icchāt bādhā diyār kāran
nai, gatike tumio olowā*

*Sursen: Dādā, āpuni gole moiyo apunār
logote jām*

[*Sūjajña Rajār Dharma Parikhyā*, Kaloogaon,
Sivasagar]

- *Rāñi: Tente tumio svāmīr lagate juddha
Karibā Padum?*

Padum: Moi baudeu prāṇanathar birahat

*tiltil koi mṛtyu baran karātkoi
juddhakhetrat svāmīr lagate prāṇ
bisarjan diyātuwei śreya. Etiyā jāo
mok āpuni bidāi diyak.*

[**Amar Haribhakta**, Charing, Sivasagar]

The language of the following specimen is lyrical in nature in presentation:

- *Saramā: Kotā kotā mor prāṇar tarani*
Bibhiṣan: Kon, Sarama? Cowā Saramā, mukti
pale putrai tumār. Śeṣ hol āji
tār rākhyas jibon

[**Sītāharai āru Taranisen Badh**, Sivasagar]

Sometimes it is also seen that in the line of imitating Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in writing Sanskrit and Brajabuli, the new playwrights produce a strange jargon.

For instance:

- *Kamalā: Āhe bāpu torā sabar bārttā śuni*
hṛdi kāti jāi. He bāpu, tohār
manobāñcā pūraṇ howaba.
Mohor āśīrbāde, tuhu pṛthibīt

mahābīr howabi. He bāpu toho

mohok cārbi nāhi

Jitdhar:Āhe Māwa, tohār paricay deha. Hāmu

tohāk prananteu carbo nahi

[**Dharmadhvajar Putra Tyāg - Ballaketu
Badh**, Kamarchuk, Nagsankar, Tezpur]

And, although the recently formed 'genre' of *Bhāonā*, are trying to maintain the parallelism in reciting the *ślokas*, *bhaṭimās*, songs and verses, it is apparent that, the language used in them do not completely abide by the rules of either Sanskrit or Brajabuli as in the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*. No doubt that, these are quoted in the style of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*, but are not even in purely colloquial language, ^{as observed in some cases.} For instance:

Sloka: Gītrāg Sindhurā Ektāl ॥

Āve jagat guru kariyu prabeś ॥

Layalāse cali jai dekhite suveṣ ॥

Saṅge cale sarasvatī ānandita beś ॥

Lakhmīsaha nārāyaṇa kario prabeś ॥

Ehi mate paila goyā sabhāra bhitar ॥

Hari hari bola sava sabhāsada nara ॥

[**Sujajña Rajār Dharma Parīkhyā**, Kaloogaon,
Sivasagar]

Theme of the play

Today, the stories or the themes of the plays are much preferable from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other *Purāṇas* than *Bhāgavata* as featured in the *Ankīyā Nāṭs*. In most of the cases, the line of story is imaginary; it is neither from the epics and other *Purāṇas*, nor from the *Bhāgavata*. As for example, *Sujāṭṅā Rajār Dharma Parikhyā*, Kaloogaon of Sivasagar and *Dharmadhvajar Putra Tyāḡ - Ballaketu Badh*, of Tezpur]

Moreover, tales telling of fights (*yuddha*), killings (*badha*), abduction (*haraṇa*) or themes of conjugal love (*sr̥ngāra rāsa*) predominate as the subject matters of the dramas of post-Śaṅkarite period. This is rightly indicated by the following titles: *Sīta Haraṇa*, *Syamanta Haraṇa*, *Kaṇsa Badha*, *Mahīrāvaṇa Badha* and so on and so forth. Dr. Maheshwar Neog described this phenomenon as:

"There is a good deal of blood and thunder in the bhaona plays particularly in those written after the two great Masters. Even the titles of the latter-day plays with the end part as vadha

(killing of demons and evil ones) and harana (rape or carrying away of godly and noble women) are a pointer in that direction. This predominance of blood and thunder is there in the same measures in plays of other parts of medieval India, whether it is Kathakali or Bhagavata-mela. The characters sometimes look grotesque and instill in the heart of the audience awe and terror with a little violence, alternated by moments of tenderness and grace and touches of lyricism and pathos."¹¹

Nature and Presentation of the Play

The nature of the play constitutes the basic components of the whole performance tradition. As one of the fundamental nature of *Añkīyā Nāṭ*, it consists of one act or *añka*. But, the later-day plays mostly have more than one act. Usually, the changes of scenes are identified with songs. An *Añkīyā Bhāonā* is performed at a stretch. The change of scenes are indicated with the verse by *Sūtradhāra* as '*Prastuta Kathā Śunaha*' or '*E Kathā rahuka*'

respectively, for instance, as found in *Rukmiṇī Harāṇa* and *Keli Gopāla* of Śaṅkaradeva.

The dominance of the role played by *Sūtradhāra* is another important feature of *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā*. He plays the intermediary role between the audience and the dramatis personae. In brief, he has a many-faced role as a dancer, singer, director and interpreter, who conducts the whole show with dances, songs and explanatory commentary. He is present on the stage from the beginning of the play till end. This vital role of *Sūtradhāra* is contrasted by the minimum importance of the role in the dramas of the Post- Śaṅkarite period, esp., *Māṭṛbhāṣār Nāṭ*. Today his role is in fact, sequential. He does not remain on the stage throughout the whole performance as in *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*. After the recitation of *Artha Bhaṭimā* and performance in the ritualistic task of introducing the play, he exits from the stage and sits in the *dohār* (place where the musicians sits to accompany the performance ^{- See P-177}) from where he took up direction by prompting the text to the performers. It is found that, in the *nāṭ* or written text of these later-day dramas there are references of *Sūtradhāra* in the intervals. This is only taken for direction

during rehearsing the play. In some cases it is found that, the *Sūtradhāra* retires from his role of performance but remains on the stage or performance area with the written text in hand prompting very prominently.

The entry of the female performers in the performances of *Bhāonā* can also be noted (especially on the secular occasions), as a divergence from the convention. Earlier, male performers performed the female roles. Entry of female members in the performances was a restriction, which is followed even today in the performances on religious occasions

From the early part of the nineteenth century till date, it is found that, melodramatic and other secular elements have made its entry into the tradition. *Bhaonās* were started to be performed on secular occasions besides religious. In this regard, Bhattacharyya says-

"Along with the progress of time and varying circumstances, the *Bhāvanā* began to undergo some changes in the nature of their performances; the long standing religious fervour gradually declines; naturally, in course of time *Bhāvanā* became secularized, too on some occasions. In this connection it may be pointed out that of the different aims and objects of the Assamese Language Improvement Society

(1890), one was to improve old and modern dramas by arranging theatrical performances after the English manner and reforming the Bhāvanā. Obviously, "reforming the Bhāvanā" indicates an attempt at some changes in the nature of its performance, conditions, equipments and the like - a tendency of secularization and modernization gradually follows, though partially."¹²

Further, Dr Bhattacharyya adds instances of performances of *Bhāvanā* performed in association to secular events in the early part of 19th century. These are, staging of the performance *Rāja Sūya Yajña* at Sibsagar and *Jarasandha Badh* at Nagaon in connection to the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887; *Abhimanyu Badh* at Nagaon in 1886 and at Dibrugarh in 1888 on the occasion of Durga Puja.¹³

Some other instances of performances of secular occasions in the contemporary period can be enumerated as, a performance telecasts in the television, a performance in a festival or competition performed often in a simulated platform.

Simultaneously, religiosity in the performance-tradition also persists which is evident in the performances observed in a religious platform i.e., in a *Satra* or *nāmghar* both in rural or urban areas. Such performances often have the ritualistic significance with its objective as an 'offering to earn piety' which is sometimes made by a single person and at other times, by the common public for the well-being of the whole society. Incidentally, such performances are also not free from the entertaining factor besides having the ritualistic significance.

In this period, comical relief to the audience makes significant appearance in the tradition of *Bhāonā*. This leads to the infusion of the lighter roles like *Bahuwā* (Clown) and *Dūt* (Messenger) which do not have any connection to the text of the performance. Sometimes, some dialogues are completely out of context. It seems that this minimizes the nature of religiosity that predominates in the tradition of *Añkīyā Bhāonā*. The factor responsible for such change will be discussed in the next chapter.

It is also a fact that, a comical relief is also provided in an *Añkīyā Bhāonā* but, not infusing a character unrelated to the actual text. A character, related to the actual drama has an amusing part to play.

Apart from other features that characterized this recently formed *Bhāonā*, the projection of emotional temperament by the characters are given much consideration instead of relishing the *Bhakti rasa*. These plays laid stress on *bīra*, *sṛngāra* and *adbhuta rasa*. As such, (as mentioned earlier), preference of tales that gives the pleasure of war, fights or love scenes are more observable.

Today, a *bhāonā* is also performed on the stages and open arenas as an 'art show' besides performing as a 'religious event' in the *Satras* and *Nāmghars* of villages and towns. The television is also used as the platform for its popularization. A performance of *Bhaonā* shown on Television is exclusively an artistic presentation rather than a religio-cultural- performance. There are also *Bhaonās* performed in a *Nāmghar* but, with an extended arena, where sometimes sitting arrangement for the audience are made even on chairs. Earlier, people sit on the floor inside the *Nāmghar*, on the both sides of the

performance area. Besides, adjacent to the *Nāmghar* or sometimes elsewhere, another temporary arena is constructed akin to the architecture of the actual *Nāmghar*, where exists even a *Maṇikuṭ*.¹⁴ *Bhaonās* are also performed on raised platform or stage often on secular occasions often as an art show which constitutes a part of a festival or other event. Performances of *Bhaonās* are not confined to Assam. There are several instances of presentations of *Bhaonā* performances on secular platforms at different places of India and abroad. Once a troupe of Kamalabari Satra was send by the president of India to Indonesia in order to perform a *Bhaonā*. Among the Assamese residents abroad, the practice of *Bhaonā* performances are also prevalent.¹⁵ But, these performances are performed in a condensed form of two-three hour show of course, with several modifications.

To minimize the time factor the plays of today are not presented in the lengthy form that characterizes an *Aṅkiyā Nāṭ*. They are shortened to only two-three hours, especially when they are presented on the stage or television or on occasions other than religious. Even the performances inside a

Nāmghar with religious significance are not that long as an *Añkīyā Nāṭ*.

Moreover, in the dramas of earlier times, the fixity in text is compulsion for the performers during the performances while uttering the dialogues. Today, the flexibility is marked in the presentation of the dialogues, specifically in the character of *Bahuwā*, who often say dialogues, often, unrelated to the actual context of performance, created instantaneously by the performer during the performance.

This divergence from the text of the recent-day performances pointed to the importance on entertainment-oriented innovations and less ritualistic significance upon the performances. In this regard, Dr. Blackburn says:

"Performances with greater fixity in content tend to be more ritualistic in function. Conversely those with greater innovations in content tend to be entertainment-oriented in function."¹⁶

Objectives of the play

Śaṅkaradeva created this dramatic art tradition with the aim of propagating his *Ekśaraṇa* Vaiṣṇavite faith. Later, the performance of *Bhāonā* became a prerequisite activity of the *Satras*. It also formed an obligatory part to the gurus of the *Satras* to write and present plays in his initiation rites. In such a way, the tradition by associating itself with the Vaisnava religion, continued and developed within the *Satra*. Gradually, this performing art appeal the people to a large extent and came out from the *Satras* amidst the common people and to the royal courts. It provided amusement in the royal courts as mentioned earlier the Chapter: 4. Besides, it gained its popularity in villages and towns which encourages the commoners to practice it extensively.

Eventually, this tradition in spite of its ritualistic significance, serves as a medium of popular entertainment shunning its previous spiritual and devotional temperament.

Events centered on religious displays or other cultural performances, contribute a great deal to the maintenance of a sense of ethnic identity. This traditional art form also seems to act as a strong identity marker of the Assamese culture. A *Bhāonā* is

projected today to enhance the richness of the Assamese traditional culture. This leads to popularize the tradition not only within the country but also abroad. In order to identify themselves as an Assamese, people of this region living abroad are trying to make practices of every rituals, customs, festivals and events in the foreign land including the *Bhāonā* performances, as mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Moreover, many groups and organizations valuing it as a rich heritage and unifying force of the divided Assam put their efforts in popularizing as well as disseminating the tradition other than projecting the religious motive. This is discussed in details in the Chapter: 8. Again, performances presented on television are specifically designed to entertain rather than attaining spiritual bliss.

Music and Dance

The songs are imitations of the two Masters if not completely borrowed from them. Unable to understand the intricacies of the raga music, the recent-day dramatists sometime move their songs syllable to syllable in the frame of the lyrics of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, so that once familiar

tunes could be kept alive. It is observable that, ~~no~~ ~~often~~ the songs are imitations of the two Gurus or the ragas are put into sequence as *Ankiyā Nāṭs*, ^{but,} [^] in practice, the tunes have the influences of either modern-day songs or folk songs as *Kamrupī Lokagīt*, *Deh Bicārar Gīt* etc.

Sometimes *payāra* verses replaced the *rāgā*-based songs and even the dialogues. Plaintive verses are put in longish metre, *muktāvalī*.¹⁷ There are many variations in the changes in this aspect of the Bhaona tradition. *Bhāonās* of Sonitpur region is mostly found to be using such *padabhāṣā*, .i.e., dialogues in verses. In some places, the *Bilāpas* (wailings) are sung in *Madhyavali*, a new tune¹⁸. Another instance of change and deviation is observed in the use of *Dharanjyoti taal* (rhythm), in pathetic scenes are common in earlier times which is now used mostly in the scenes of fights¹⁹. In some areas, such as *Sivasagar*, it is still used in the scenes which are predominated with the *Karuṇa Rasa* mostly in the *Bilapas* (wailings).

The *Dhemālis* (*purvarāṅga*) played by the *Gāyan Bāyan* not only varies in numbers from place to place but also varies in the style of presentation. As for

instance, within the district of Jorhat at Dicoinagar the *Dhemālis* usually used are: *Bahā Cāhini*, *Uthā Cāhini*, *Dhumāhi*, *Na-dhemāli*, *Bar-Dhemāli*, *Sur dhemāli*, *Ghoṣa-dhemāli* and *Guru-ghāt*, and at Dhekiajuli, the *Dhemālis* prevalent are: *Jurani Cāpar*, *Cāli Bājanā*, *Cuk dhemāli*, *Saru dhemāli*, *Bar dhemāli*, *Ghoṣā-dhemāli*, and *Guru-ghāt*. The common practice in *Satra* and village performances are *Saru*, *Bar* and *Ghoṣā-dhemali*, sometime followed by *Guru ghat*²⁰.

Changes are observed in the use of instruments in the performances. One significant deviation is the use of *Mṛdanga* (a kind of percussion instrument) instead of *Khol* as found in the *Kahmara Satra* of *Namti* of *Sivasagar* and also in *Latabua Gaon*, *Nagaon*.

Similarly, changes are also perceivable in the dance style of the *Bhāonā* performances as found in the *hastas* of *Sūtradhāra* and *Gāyan-Bāyan* or the performers' gaits.

People's Participation and Attitude

Today, the expectation of the people is much considered while performing a *bhāonā*. Change in the taste and philosophy of the people is a significant

factor in directing the changes in the tradition of *Bhāonā*. It is noticeable that, people still participate in this traditional performance otherwise; it would have been extinct from the Assamese cultural heritage. Or, whether the tradition with so much of transformations, is in the verge of extinction? What are the attitudes in the people's participation? [This will be discussed in detail in the eighth chapter]

*Dress, Make-up, Mask-making, Light Arrangement
etc.*

Emergence of newness in every sphere of the *Bhāonā* tradition is common in this period. Infusion of modern elements in the style of dress, make-up, mask, lighting of the set of performance etc. is observable.

Previously, light is provided in by large chandeliers (*gachā*), torches of burning cloth soaked in oil (*ārīyā*), and other lamps known as *mahatā*, *matā* or *mahalā*. Today, such indigenous lighting arrangement has been replaced by gas lights, petromax lamps and electric lights.

In make-up instead of using the raw ingredients as, *hāitāl* (yellow arsenic), lamp-black, *dhalmatī*

(chalk), modern elements which are easily available in the markets are used today.

Similarly, in mask-making, the previous methods have been shunned out by accepting modern methods to produce a better product. Now, masks are light and lively contrasted to the heavy mask of the earlier period made of clay.

Many changes have taken place in the style of dress. For instance, the *Sūtradhāra* usually wears *Muglāi-pāg* as the head gear in performing an *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā*. But, now it is also noticeable of using *Maṭhurā-pāg*. Sometimes a garland on neck or

handkerchief tied in the hands of *Sūtradhāra* is
a significant deviation in the dress of *Sūtradhāra*, as observed in the performances in the *Bhāonā* Competition held at Duliajan. Significant variation in the dress-pattern of *Gāyan-Bāyan* has also been noticed in different places. (See pp. 171-172)

Thus, it is well perceived that the tradition of *Bhāonā* has undergone with many transformations since its evolution. The emergence of newness in every aspects of the tradition has led to the formation of new identity to this performance tradition.

Notes

- ¹ Peter J Clause & Frank J Korom, *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore* (Udupi: Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, 1991) 159.
- ² Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1984) 37-45.
- ³ Peter J Clause & Frank J Korom (1991) 160.
- ⁴ Richard Bauman, (1984) 41.
- ⁵ Stuart Blackburn, *Rāma Stories and Shadow Puppets: Kampan's Ramayana in Performance* (New Delhi: OUP, 1997) 10.
- ⁶ Jennifer B. Saunders, "Performance" *Key Concepts and Debates in Linguistic Anthropology*, (1999), 6 Jul 2004 <<http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/ANTHROPOLOGY/Linganth/performance.html>>.
- ⁷ Richard Bauman, (1984) 11.
- ⁸ Peter J Clause & Frank J Korom (1991)160-161.
- ⁹ In his *Verbal Art as Performance*, Richard Bauman gave the information that the concept of emergence is developed in Peter McHugh, *Defining the Situation* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968). The emergent quality of performance is emphasized in Hymes, Dell: 'Breakthrough into Performance' in Den Ben Amos & K. Goldstein, eds., *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (The Hague : Mouton, 1975) 11-75.
- ¹⁰ Richard Bauman, (1984) 38.
- ¹¹ Maheswar Neog, *Bhaona, The Ritual Play of Assam* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1984) 57.
- ¹² Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 63-64.
- ¹³ *ibid*, 64-65.
- ¹⁴ A *Nāmghar* consists of two parts, *Kirtanghar* which is the prayer hall where the congregational prayers

and *Bhāonās* are performed and the *Maṇikuṭ*, the place where the holy scripture (*Bhāgawata*) is kept.

¹⁵ Mano Hazarika, "[Assam] FW: ASSAM CONVENTION 2004 UPDATES" (29 May 2004), 3 Jun 2004 <<http://pikespeak.uccs.edu/pipermail/assam/2004-May/006223.html>>.

¹⁶ Stuart Blackburn, "Indian Performance Tradition: Introduction", *Indian Folklore-1*, 18 Jun 2004 <<http://www.ciil-ebooks.net/html/folklore1/tradition.htm>>

¹⁷ Maheswar Neog, (1984) 54-55.

¹⁸ Biswa Barua, "Bhaona: Lokanāṭya, āru kisu prāsaṅgik kathā" *San̄karī Kalā Sāhityar Adyayan* (Jamuguri: Baresahariya Bhaona Mahotsav Ussjapan Samiti, 1998) 47.

¹⁹ Prahlad Kumar Barua, *Bhaona Samikkhya* (Dibrugarh: Bhaona Satabarsiki Udjapan Samiti, 1990) 18.

²⁰ Maheswar Neog, (1984) 39.

Chapter 6

FACTORS OF CHANGES IN BHĀONĀ AND ITS IMPLICATION

This chapter is an attempt to specify the factors that led to the transformation of the traditional form of the performance into the formation of *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*, the recent genre.

A number of causes are found to be responsible for the formation of the *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*. The term '*Māṭṛbhāṣār*', as mentioned earlier, indicates the mother language, where *Māṭṛ* denotes 'mother' and *Bhāṣā* means 'language'. Along with the change of language, the intermixture of secular elements and other manifestations seems to result in the creation of this new genre.

A traditional culture always needs adjustment with the changing time, tastes and attitudes of the people for its survival. The contemporary view of tradition does not mean mere clinging to the past; it is the dynamic relation between the tradition and the creative individual. It is the synthesis of the past and the present.

The modern academic discourse on tradition argues that, a tradition is not 'cultural given' but 'cultural construct'. It is neither 'genuine' nor 'spurious' as it is not handed down from the past as a thing or collection of things, but it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present.¹

As a dynamic process, tradition flows from and shapes individual lives, while shaping and resonating with larger patterns of worldview and culture. Dell Hymes understands tradition equally as a fluid and emergent. He says, "The traditional begins with the personal. Its distribution in history, in a community, is important, but secondary, not defining. Something partakes of the nature of the traditional already when the effort to traditionalize has brought it into being. . . . In fact tradition is not so much a matter of preservation, as it is a matter of re-creation, by successive persons and generations, and in individual performances."²

Mary Ellen Brown describes tradition as a constant process across time and in time, linking past with present, thus ensuring continuity. It is

also dynamic and ever-changing as culture and societal needs alter³.

Mary Magoulick rightly says, "...we must understand tradition as a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. In other words, tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past. . . . Tradition is always defined in the present. . . . [and] never exist apart from our interpretations of them."⁴

The above discussion makes it clear that, a tradition is a 'process' which is interpreted and reinterpreted by the succeeding generations and is always an emergent. The evolution of *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*, on the basis of the performance-tradition known as *Anīkīyā Bhāonā*, can therefore be looked upon as a natural phenomenon of reinterpretation of the tradition in the present environ. In a way, today the tradition of *Anīkīyā Bhāonā* has its manifestation in the present-day *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*.

Secondly, an individual 'competence' and 'creativity' or the 'innovative nature' of man may leads to the formation of a new identity of a tradition, especially in the case of a performance-tradition. This has been already discussed in the previous chapter that due to this 'individual competence', no two performances are ever alike. The individuality of one performer, no matter, performing the same text within a similar context, always differs with another. In the words of Richard Bauman:

"The ethnographic construction of the structured, conventionalized performance system standardizes and homogenizes description, but all performance are not the same, and one wants to be able to appreciate the individuality of each, as well as the community-wide patterning of the overall domain."⁵

Next, the creative man always wants to initiate some kind of newness to a tradition. His innovative additions create deviations to the type outline or the tradition. And, these innovations, in the case of a performance-tradition, are related to the

function of entertainment which is a natural impulse for man. In the traditional practice of *Bhāonā* some of the innovations in the recent period, are for instance, significance of the comical characters, the *Bahuwā* and *Dūt* in a more secular role than related to the actual devotional theme of the performance; infusion of modern elements in the arrangement of lighting of the performance and many others. Such changes on the *Bhāonā* tradition have been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. While inquiring on such innovations, it is found that, the changing tastes of the people has greatly influenced for such development in this performance-tradition.

In understanding the changes in the traditional practice of *Bhāonā*, it can also be taken as contemporary adaptations. Adaptation is a natural tendency to changes.

However, it is also true that, along with the emerging nature of the performance, a performer can never be totally detached from the tradition which is related to the performance. He is always responsible to it and is at all time, evaluated as a bearer of the tradition. This makes the performer

conscious of the defined rules of the tradition. It is observed that, in the performance of *Bhāonā*, often a performer seems to give impetus to the traditional principles besides his individualistic approach to it. In fact, they are much devoted to the role they are directed to perform. The performer, himself is unaware by the 'individual competence' he possesses. His skill is naturally expressed in his performance, which is more or less, judged by the viewers only. Sometimes, the quality of performance of a performer can not fulfill the actual requirement of the total performance in neither keeping the traditional values nor through his individual skill. At other times, the performer's expertise in the performance is highly estimated while the total performance is not agreeable to be that satisfactory. It is a fact, that the total quality of a dramatic performance cannot be evaluated only with the role of the performer or performers. It depends on the coordinated role of every elements of the performance such as, music, dance, dress, costume, make-up, *cho*-effigies, lighting etc.

As perceived in the recent development of *Bhāonā*, many factors seem to be responsible for the transformations since its evolution till date. In addition to the notions discussed above, the following have been cited in brief as the other observable causes:

- The unintelligibility of the Brajabuli language or less acquaintance with the language
- The rigidity of the principles of Satra culture
- Lack of time to devote in a lengthy performance
- To avoid the break of suspension, the role of *Sūtradhāra* has been simplified and sequential
- Importance of the aspect of entertainment rather than devotional which leads to the infusion of many secular elements
- Impact of Modern Technology, particularly, media
- Influence of modern education
- Impact of Socio-cultural and economic changes

The language is the most important feature of *Anīkīyā Nāṭ*. Śaṅkardeva's prose in his dramas was not Assamese proper, it was a form of artificial literary idiom which has a rhythmic quality, known

as Brajabuli-bhāṣa or Assamese Brajabuli.⁶ The lyrical nature of the prose dialogues makes his dramatic art a 'lyrico-dramatic spectacle'⁷. He employed *Brajabuli* as the language of the dialogues, songs and stage directions (sutra). He also used Sanskrit for the śloka that has been strewn all over the plays. In the traditional practice of *Bhāonā* the minimization of the use of Brajabuli language has been apparent since the days of Madhavdeva⁸. Mādhavadeva, besides using Brajabuli, introduced the use of spoken Assamese language. In his dramas, Brajabuli is the language of the prose dialogues while spoken Assamese is used in the compositions of some of the songs and *payāras* (recitative verses). A few specimens are provided below from the dramas of Mādhavadeva which have the influence of spoken Assamese language.

- *Ohī prakāre Jaśoda kṛṣṇaka bicāri*
napai: Parama cintāye kandi
kandi: Murucita huyā māṭi
luṭi paḍala

[*Cor Dharā*, Mādhavadeva]⁹

- *Kānu bole suna are gopi nidaruni ।
Tohora mukhat gandha taise curuni ॥
Suniyā gopini khuji napāila uttar ।
Micha mati gopire bhāndilā dāmodar ॥*

[*Pimparā Gucuwā*, Mādhavadeva]¹⁰

Gradually, the later head and other abbots of the Satras also employed the spoken Assamese language mostly in the songs and verses. At the same time, the Brajabuli language was equally at vogue in their dramas. Gopaldev, Ramcharan Thakur and Dvijabhusan are a few playwrights who wrote dramas of such kind. The factor which is responsible for such a change in the use of language can firstly be pointed to the people's choice, for whom the Assamese, as the colloquial language is much easier than the Brajabuli¹¹. It is obvious that, gradually Brajabuli became an unintelligible language for the common mass. And more recently, the extensive use of Assamese as the language in the *Bhaonās* is an obvious alteration. For easy communication of the message that constitutes the performance, the language should be comprehensible to the common masses therefore; people opted for the easy language. Another cause for the unpopularity of the

Brajabuli language is that, the later playwrights have lesser acquaintance of the language. Despite of the fact, the Brajabuli language did not totally extinct, it was practiced by many other Vaiṣṇavite saints of the 17th-18th centuries following Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavadeva. In their dramas the influence of Assamese was prevalent too, especially in the songs and verses as mentioned above.

The Satra institution established by Śaṅkardeva served towards the spread of intellectual and cultural activities of the people of Assam. Following Śaṅkardeva, the other Vaiṣṇava saints have greatly put in their efforts for the development of these institutions that brought into a religious and cultural renaissance to Assam with its manifold activities as a centre of cultivation and dissemination of the religious ethics, general education and other ancient and traditional knowledge of art and craft. For the smooth and systematic functioning of these activities the Satras have to maintain certain authoritarian principles. This created a dignified strict aura for the commoners to easily access especially, the knowledge of art and culture which has been

accomplished and fostered within the *Satra* premises among the *Satra* people. The *Satras* act as the platform of propagating the wisdom of Vaiṣṇavite culture. For the reason, the common people bring into the understanding of the dramatic art, *Bhāonā* to their villages after the observation of the performance in a *Satra*. Thus, *Bhāonā* came into the village-*nāmghars* with obvious transformations, explicitly the language. Later, with more awareness for a quality performance, in some villages, the vaiṣṇavite *bhakats* (abbots) were invited to the villages to impart training for a performance of *Bhāonā*.¹² During the training period the *bhakat* use their written *Nāṭ* (script). It was orally transmitted to the masses. Later, a script was written down by the trainees or other prominent learned person of the village. Thus, again apparent changes appear in the hands of the village people not only in the written script but, to the whole performance¹³.

Further, *Bhāonā*, in earlier times, performances continued the whole night starting from the evening till dawn. This tradition was also in continuation even in the post-Śāṅkarite period. However, in the recent period, the *Bhāonā* performances does not

exceed more than five hours. In fact, two to three hours performances are also arranged for secular purposes. For instance, a *Bhāonā* performed to be telecast on TV or a performance during a *Bhāonā* festival or *Bhāonā* competition.

Although, the intentions of contracting the time of performance in the *Bhāonā* tradition are different for different purposes, nevertheless, the most important cause is the lack of time to devote at a stretch for a person in today's busy world. Again, a number of performances are to be presented within a stipulated period either in a *Bhāonā* competition or in a festival which compels to cut short the time of performance. This results in the elimination of many elements as *bilāpas* [mournful wailings], *stūtis* [prayers in verse] and *bhaṭimās* [laudatory ode or a benedictory verse in vernacular]. In most cases, they are usually replaced by prose pieces or dialogues.

Thirdly, the role of *Sūtradhāra* has been minimized in the later-days *Bhāonās*. Previously, the *Sūtradhāra* had the vital role to play in the *Ankiyā Bhāonās* as the director, dancer, singer who performs the short introduction of the play by singing the

Nāndī śloka and the *Artha-Bhaṭimā* punctuated by gestures (*hasta*, *hat-diyā* or *hasta karma*). He announces the entry and exit of the performers and commences the beginning of every episodes thus, remains on the stage till the end of the performance. Today, his part is simplified and sequential. He does not stay on the stage throughout the whole performance as opposed to the actual tradition. After the recitation of *Artha-Bhaṭimā* and performance to the ritualistic task of introducing the play he exits from the stage and remain in the *Dohār* (Place adjacent to the performance arena where the musical troupe sits to accompany the performance) to direct the play, prompting the dialogues of the performers. But, in the written *Nāṭs* (scripts) of *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* there are references of *Sūtradhāra* in the intervals which is actually observed to be taken for direction during rehearsing the play.

In this section, an argument has been made earlier that, the entertaining factor leads to innovations in a performance. And, tendency into the function of amusement makes a performance less ritualistic. In the words of Stuart Blackburn,

"Performances with greater fixity in content tend to be more ritualistic in function. Conversely, with greater innovation in content tend to be entertainment-oriented in function."¹⁴

It can be ascertained in the traditional practice of *Bhāonā*, that, innovations are crept into it which are intended more for entertainment than for devotional purpose. Earlier existing ritualistic fervor of a performance of *Bhāonā* is now diminishes with the inclination towards the pursuit of pleasure.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Bhāonā* performances are organized completely with secular objectives rather than devotional as observed in the Āhom courts to the staging of performances in the modern period. This led to the infusion of many secular elements, esp. the comical characters. It has been found that the performances provide 'comical relief' along with the ethico-devotional codes to the audience. Such changes are due to the people who are much responsive to entertainment, in the sense as a 'popular taste'.

The impact of modern technology is evident in the arrangement of lighting, providing sound effects, mask-making, dress, make-up as discussed in details in the previous chapter. The media has extensive influence to modulate the tastes of the people. Such manipulations of the media are seemingly observed even in those performances performed in the *nāmghars*. As for example, the exaggeration of the fighting scenes, comic scenes etc. and the deviation in the traditional ethics of the dress pattern of the actors, which is much akin to the elegant dresses shown in the screen, such as, in the television serial of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Therefore, the impact of media also seems to be a cause that develops the innovative nature of man which instigates to make certain changes to the tradition in order to suffice the present tastes of the people.

Impact of modern education which has been started with the coming of the British to Assam is very significant in the traditional practice of *Bhāonā*. During their rule, educational institutions were under the control of the Calcutta University¹⁵. This causes the influence of Bengali culture on the

culture of Assam including the *Bhāonā* tradition. This is evident from the development of *Dhurā Bhāonā* and *Phaujiyā Bhāonā* as discussed in Chapter 4.

Besides, the introduction of English in the educational institutions during that period, also led to the development of new philosophies and tastes among the people.

Thus, with the change of time, the socio-cultural and economic milieu of Assam has also changes, which have obvious impact on the traditional practice of Bhaona. Since the introduction of Vaisnavism by Śaṅkaradeva, Assam has been experiencing several phases of socio-cultural modifications. The once rigidity in caste-system had been made flexible by the ethics of Vaisnavism, particularly in the days of the two principal Gurus. Later, the followers deviated from the religious conventions set by the two Gurus and was divided into groups known as *Sanghatis*. This has its impact on the culture of Vaisnavism as well as upon the whole Assam. Diversifications were perceivable in the performance-tradition from one *Sanghati* to the other. Later, outside the Satras, the performance-tradition was exposed to the flexible contemporary

values and attitudes of the people leading to certain alteration to the tradition in adaptations to the contemporaneity.

As already observed, the affluent societies which have the impact of modernization are more flexible to the contemporary transformations in the performance of Bhaona.

Notes

- ¹ Kristin Kuutma, "Folk Culture and Folklore Ensembles" *Folklore*, vol.6 (January 1998) 17 May 2001 <<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol6/krifolk6.htm>>.
- ² Dell Hymes, "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth" *Journal of American Folklore* 88:345-369 as quoted in Jill Terry Rudy, "Toward an Assessment of Verbal Art as Performance: A Cross-Disciplinary Citation Study with Rhetorical Analysis" *Journal of American Folklore* 115(455):5-27
- ³ Mary Magoulick, "History of Folklore", *Folklore Connections*, (7 Nov 2003) 6 Jul 2004 <<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/history.htm>>
- ⁴ *ibid*
- ⁵ Richard Bauman, (1984) 37.
- ⁶ Rupasree Goswami, "The Prose Style of Śaṅkaradeva", *Mahāpuruṣa Jyoti*, Vol.II (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 1999) 115.
- ⁷ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 11.
- ⁸ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 70.
- ⁹ Kaliram Medhi, *Aṅkāvalī* (Guwahati: LBS, 1997) 316.
- ¹⁰ *ibid*, 335.
- ¹¹ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 77.
- ¹² Manik Neog, personal interview, 17 Aug 2001
- ¹³ Manik Neog, personal interview, 27 Jun 2002
- ¹⁴ Stuart Blackburn, "Indian Performance Tradition: Introduction", *Indian Folklore-1*, 18 Jun 2004

<<http://www.ciil-ebooks.net/html/folklore1/tradition.htm>>

¹⁵ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 62.

Chapter 7

MĀTRBHĀṢĀR BHĀONĀ: ITS TYPES

A performance, as pointed earlier, always has a tendency towards diversification, when it is repeated. Hence, it is obvious that, when a traditional performance continues, it is inclined to modifications in the course of a period. An argument in this aspect has been made in the previous section. The individual competence, creativity or the innovative nature can be regarded as the operative factors in the evolution of emergent forms within a performance-tradition.

As the consequence of these factors operating into the tradition of *Bhāonā*, *Mātrbhāṣār Bhāonā* emerged in the course of time. However, even though, it is condensed and identified as one form, it is actually a multifarious phenomenon. In form and content and in context of performance, variations seem to occur within the genre itself. In brief, these dramas usually vary on the basis of language, time, place and playwrights etc.

Although, it is not possible to make a classification of this vast performance genre, which is actually in transition, an attempt has been made in this present study. With the verification of a few written *Nāṭs* and observation of performances at different places, it is assembled into certain groups as discussed below.

Firstly, a classification has been traced, in support of the language used in these dramas. As it is already noted, that, *Māṭṛbhāṣā* is usually termed on the basis of language. To be precise, the change of Brajabuli language to spoken Assamese was regarded to be significant in demarcating *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* from *Aṅkiyā Bhāonā*. This genre has other features too to characterize as *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*, which has been already argued in the Chapter: 5, as focused in the changing elements of the tradition.

Even on the change of language, it has been observed that, *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* can not be recognized as a single entity. In fact, variations in the use of language also seem to occur at diverse levels. This difference of language is mainly due to the varied playwrights involved in writing these scripts. Following is the classification as such ---

- Dramas with the influence of Brajabuli language
- Dramas with the influence of Sanskrit language
- Dramas with the influence of old Assamese
- Dramas with the influence of colloquial Assamese language

A few excerpts with the evidences on the use of language, as categorized above, are given below respectively.

After the two Gurus the other followers as, Gopāldev, Rāmcaran Thākur, Dviija Bhuṣan, Daityārī Thākur have more influence of the Brajabuli language in their plays, especially in dialogues. For example:

-Narasingha bolala:

*Kathā || Aye papisṭa daitya: Toho trijagatak
 jataye lāñcanā Kayali: Bhakta
 Prahlādak jateka jatanā delahi:
 Āju tāhāra pratiphal dite: Ohi
 narasingharūpe stambhar bhitare
 bekata bhelo: Āju hante daityakul
 nirmul karaba.¹*

[*Nṛsiṅha Jātrā*, Daityari Thakur]

- *Kathā* ॥ *Ajāmil bola* ॥ *hari hari: hāmu*
mahāpāpi: tini dute narake laiyā
jāi: cāri pārisade āsi rākhala:
tārār mukhe nāmar mahimā sunalo:
papini besyār sange nij kul naṣṭa
*kayalo:*²

[*Ajāmil Upākhyān*, Dviija Bhusan]

Many scholars are of the opinion that, the Sanskritic dramatic tradition has its impact on the creation of *Anīkiyā Nāṭs*. This has already been argued in the Chapter 2. Various elements of *Anīkiyā Nāṭs* are analogous to Sanskrit dramas which signify the influence of the Sanskritic dramatic tradition.

In the *Anīkiyā Nāṭs* the influence of Sanskrit language is evident in the language of *Nāndī* (invocation) and other *ślokas*, which are strewn all over the drama. Bhattacharyya described the use of Sanskrit language in the *Anīkiyā Nāṭs* as:

“In addition to Nandi slokas written always in Sanskrit, there are other Sanskrit slokas also. Next to the Nandi there is one Sanskrit Sloka addressing the audience and introducing the play to them. It generally begins with words like “Bho

Bho Samajikaha" (Oh you, the members of the assembly'). Thus to introduce new roles and turns of events, Sansrit slokas are used, while, another is used to signify that the ply is ended by the grace of God. Some of these are borrowed from the epics or the other sources."³

And, the use of Sanskrit language mostly in the *ślokas* by the later playwrights formed as one of the characteristic feature in the emergent genre. There are variations in employing this language in these plays, i.e., *Māṭṛbhāṣār Nāts*.

More accuracy in the language was seemed to maintain in the plays written within the *Satras* by the playwrights during the 17th - 18th century. In the recent times, the Sanskrit language is very sparsely used even in the *ślokas* and verses. It is either imitated or written incorrectly. A few specimens are provided below:

- *Śloka:* *Sṛrāmañ lakhmaṇaṇi raghubarañ*
 sītāpati sundarañ e hari rāma
 rāma

[*Amar Hari Bhakti*, Charing, Sivasagar]

- Sūtra śloka: Bho bho sabhāsada ghoyaṅ sṛ
naha śraddhāye suna. Sītā
haraṇaṅ rākhyakumār Taranisen
Badha nām nāṭakaṅ śravaṇe
mukti sādhak e hari rāma rāma
[Sītā Haraṇ Taranisen Badha, Charing, Sivasagar]

- Śloka: Śṛ Śṛ kṛṣṇaye namoh namahah
namoh Kṛṣṇaye namaste Daibakī
nandasah caturbhūja rūpa
dharanam gale banamālā
suśobhita
[Candrasenar Biṣṇubhakti Bikāl Daitya Badh, Charing,
Sivasagar]

Use of old Assamese was evident, as mentioned in the Chapter: 5, in the plays of Dviya Bhusan, Daityari Thakur, Ramcharan Thakur, mostly in the verses and songs. Instances are provided below:

- Pada ॥ Sādhu loka dviya pitṛ sujana ।
Māri curi kari ānala dhana ॥
Asatir sange duṣṭa bhaila mati ।
Kahe dviya bhūṣaṇe gobinde gati ॥
[Ajāmil Upākhyān, Dviya Bhusan]⁴

- Pada ॥ *Jāve jiye loke moka nubulibe bhāl ।
Mahanta sakale mok karibe dhikkār ॥
Kimate eraibo moñie lokar sāp ।
Kenamate tusta hanta jagatara bāp ॥
Kimate Kṛṣṇara moñi rañjiboho citta ।
Jagata iśbara kenamate hoiba tuṣṭa ॥
Satyabhāmā kanyā mor diboho Kṛṣṇaka ।
Lagate joutaka mani dibu syamantaka ॥
Tevese santuṣṭa mota hoiba dāmodara ।
Nedekho upāy monyi āra ātapar ॥
Ehi buli kanyā mani dilāhā Kṛṣṇaka ।
Kahanta daityāri dina mādharma sevaka ॥
[*Syamanta Haraṇa Jātrā*, Daityari Thakur]⁵*

As observed, influence of Assamese as the language, are evident in the plays of Mādhavadeva, followed widely by Gopāldeva, Dviija Bhuṣan, Daityāri Thākur, Rāmcarāṇ Thākur, specifically in the songs and verses. In the later part of 17th century, Niranjandev, the founder Adhikāra (Head) of Āṇiāṭi Satra, wrote *Mahamoh Nat*, an Assamese translation of the Sanskrit drama, *Prabodhcandrodaya*, on the basis

of the principles of *Anīkiyā Nāṭ* as one *Anīka* (scene) play⁶.

Thus, the practice of using Assamese language has been started in the dramas written by the Vaiṣṇavite leaders of the *Satras*. During the later part of 18th century to till date, the influence of Assamese language seems to be more prominent. Particularly, the profuse use of Assamese language has been observed in the writings of the non-Satra people. Gradually, it is becoming a distinctive feature of the *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* with its use in a more spoken style or non-lyrical, with less ornamentation, in contrast to its use in the early part of 19th century, when dialogues are more in verse⁷. Some instances from a few scripts of the contemporary period, which have the impact of colloquial Assamese language, are extracted below:

- *Hanu: Mahīrāvaṇ, loi āh sei mānuh duṭāk:*

*Āru mor maramar Mahīrāvaṇe bali
dilehe moi ihatak grahaṇ karim*

[*Mahīrāvaṇ Badh*, Na-ali Dhekiajuli, Jorhat]

- *Sujajña: RāṇI, araṇya prāy šeṣ hoiche.*
Nagaraloi āru bechi dūr nāi. Mātra
dudinar bāṭ he āche. Gatike āji sou
durat thakā muṇir āśramatei rātito
katāi kāiloi punar nagaraloi gaman
kariba lāgiba

Mālāvati: Mahāraj, moi āru caliba nowārā
hoicho. Belio āru bechi nāi. Gatike
āji konobā muṇir āśramat thakāi bhāl
haba

[*Sujajña Rajār Dharma Parikhyā*, Kaloogaon,
 Sivasagar]

Secondly, classification can also be made on the basis of their writers or playwrights, as:

- Dramas written by the Vaiṣṇava leaders or the *Mahantas* of the *Satras*
- Dramas written by the laities or non-*Satra* people

Śaṅkaradeva initiated this performance-tradition which was later continued and developed by the posterior Vaiṣṇavite leaders and *Mahantas* of the *Satras*. Later, when the writing of the plays was started by the laities of villages and towns then, divergence between the *Satra* and non-*Satra* people

appeared in the tradition, not only in the scripts, but also in the performances.

As discussed earlier, significantly, the people of the *Satras* set off the new developments in the traditional practice of *Bhāonā*. Simultaneously, they also hold the tradition and helped in its extensive dissemination. Thus, apart from introducing the newness into the tradition, they basically try to maintain the devotional character as imperative in the tradition.

Again, these dramas are characterized by the individual style of writing of the playwrights in both inside and outside the *Satras*.

It has been already been argued that, the dramas of Mādhavadeva have a distinctive character as compared to the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva. So, since then, deviation crop up into the tradition. Despite of the fact that, Mādhavadeva's dramas are regarded as *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*, these are specifically identified as *Jhumurās* by the *Caritkārs* (biographers) and scholars. The individuality of the playwright is also reflected in conjunction with the standards intrinsic to the tradition.

The dramas written during the 17th century-early part of 18th century are more akin to the dramas of

the two Gurus. This can be classed as one group Gopāldev, Dviija Bhuṣaṅ, Rāmcaran Thākur, Daityārī Thākur. They used the Brajabuli language in the prose dialogues, although, in the verses and songs, the use of Assamese language is observable.

Gradually, the use of Brajabuli language became thinner in the Satras from the later part of 18th century onwards.

Again, *Satrādhikāras* of many Satras initiated several significant developments as *Jurī Bhāonā*, *Dhurā Bhāonā*, *Phaujiyā Bhāonā* etc. as illustrated in the Chapter: 3.

As mentioned earlier in this section, Niranjandev, started a new movement in the traditional practice of *Bhāonā* with his Assamese translation of the Sanskrit drama, *Prabodhchandrodaya*. In that period, this development in the *Āṅkiyā Nāṭ*, also became popular among the people outside the *Satras*⁸.

In the later period, during the 19th century, some other deviations can be noted.

In Bhetiani Satra of Bordowa at Nagaon, a distinctive diversion in the tradition can be identified in the plays of Harendranath, as the use of soliloquy in the dramas⁹.

The characteristic of the Satra performance vary in the use of music. Some Satras play the selective preliminaries while some play all the *dhemalis*.

The dramas written by the Non-Satra people are often characterized with non-lyrical dialogues, mostly in spoken Assamese language with less ornamentation. Such plays have more expression of the scenes of fights, abduction, love and comical rather than projecting the devotional temperament. Further, the episodes from Mahabharata and Ramayana and sometimes imaginary Puranic story line are generally selected as the themes of such plays.

The dramas of the non-Satra people can further be classed in the line of time in which it is written, as the dramas which were written in the later part of 18th century -19th century and the dramas written in the recent period. The dramas of the former group are more devotional in character than the dramas of the recent period. More secular commitments are noticeable in the later with much sophisticated and stylized innovations in many aspects as costume, mask-making, make-up, lighting arrangement, use of prop and other *cho*-effigies, in the manner of presentation, change of performance

arena from *nāmghars* to stages and the platform of media.

Again, within the same period the dramas may vary from place to place or community to community. In the broadest category for instance:

- Dramas prevalent in an urbanized area
- Dramas of rural area

These variations occur in the manner of presentation, music, dance-style, stage-setting, *cho*-effigies, costume, make-up, etc.

The dramas of the urban areas are more sophisticated in its presentation, especially in lighting arrangement, stage-setting, i.e., the performance-area setting, even when performed inside a *nāmghar*, costume, make-up etc. which, are often influenced by the media.

Moreover, *Bhāonās* performed in the *nāmghars* of rural areas observed to have much association to the religious ideals of the tradition. The rituals that preceded and succeeded the actual performance as *Nāṭmela* and *Nāṭsāmarā* are seemed to have been maintained to a great extent by the rural dwellers. Besides, the devotional temperament in the actions of the performers and in the reactions of the

audiences is more noticeable in the performances of the rural areas.

It has been observed that in this performance-tradition variations occur in very minute levels that it is often overlapping with each other with the slightest distinctiveness.

Notes

¹ Kaliram Medhi, *Añkāvālī*, (Guwahati: LBS: 1997) 555.

² *ibid*, 516.

³ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 11-13.

⁴ Kaliram Medhi, (1997) 508.

⁵ *ibid* 585-586.

⁶ Tirthanath Sarmah, *Āuniāṭī Satrar Burañjī* (Auniati Satra: 1975) 432.

⁷ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 85.

⁸ Pitambar Deva Goswami, personal interview, 02 Nov 1998

⁹ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 89.

Chapter 8

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN BHĀONĀ

The understanding that every performance is essentially a communicative or interactive event entails a substantial role of people, and their participation, in it. In order to be a communicative event, it is essential for a performance to be communicated by its performers from one end and to be received by people at the other end. Quiet obviously, the expectations of people at the receiving end happen to be one of the determining forces in shaping a performance in its process of transition. Richard Bauman rightly defined 'performance' as:

"...a mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event. While the term may be employed in an aesthetically neutral sense to designate the actual conduct of communication (as opposed to the potential for communicative action), performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode

of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The analysis of performance -indeed, the very conduct of performance-highlights the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process."¹

Thus, a performance, according to the actual conception, is set to be displayed for an audience and, the performers' competence is accountable to the audience. In this regard, Dell Hymes also have the opinion as:

"... Performance, as cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience, is a quite specific, quite special category."²

But, there are also cases that deviate from this conceptual model. Stuart Blackburn in his study of Kampan's Ramayana discovered the 'absent of audience' in the performance of Shadow Puppet Show based on Kampan's Ramayana. Later, he interprets the 'absent audience' as 'ritual audience' or 'internalized audience' who seems to be physically

absent. They are internalized audience who scrutinizes the quality of the audience, by hearing the epic from their homes. And, as a ritual performance, Goddess *Bhāgavatī*, the host of the temple at which it is performed, is the 'ritual audience'³. Thus, the audience can never be denied as an imperative element of a performance.

In the performance-tradition of *Bhāonā*, the impact of people is very apparent in such a transitional period. In this study, it is ascertained that, at this point of time, the performance-tradition of *Bhāonā* is in the state of continuation of the tradition, but, in emergent forms. It is actually the consequence by way of the involvement or participation made by many people since it was initiated by Śaṅkaradeva till the recent period.

The 'people' who are engaged to this tradition can be classified as, Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the *Satras* and Non-Satriyas or the common people; Active and Passive participant in the role of playwrights, performers, audience, organizers, etc.

This dramatic art form is the outcome of the movement of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. Śaṅkaradeva, the

preceptor of this faith is also the initiator of this tradition with his creation of the *Ankiyā Nāṭ*. Since its creation, the *Satras* became the centre of cultivating this dramatic art form, as the medium of propagating the Vaisnava faith and also as a source of pleasure and recreation⁴.

Therefore, the Vaiṣṇavites, or the people of the *Satras* had the contribution in the evolutionary development of this performance-tradition. It has been previously mentioned that, after the two Gurus the tradition of this dramatic art has been sustained by the *Satrādikāras* (heads) of the *Satras*. It was mainly maintained as a mandatory activity, by the *Satrādikāras*, as a part of their initiation rites. Consequently, the tradition of *Bhāonā* flourished and became a regular feature on all ceremonial occasions in the *Satras*. This is still in vogue in the *Satra* culture especially in the *Satras* of Central and Upper Assam.

The tradition persists at different periods in varying degrees within the *Satras*, following the basic principles of the form set off by the two Gurus.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the immediate descendants of Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva

during the 17th century have much influence of their principles compared to their succeeding playwrights. Their plays laid more stress on imitation and could not characterize by significant individual artistic creation in the basic form⁵.

But, it is also to be mentioned that, some distinct developments have been noticed in the plays of the succeeding playwrights. Firstly, a new trend has been developed in the method of composition of such dramas, starting from the hands of Dvija Bhusan and some later writers⁶.

It is already pointed out that, the change of language have been perceivable from the plays of Mādhavadeva. Gradually, the divergence in the traditional form became prominent within the *Satra* culture. [Diversification in the tradition of *Bhāonā* has already been discussed in the Chapter: 7]

With this, it can be verified that, even though, the *Satras* maintained an orthodox, dignified environment, it could not cling to one identity of the tradition of *Bhāonā*. Various *Satras* maintain their own distinctiveness along with the individuality of the playwrights by way of creation of the plays by several Vaiṣṇavite leaders at different periods.

The range of audience was widened with the stepping out of the performances of *Bhāonā* from the Satras to the Āhom Courts and to the villages and towns. As pointed out earlier, *Bhāonās* were performed by the Vaiṣṇava saints on the Āhom courts, esp. during the reign of Rajeshwar Singha, Kameleshwar Singha, Gaurinath Singha.

In the past, the manipulation of the form and content and the performance of *Bhāonās* had greatly been influenced by the tastes and preferences of the audiences and also due to the individual competence, mainly of the playwrights. As noted before that, the dramas of Mathura Das Ata of Barpeta Satra brought a drift to the traditional practice with the influence of Bengali.

Similarly Niranjandev, the founder *Satrādīkāra* of Āunīaṭī Satra made a revolutionary movement with his *Mahamoh Nat*, an Assamese translation of the Sanskrit *Prabodh Candradam* based on the principles of *Ankīyā Nāṭ*⁷.

Within the *Satras*, the entertainment dimension was started to be given importance along with the emphasis on religious attainment. This can be noted with the significance of the comical characters in

the dramas of the later period which was avoided earlier by the two Gurus. As for instance, due to the absence of the comical character, the *Akruragaman Nat* of Dihing Namati Satra could not receive the mass acceptance as mentioned in the *Tungkhungiya Buranji*⁸. From this it is evident that, the *Bhāonā* performances written and performed by the Vaiṣṇavites are no exception to change in a secular direction. The departure from the tradition became more marked during the period of 18th-19th century. [This has been discussed in detail in the Chapter 4.]

In spite of these changes, the Vaiṣṇavites had been performing their role in upholding this performance-tradition till today. In regard to its implementation, the attitude and action of all the Satras are not the same towards this institution. In most of the Satras, the *Bhāonās* are performed only on the usual annual occasions such as on the death ceremonies of the Gurus, *Kṛṣṇa Janmotsav*, Rās Purnima etc. and on the initiation ceremonies, as a part of the Satra culture. A few of such Satras are: Bengana-ati, Kathpar, Jarabari of Sivasagar, Nikamul of Tezpur, Borduwa, Kaliabor of Nagaon.

It is also observed that, in some of the Satras, there is the tradition of performing an *Añkiyā Nāṭ*, maintaining the tradition to a large extent, especially on the death ceremonies of the two Gurus.

As noted before, mere retaining the tradition, imitating the plays in the form and structure as introduced earlier is not a convention for many Satras. Many significant modifications were made not only in the language but also in the structure and presentation of the drama of the traditional type. In a way, experimental changes have been made in the traditional form of the performance and therefore, as mentioned earlier, a number of new forms evolved within the Satras as, *Dhurā Bhāonā*, *Phaujiya Bhāonā*, *Jurī Bhāonā*, *Cukragānar Bhāonā* and *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*. The Satras which were engaged in creating these new movements in the tradition are mainly: The Barpeta Satra, Kamalabari Satra and Auniati Satra. The detailed description has already been mentioned in the Chapter 4.

In the recent period, except the Barpeta Satra, Kamalābāri and the Āunīaṭī Satra are still actively involved in this dramatic tradition. In fact, the

Kamalābāri Satra is trying to develop a basic form, keeping the fundamental principles of the *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs*, in the movement of diversification within the tradition. The common people are of the view that, today the authenticity in the tradition is largely maintained by the Kamalābāri Satra, accepting the change of language to modern Assamese.

Some of the other *Satras*, who are keenly engaged in the tradition, are the Kāthpar satra of Sivasagar, Cāmaguri Satra of Majuli, in the continuation of the tradition of mask-making that enhances the development of the dramatic art in the recent period. In this aspect, infusions of many modern techniques in adjustment with the changes are perceivable in the tradition.

Next, to look upon the participation of the common people or the non-*Satriyas*, it can be enumerated that when the institution of *Bhāonā* gained its high regard within the *Satras*, then, mostly the religious-minded people started to perform themselves in the *nāmghars* of the villages, in imitation of the performances they usually observed in the *Satras*. In many villages, there is also the tradition of inviting the Vaiṣṇavite Gurus

of the Satras by enthusiastic villagers in order to provide them with the formal instructions required for a good performance of *Bhāonā*. At their request, the Vaiṣṇavites offer their guidance with the full training session of dance, music and action included in a *Bhāonā* performance. The written script used during the training period, is the production of the *Satra* itself. After the period is over, an intelligent person usually writes down the orally transmitted text of the script⁹. Thus, the latter production, obviously have distinguished transformations.

In such a way, this dramatic art was diffused among the people especially in the Upper and Central part of Assam.

Gradually, a new trend came into the tradition of *Bhāonā*, as it was flourished outside the *Satras*, particularly when it came into the hands of commoners. Numerous playwrights evolved at different places and periods of time, started from the last part of 18th century (approx.) to till date. The change of language was started by the Vaiṣṇavites was later became more prominent outside the *Satras*. Although, identified as one form, and known as such,

as *Mātrbhāṣār Bhāṅā*, the occurrence of variations within the genre became a regular feature.

Eventually, the playwrights have great manipulation in the formation and growth of this emergent form of the dramatic tradition. The *Nāṭ* (script) of the play is the indispensable part of the performance, and this has a qualitative effect on the performance. It has been observed that, the recognition as one identity has no concrete binding upon the playwrights, who often make their individual modifications in the plays with the infusion of some contemporary elements or elimination of the existing elements. [These changes have been illustrated in the Chapter 5.] Sometimes, these alteration or modifications are neither appealing to the audience nor imperative for the development of the tradition.

In many cases, it is noticeable that the language used does not suit the richness of the dignified tradition; in fact, it is very much akin to the dialogues of a modern drama, often expressed in the spoken temperament by the performers. Such dialogues are not lyrical in nature. Below provided an instance of such a kind:

*Bhadrasen: Senāpati tomār icchāt bādhā diyār
kāran nāy, gatike tumio olowā*

*Sursen: Dādā, āponi gale maio āpunār lagatei
jām.*

*Bhadrasen: Bhāi Sursen, tumi jābo nālāge. Tumi
Gurudevar lagate rājyat thākā,
Senāpotio mor lagat jabo. Tumi gole
rājyat arājak hobo. Gotike tumi jabo
nālāge*

[*Sujañja Rajār Dharma Parikhyā*, Kaloogaon,
Sivasagar]

The presentation of music in the performance of *Bhāonā* also depends upon the playwrights not only the lyrics; the scripts have also the mention of the *rāg* and *tāl* of the songs. The change in this facet of the drama has already been discussed in the Chapter 5.

However, the changes made by the playwrights in this aspect usually diminish the quality of the performance to a large extent as observed in many of the performances. It is observable that, sometimes the songs provided in their scripts can not be qualified as the production maintaining the required basic principles that need to enhance the aesthetic and the qualitative nature of a performance.

This is quite obvious in the creation of *Nāt* by unintelligible person or persons with less acquaintance with the tradition. In the traditional practice the *rāg* and *tāl* used in the songs are situation-based and often fixed. But, in the recent developments, deviation in this aspect is perceivable. As for example: The *Dharaṇjyoti tāl* is to be used in a scene which predominates with the sentiment of *Karuṇa* (pathetic), while today many playwrights make use of this *tāl* in scenes describing the fights¹⁰.

As a consequence, the playwrights in such a transitional period have an influential role to play either in developing the tradition, as well as preserving it in an agreeable manner or in the worst way of affecting the quality of the tradition with his creation.

Similarly, performance of *Bhāonā* can also be manipulated by the performers themselves. With the performer's presentation, the quality of a performance can be defined. Their significance in the performance is well perceivable in the individual competence of the performers. It is found that, while performing sometimes a good performer

can make instant alteration in the performance with his skill of presentation thereby, making the otherwise dull performance lively. It is evident that a single character can produce a strong effect on the performance. In the observation of *Bhāonā* in a village at Sivasagar, once it is found that the play was carried on by the character of *Śakuni*. [The maternal uncle of *Kauravas* in the *Mahabharata*] His performance made the audience spell-bound. Besides, abiding to the principles of the tradition he shows his competence of performance in a pleasant manner of blending tinges of modernity. It could be very well substantiated from his actions that he is persuaded by the contemporary tastes of performance esp. the performance of the *Śakuni* character as shown in the popular television serial, *Mahabharata*. Therefore, many changes of *Bhāonā* in the presentation level are established as the outcome of the performers' skill.

It is noted that some performers are profusely involved to this dramatic tradition. This is evident mostly in the rural areas of Sivasagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur and Tezpur. These performers are not involved simply as performers of a single performance, in fact, they seem to be attached to

the development of the whole institution of this art form. It is found that, some performers have all-around responsibilities in the performance, no doubt as performers but, also as playwrights, organizers, sometime also as an instructor. Moreover, apart from performing as an artist, they take part in the performance with a religious bend of mind. I met some persons who are so religiously inclined to the performance that, he really makes his performance an offering to God, but, if he incidentally could not perform he believe it to cause him misfortune. Such performers, who are so actively associated with the institution, are the real contributors of the tradition. Simultaneously, passive performers are also observable in the practice, who have minimum input for the performance as well as the tradition.

Next, the development of a performance as well as the tradition depends on the audience, in other words the audience constitutes an indispensable part of the performance. (In the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, an argument on the importance of audience has been made.

In the recent development of *Bhāonā*, the 'audience expectation' often seems to initiate the newness in the tradition. As informed by the

respondents, their expectations from the performance instigate the playwrights, performers and other related people of the performance-tradition, to make certain modifications that correspond with the change of time and tastes of the people. These modifications have both good and adverse effects on the tradition.

Today, with the exposure to latest developments of entertainment along with the advanced technology, people's expectations are more fascinated by the stylization and sophistication, as evident in the costume-making, which are more elegant and colourful, often less concern of the colour ethics that is necessary to signify the characters, mask-making, lighting arrangement, etc. The scripts are mostly influenced by the audience's choice and preference. It has been observed that in many cases, the scripts of this period maintain a very thin line of demarcation with the modern secular dramas by providing a weak theme, mostly imaginary than from the epics or *Purāṇas* where, the sentiments predominates are: *Vīra*, *Śṛṅgāra*, *Adbhuta*, *Hāsyā*. These were mostly avoided in the dramas of the early period.

The religiosity that engulfed the performance earlier is diminishing in the recent period. This is evident in the simplification and in many instances, elimination of the ritualistic significance and the devotional attitudes towards the performance. People prefer entertainment rather than any religious teachings from such an artistic medium. Further, they favor everything in precise and easily communicable. As informed by the respondents, this instigates the playwrights to shorten the play by eliminating many elements, to give importance of comical characters and to make a shift of language. Thus, such influencing factors led to make new developments in the performance-tradition. Discussions on these changes and the factors have been provided in the Chapter: 5. and Chapter: 6. respectively.

The impact of such a variety of factors in the different platforms steered on the development of a profuse diversification within the tradition. This created confusion in the performance-tradition with the variations within the single entity identified as *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā*. Many people became aware of the fact, and, took steps like organizing Competitions and Festivals of *Bhāonā*, where it is tried to

maintain some kind of uniformity by accepting the contemporaneity as well as holding the tradition in a set form, thus, trying to check further decadence in the performance. As informed by the respondents engaged in organizing the competitions of *Bhāonā*, that besides popularizing a definite form of *Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā* this will help to disseminate the actual ideals of the tradition, although presented in a different platform, instead of the *Satras* and *Nāmghars*. In the festivals of *Bhāonā*, organised at Nagaon (Dated 26th-29th December'2000) and Guwahati (Dated 26th-28th September'2003), it has been observed that presenting a *Bhāonā* in the Brajabuli language was preferred. Besides the festival held at Guwahati known as *Setubandha*, is an exception of giving a platform to the different communities of Assam such as tea-garden labourers, Bodo, Sonowal Kachari, Nepali, Mishing for a performance of *Bhāonā*. Infact, they were also provided with an expert training session during the rehearsal period by the organizers. It was an effort of uniting the varied communities as well as popularizing the ideals of this rich art heritage.

Another significant participation of people with the performing art can be noted as patrons.

Bhāonā, which evolved as a socio-religious event, actually do not have traditional patrons. Usually, the society or the individual connected to a particular performance extended their contribution with a devotional temperament, regarding the performance as 'an act of piety'. So, when it has a ritualistic significance even the performers or other people related to the performance need no remuneration. Later, with the increasing secular attitudes other than religious, towards the performance patronization from the Royal Courts started. Chilaray, alias Śukladhvaja of Koch-Bihar, patronized the first representation of Sankaradeva's *Rukmini Haran Nat*¹¹. As mentioned earlier, performances of Bhaona are also organized under the aegis of Ahom kings to entertain their guest, *Abhišek* or in the victory of wars. These performances are designed to cater their needs as evident by the unpopularity of the *Akrugaman Nat* (See in the preceding paragraphs in this chapter) performed by Dihing Namati Satra for not infusing the character of Bahuwa (clown). Later, the government (both State and Central) also called for the performances of *Bhāonā* on several occasions. As discussed earlier in this section, recently, the performance-tradition

with its extensive diversified status led to aware many groups and organizations. Thus, the performances of *Bhāonās* organized by them as a part of the festivals and competitions are also directed by them in the endeavor to value the heritage. Moreover, the sponsorship of the media as an art show has also significant impact to the tradition. Although, patronization is not a requisite part in the performance of *Bhāonā*, it has an indisputable relation since its evolution.

Besides the unfavorable developments that crept into the performance-tradition, there are also developments favourable to the tradition, as observed to be contributed by most of the contemporary playwrights, directors, performers; individuals and groups engaged in this performance-tradition with an enthusiastic attitude for an innovative presentation, acceptable to new generations of audiences, in the contemporary options available merging into the fundamental base, while propagating the principles of the religion as well as the performance-tradition.

Notes

- ¹ Richard Bauman, "Performance" *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (New York: OUP, 1992) 41.
- ² Hymes, Dell: "Breakthrough into Performance" *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 11.
- ³ Stuart Blackburn, *Rāma Stories and Shadow Puppets: Kampan's Ramayana in Performance* (New Delhi: OUP, 1997) 10-15.
- ⁴ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam* (Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1966) 172.
- ⁵ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya* (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 75.
- ⁶ Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage* (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 28.
- ⁷ Satyendra Nath Sarma, (1996) 83.
- ⁸ *ibid* 75.
- ⁹ Manik Neog, personal interview, 27 Jun 2002
- ¹⁰ Kesavananda Deva Goswami, "Bhāonār Gīt Māt" *Bhāonā Samīkhyā*, (Dibrugarh: Bhaona Satabarsiki Udjapan Samiti, 1990) 18.
- ¹¹ Maheswar Neog, *Bhaona, The Ritual Play of Assam* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1984) 15.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

In this study, an attempt has been made to understand the aspect of 'change' and 'continuity' in the traditional performance of *Bhāonā* in Assam with the emphasis on *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* as its emerging form.

Change is invasive in every phenomenon of human life, be it individual or collective. A traditional culture is no exception. It also changes with the change of time and other varied factors. In fact, culture is like a flowing river, which changes its course in due phases of time. And, a river is living, when it is in its motion or flow, otherwise, it is a dead river. Likewise, the traditional culture, when not in practice, is regarded as frozen or dead. The cultural continuity is very essential to consolidate the past.

Today, the institution of *Bhāonā* does exist in a complicated situation with its several identities, often with the claim of holding the tradition in adaptation to the changing time and attitudes of its active and passive bearers. In addition to this

complicacy, this performance tradition seems to be in persistent instability which might be looked as one of the common characteristics of many traditional arts in today's changing world. Thus, it is not easy to make a distinct assessment of the whole situation in such a transitional phase. While discussing the plurality of traditions in the Asia and their non-feasibility to be categorized in some definite genres, Kapila Vatsyayan says:

"The phenomenon of cultural growth can be never sketched in terms of a single rising line or curve of development; subsidiary curves, lines and graphs have to be drawn to contain to total picture. Repeatedly major exceptions, seeming contradictions and departures have to be stated the moment a formulation in general terms have been made. In the face of this multiplicity and absence of a monolithic structure, many have characterized the picture as conglomeration of many trends and historical periods and have been obliged to rest content with a narration of parallel growths. Also, many aspects of the past seem to overlap with the present,

not merely as vestiges and heritage but as a living reality.”¹

In spite of the fact, the study tries to make an analysis of the present situation in the performance of *Bhāonā* along with the past---the continuity in adaptation to change.

Bhāonā has its origin during the 15th-16th century A.D., with the creation of *Añkiyā Nāṭs* by Śaṅkaradeva, mainly in order to preach the principles of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. Before the evolution of *Añkiyā Nāṭs*, there are evidences of existence of several indigenous dramatic and semi-dramatic modes in Assam, viz. *Ojā pāli*, *Dhuliyā Bhāonā*, *Khuliyā Bhāonā*, *Bhari Gān*, *Kuśān Gān*, *Putalā Nāc*. Many scholars are of the opinion that these forms have its impact on Śaṅkaradeva while creating his dramatic spectacle. This is supported by the presence of many features of *Añkiyā Nāṭs* similar to these forms. This has been discussed in the Chapter: 2.

Śaṅkaradeva, regarded as the father of Assamese drama and dramaturgy with the immense contribution towards the dramatic tradition of Assam through his

Aṅkīyā Nāṭs. A descriptive detail on the evolution of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭ* and its characteristics has been provided in the Chapter: 3.

Śaṅkaradeva was followed by Mādhavadeva and the later Vaiṣṇava leaders. In a way, the Satras played a significant role in maintaining and developing the dramatic tradition.

Gradually, *Bhāonā* gained its currency outside the Satras, which led the participation of the commoners. *Aṅkīyā Bhāonā*, devised by Śaṅkaradeva became the touchstone and criterion in its growth in the later period. Obvious changes made its entry into the traditional practice. This resulted in many new developments within the tradition. Different forms on the basis of *Aṅkīyā Bhāonās* evolved at different periods since its initiation made by Śaṅkaradeva. The changes in the tradition started within the Satras. Even, the plays of Mādhavadeva have a distinctive identity, which are extensively known as *Jhumurās*.

Later, with the recognition of certain distinct characteristics, these new developments within the tradition were classified into certain categories where the basic ideals of the tradition persists,

although, in many of the cases weakly maintained. One such development is known as the Mātṛbhāṣar Bhāonā, which characterizes by the change of language from Brajabuli with many other discernable alterations. These transformations are more secular in character, rather than devotional influenced by the modern attitudes and tastes of the people. The other forms in the style of *Ankīyā Bhāonā* are: *Dhurā Bhāonā*, *Phaujiyā Bhāonā*, *Jurī Bhāonā*, *Cukragānar Bhāonā*, *Baresahariyā Bhāonā* and *Hezāri Bhāonā*. Illustrations of these forms have been made in the Chapter: 4.

As pointed earlier, change is a universal issue and, is undeniable. Changes are sometimes favorable, while at other times unfavorable. A performing art continues in adaptations to contemporary changes.

In the process of adapting to the current changes, it is necessary to make the past relevant to the present; otherwise there is the fear of loosing the traditional identity. Therefore, a performing art survives only with its continuity, which is again depends on contemporary adaptations. In this regard Ashok D. Ranade rightly opined:

“Nothing strengthens the performing art more than their essential continuity. It

is this continuity which consolidates the past, validates the present and ensures a future for the performing arts. No amount of documentation, preservation or (a passive) dissemination of cultural values is likely to help unless accompanied by an active circulating presence of things and truths we believe in.”²

A performance-study is not parallel to other 'structuralized study'. Every performance is a new creation with every time it is performed, even though it attributes the same text within the same context. Therefore, comprehending of the 'traditional continuity' as well as the 'contemporary changes' or the 'emerging trends', can be considered as inevitable while analyzing a performing art. Moreover, a performance, like *Bhāonā* which is in transition has other dimensions responsible for its transformations, these are, 'communicative competence', 'creativity' or 'innovative nature' of man, and 'emergent quality of a performance'. A brief discussion on these issues has been made in the Chapter: 5, provided by an argument on the changes that crept into the

performance-tradition. As mentioned earlier, the changes are perceivable since its evolution. But, as the study laid its emphasis on *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*, this section is detailed in documenting the changes that have been observed in the various aspects of the performance, evaluating from the period of its development.

Intermixture of modern elements and sometimes elimination of existing elements led to the formation of *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*. Changes are perceivable in the various fields. The text, which stands for the written script of the play, have significant change of language and theme; change of objective of the performance, where the previous ritualistic significance of the tradition has been gradually inclined to be entertainment-oriented; change in the field of music and dance; sophistication and stylization entered into the field of mask and costume making, lighting arrangement, sound effects, and other *cho*-effigies and prop.

With the natural tendency of communicative competence and innovative or creative nature of man, several other factors are also responsible as the causes of transformations that have been operating

within the variety of aspects of the performance during the recent period. This has been discussed in the Chapter: 6. Apart from the creative nature of the man, the changing expectations of the people also have great impact on the alterations in the traditional practice. In the evolution of *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* the people's expectation and convenience instigated for certain changes as the change of language, importance of the comical character, shortening of the time period of performance etc.

The change of language is the distinctive criterion to signify *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*, and to make it clear, this change is not only as a result of the people's choice or convenience, but also due to the lesser acquaintance of the language by the playwrights, which also include the Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the *Satra* besides the commoners. Further, another influential factor is the importance of entertainment in contrast to the devotional attainment has led to certain secular changes which are evident in the performances organized not for religious purpose but, either for the popularization of the tradition or simply for

entertainment that has been telecasted on television.

Today the tradition of *Bhāonā* is surviving in a multilayered platform. The plurality within the tradition has no end, which is evident with the occurrence of diversification within *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā*. In such a transitional phase when the transformations are very numerous, it is hard to classify or categorize this emergent form of *Bhāonā*. Nevertheless, a simple classification has been made on the basis of language, time, place and playwrights etc. which is presented in the Chapter: 7. The variations of alterations within the tradition has led to the development of several identities of the genre, where some are rather loose and compromising, as far as, the total quality of the performance is concerned, and, some others have shown strict orthodoxy in sticking to the traditional norms.

Several people have their contributions in sustaining the institution of *Bhāonā*, since its evolution to the recent period. They can be categorized as: Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the Satras and non-Satra people and Active and Passive

Participants. This has been illustrated in the Chapter: 8

The involvement of the Vaiṣṇavites in the development of the performance-tradition is very commendable. Because, if they would not have retained the tradition initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, then today, the tradition would have been extinct. Their contributions in the continuation of the tradition have made possible to broaden the horizon of its practice. The movement towards change in the tradition or tendency to new developments was also started by the Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the Satras as shown in the alteration of language and style of the Nāts written by many Vaiṣṇavites. And, the change is often an expression of the individuality or creativity of the playwrights.

Later, the Vaiṣṇavites also imparted training to the commoners or the non-Satra people, whenever they show their interest on the performance.

With the high esteem towards the performance, which was also due to the impact exerted by the presentation of the performances of the Vaiṣṇavites, the non-Satra people were drawn to participate in the tradition. Later, with their participation the

preference of contemporaneity was more focused in the tradition of *Bhāonā*. Thus, *Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā* although identified within the *Satras*, has developed to the recent form in the hands of the non-*Satra* people outside the *Satras*. However, this led to the diversifications within the genre which indicates the lack of uniformity in the form and content of the tradition.

The innovative nature of man has no end. Although, people are aware of the structured system of the performance, it is observable in most of the time, they fail to maintain the regularity of the tradition which was influenced by many factors in this changing world as already discussed. This resulted in the variations within the genre which, actually bring about a chaotic movement in the performance-tradition. While some conscious people put their effort to hold the Śāṅkarite dramatic tradition in a conventional form accepting the contemporary adaptations in an agreeable manner. The role of these persons as playwrights, directors, performers or in other activities of a performance is additional to their effort to develop the performance-tradition by organizing the competitions

and festivals of *Bhāonā*, for proper dissemination and popularization of the tradition, particularly in a basic form. In such a way, it is expected to accommodate the tradition to avoid variations and confusions.

From the analysis of the present situation of the performance of *Bhāonā*, it is perceived that, the performance-tradition has experienced different layers of identifications at different period of time. Today, it is characterized by the presence of both traditional and contemporary spirits in a variety of levels. Sometimes, the performances are more inclined to traditionality and at other times, to contemporaneity. While enumerating the simultaneous existence of the both, it can be said that, in some places, as evident in the practices in the areas of Nagaon *Bhāonās* akin to *Añkiyā*, often employing the Brajabuli language, is more prevalent.

Since evolution, the tradition of Bhaona is continuing albeit in many emergent forms. Today, the tradition has been popularly existing in the form of *Mātrbhāṣar Bhāonā*, even though, it has several manifestations.

There is always a fear of loosing a tradition either, completely adhering to it or breaking away

from it. A tradition is not mere clinging to the past. Today, the interrelationship of the past and the present is viable while defining a tradition. To be precise, the focus is on the dynamic relations between the socially given, i.e., 'traditional' and the creative individual i.e., 'emergent'. In a way, a tradition undergoes certain transformations in the present context. But, the tradition can be maintained in a proper blending of the past and the present. The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.³

Notes

¹ Kapila Vatsyayan, *A Study of Some Traditions of Some Performing Arts in Eastern India: Margi and Desi Polarities* (Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1981) 2-3.

² Ashok D. Ranade, *Myth and Music in India* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1997) 123.

³ T. S. Eliot quoted in Nabin Chandra Sarma, "Asomiya Loka Natyar Parampara", *Asomiya Natak: Parampara aru Paribartan* (Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 1995) 26.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS

Ānr Kapoor (White Curtain)



..... the *Agnigarh* (arch of lighted lamps)
behind the curtain



Dhemali (Musical Preliminaries)
performed by *Gāyan-Bāyan*





[Variation in dress-pattern of *Gāyan-Bāyan* at different places may be noted]

The Śūtradhāra



Different Scenes of Actions
in a variety of performances





Modern setting of the
Performance-arena inside *Nāmghar*



Special
arrangement of light →



Dohār:
The place of the musicians during the play



Stage performances of Bhaona



← Extended sitting arrangement in a *Namghar*

Make-up sessions inside the *Co-ghar* (green room)



Audiences...

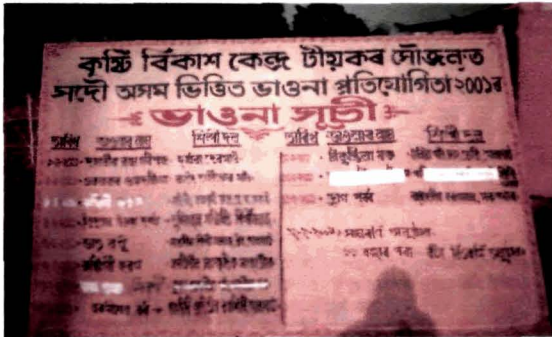


... watching a play



... in a moment of climax

Organizing of *Bhāonā* competitions



A schedule of competition

A tradition in contemporary situation:
Erection of temporary *Maṇikūṭ* in the performance arena of competition



Organizers of a competition welcoming a group of performers and their script



Sri Manik Neog, as a judge of a competition



The prizes

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