Ankiyâ Play and Bhâonâ of Srimanta Sankaradeva

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A masterful innovator in the field of Indian (and world) drama who got constructed a seven-layer stage for his maiden play – ‘the first play in the whole range of modern Indo-Aryan languages’ - and employed boy actors for the first time in Indian theatre in his second, a pioneering playwright who experimented with new themes and forms, successfully combining elements from classical dramaturgy with local culture, fusing high philosophy with folk-taste, to create an irresistible medium of mass-entertainment, all with the ultimate objective of propagating the ideal of Devotion to Lord Krishna among the hoi polloi.

India and Indian theatre surely owe a special debt of gratitude to Srimanta Sankaradeva the dramatist.

In this paper by Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, apart from throwing a flood of light on the special contributions of Sankaradeva in the field of drama, the author also adduces several weighty points in support of the contention that even the Maithili and the Bengali playwrights were influenced by the dramatic form innovated by Sankaradeva. This need not appear surprising as Vaisnavism had already struck deep roots in Assam by even as early as the close of the fifteenth century and the floruit of most of the personalities of the other movements was at a much later date.

That Sankaradeva is the earliest composer of devotional lyrics in Vrajawali is beyond doubt (‘we can safely consider it (Sankaradeva’s first Bargit) to be the first lyric to be written in Brajabuli in Assam, Bengal, and Orissa’, The Bhakti Cycle of Assamese Lyrics: Bargits and After, Maheswar Neog). In this he preceded even Yasoraja Khan of Sultan Husain Shah’s (1493-1519 A.D.) court. Again, it has been proved that the ‘credit of writing the entire play in a Desi Bhâshâ goes to Mahâpurusa Sankaradeva of Assam’ (Dashrath Ojha). The eminent historian of Maithili literature Jayakanta Misra also places the Ankiya plays of Sankaradeva in the early phase of the growth of literary output in Maithili.

The researchers of Indian theatre must now acknowledge the achievements of Sankaradeva and probe, in all intellectual integrity, into the possible impact of Sankaradeva’s dramas on the plays of North India. Some work has already been done in this regard. See, for instance, ‘The Impact of Sankaradeva’s Dramas on the Literatures of Northern India’, in which paper the writer accepts that ‘one fact is perhaps to be accepted that Mahâpurusa Sankaradeva influenced the dramatic activities of the North to a great extent’ and that ‘the Lilâ players might have got the suggestions from Mahâpurusa Sankaradeva at the time of his pilgrimage to Vrindâban’.

Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568 AD) was a leading playwright of Assam as well as India. He set several world records as a playwright and director. His maiden play Chihna yâtrâ (Cihna Yatra) launched the movement of regional plays in the modern Indian languages. This play was enacted in 1468 AD at Tembuwani (Bardowa). Unfortunately no script of this play survived, because of which many
persons opine that it was not a written play. But there are vivid descriptions about Srimanta Sankaradeva writing this play in the ancient hagiographies. Moreover several songs are also available which are traditionally known as songs of Chihna yatrá. So the script of this play was lost due to lack of proper care.

The plays composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva are known as Ankiyā play or Anka. Enactment of these plays in a distinctive style is known as Bhāonā. Enactment of the plays written by the followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva is also called Bhāonā. But their plays are not called Ankiyā play. The term Ankiyā play is reserved only for the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The plays written by Madhavadeva are called Jhumurā. Only the play Arjuna bhanjana by Madhavadeva belong to the same genre as Srimanta Sankaradeva’s plays, because of which that play can be called Ankiyā play.

Scripts of several Ankiyā plays have been recovered till now. These are Patni prasāda, Kāliya damana, Keli Gopāla, Rukmini harana, Pārijāta harana, and Sri Rāma vijaya. Srimanta Sankaradeva composed and enacted another play named Janma yatrá when he was residing at Patbausi, according to the hagiographer Ramcharan Thakur. The saint composed that play after returning from his second pilgrimage.

The script of the play Janma yatrá is however not available now. The Vrindavani cloth which was woven later, incorporating the incidents in Sri Krishna’s life starting from birth till the killing of Kamsa was a painting form of the Janma yatrá play only. Unfortunately the Vrindavani cloth has been lost and only a part of it remains in a London museum. Other two plays authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva were Gopi Uddhava sambāda and Kangsa badha. The first was gutted in fire, while the latter was lost. Anyway, we can list the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva as Chihna yatrá, Patni prasāda, Kaliya damana, Keli Gopala, Rukmini harana, Pārijāta harana, Janma yatrá, Gopi Uddhava sambāda, Kangsa badha and Sri Rāma vijaya.

Once Srimanta Sankaradeva lived at a place named Gajalasuti for six months. It was during this period that he composed the play Patni prasāda. It was written in 1448 Sakabda or 1526-27 AD, according to Ambika Nath Bora. This play is not enriched with
dramatic characters like the other plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. This is however not hard to understand. The playwright wrote this play in order to express his anguish. It was composed as a reaction to the stiff resistance to his effort for preaching the ideology of Eka-Sharana-Nâma-Dharma.

Srimanta Sankaradeva set several world records with his play Chihna yâtrā. He used drop scenes in it for the first time in the world. Also he got constructed stages at higher levels than that of the audience. It may be mentioned that a seven layer stage was constructed for this play, which was yet another innovative experiment in the entire world. It was also the first play in all modern Indian languages. The second play of the saint litterateur, Patni prasâda also experimented another innovation. The playwright introduced here the character of teenager boys for the first time in any Indian play. Before this, only adult characters were incorporated in the plays. So the play Patni prasâda deserves a distinctive place in the annals of Indian plays.

Ram Rai, a cousin of Srimanta Sankaradeva once organized a toy-dance at Dhuwahata. Srimanta Sankaradeva then asked Ram Rai if he wanted to enjoy a good festival. Ram Rai immediately answered in the affirmative and requested Srimanta Sankaradeva to hold a Nât yâtrâ (drama festival). The former took the responsibility of finance. It was then that Srimanta Sankaradeva composed the plays Kâliya damana and Pârijâta harana. He enriched them with dramatic components as he did not have to worry about the pecuniary aspect during their enactment. People came from far and wide to enjoy these plays when these were enacted.

Srimanta Sankaradeva used Brajawali (Vrajawali) language in his Ankiyâ plays also like in his Bargeets. Perhaps he wanted an all India audience, so that his message could spread in Northern India. The playwright succeeded also in this goal. The Bengali society and the Maithili society were highly influenced by the Ankiyâ plays. Even the popular Yâtrâ movement in Bengal was derived from Srimanta Sankaradeva’s Ankiyâ plays, which used this word ‘Yâtrâ’ in nomenclature. It may be mentioned that the name Bhâonâ to denote enactment of Ankiyâ play came to be popular in Assam only much later. Earlier, the Ankiyâ plays were known as Yâtrâ. That the very first play of the saint
was named Chihna yâtrâ is also significant in this context. The method of entry by the actors in both Bengali Yâtrâ plays as well as in the Maithili plays is similar to the method of entry in the Ankiyâ plays. Moreover the enactment of these plays right in the middle of the audience is also derived from the Sankari plays. The Nandi is followed by the prayer song to God in the Maithili plays just like in the Ankiyâ plays. All these traditions were carried from the Ankiyâ plays to the Maithili plays, thanks to the use of Brajawali.

The second possible reason behind the use of Brajawali in the Ankiyâ plays is that Srimanta Sankaradeva tried to create a sombre atmosphere during the enactment of his plays by using a different medium in these from the lingua franca of the majority of the people. He succeeded in that too. That is why his creations as well as his styles have remained alive among the masses even five centuries later. Ankiyâ plays still remain a vibrant style in the world of drama. These are looked upon as a source of healthy entertainment in the Assamese society even in the twenty first century.

The play Kâliya damana crossed the geographical boundary of Brahmaputra valley and became widely popular in Bengal too. Even a cultural era was created there by this play. The period from sixteenth century to the middle part of nineteenth century is known as Kâliya damana yâtrâ era in Bengal. The popularity of this play was so high that all plays with the subject matter of Lord Krishna’s life and activities came to be known as Kâliya damana yâtrâ. Many stage managers included this play in their commercial circuit till the nineteenth century.

The Maithili plays were also influenced by the Ankiyâ plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Two Maithili playwrights influenced by the Saint were Govinda, who composed his plays around 1640 AD and Umapati who was a playwright of the transition period between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. The Maithili playwrights derived the concept and materials for their harana plays from the Ankiyâ plays. The harana plays like Ushâ harana, Rukmini harana, and Umapati’s Pârijâta harana etc. are vivid examples of this. The influence of Ankiyâ plays in these Maithili plays is seen in the nomenclature, enactment during night, enactment at regular place like in Bhâonâ, entry
of Sutradhāra (compere) after the reading of Nandi, costume, headgear etc. The Maithili historians have accepted this truth.\(^{11}\)

Srimanta Sankaradeva did not want his devotees to live a dull and insipid life, even though they lived very pious lives. The Saint composed his Ankiyā plays in order to offer quality entertainment to his disciples as well as lay public. That was why he embellished them with lots of songs and dances.

It may be noted that the Shānta rasa prevails over all other rasa in the Ankiyā plays. Other eight rasa are relegated to a secondary position in these plays. The concept of Shanta rasa was not there in the Nātya shāstra written by Bharata. Scholars like Ananda Bardhana and Abhinava Gupta incorporated it in the Alankāra shāstra.\(^{12}\)

The very fact that Srimanta Sankaradeva laid emphasis on the Shānta rasa departing from the tradition of Nātya shāstra proves that he was quite revolutionary for his time. This rasa gives the pleasure of spiritual bliss to the audience. Srimanta Sankaradeva wanted to deliver this pleasure to his audience through the Bhaona of his Ankiyā plays. He did not give importance to gross scintillating pleasures. So the remaining eight rasa i.e Shringāra, Karunā, Adbhuta, Hāsya, Bira, Raudra, Bhayānaka, and Bibhatsa always remained subservient to the Shānta rasa in the Ankiyā plays. The character Sutradhāra always reminded the audience about their spiritual duties. Thus religious sermons got the upper hand over acting in the Ankiyā plays.\(^{13}\)

The Ankiyā plays are termed as sermons rather than plays by some writers because of the predominance of sermons and the Shānta rasa in these.\(^{14}\) But this is not a proper analysis of these plays. We cannot judge the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva by the standard of ancient Sanskrit plays which always gave importance on Shringāra and Bira rasa. The saint had his own original approach in his creative works, which have now been recognized. Moreover the Shānta rasa has been accepted as an important rasa in the period after Bharata. So we cannot say that the Ankiyā plays are deficient in dramatic characteristics. Srimanta Sankaradeva created his own style which had the dual purpose of proselytizing and giving entertainment to the audience. It would be an injustice to
Srimanta Sankaradeva if we judge his original play-form by the standard of other play-forms.

The Ankiyâ plays were certainly a tool for Srimanta Sankaradeva to spread his message. He was the first person in the world to use the plays as a medium of proselytizing. He was a forerunner to even Bertolt Brecht in this respect. The former had achieved the purpose of using drama as a tool for social reform and reconstruction way back in the sixteenth century, a feat that the latter performed only in the twentieth century. Moreover Srimanta Sankaradeva used his static plays for a different purpose by keeping the actors in a low profile and giving them minimum actions. The plays of Maeterlinck have similar characteristics, because of which Srimanta Sankaradeva can be called a forerunner of Maeterlinck\textsuperscript{15}.

There is no record in the hagiographies of making elevated stage for any play other than Chihna yâtrâ. So we can guess that the present tradition of enacting the plays in the Kirtanghar was started during the lifetime of Srimanta Sankaradeva himself. The system of enacting a play in Kirtanghar or any open space amidst the audience is called Proscenium. The purpose of Proscenium is to achieve contact between the actors and the audience. This Proscenium concept came into effect only after 1650 AD in the West\textsuperscript{16}. So we can say that this concept also was actually an innovation of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Thus the rest of the world lagged behind by a century. They lagged behind also in incorporating religious elements in the plays. The religious play of Valentiena was enacted in the Mansion stage of Paris only in 1547 AD\textsuperscript{17}.

Srimanta Sankaradeva preached the main tenets of Eka-Sharana-Nâma-Dharma among the masses through his Ankiyâ plays. So the enactments of these plays were symbolic. The screen used for covering the actors before their entry symbolizes mâyâ (illusion). The character of Krishna enters the arena of acting after this screen is removed. This symbolizes the fact that truth dawns in one when the veil of ignorance is removed. Similarly, nine wicks in the Agnigarh symbolize nine types of devotion. Sometimes twelve wicks also are used. Then they signify the Bhâgavata scripture, which has twelve cantos. Srimanta Sankaradeva gave stress on two particular modes of
devotion to God more than other modes. These were chanting and listening to God’s Name. Two Ariyas (beacons) used for illumination of the arena of acting signifies these two modes of devotion.

The audiences of Bhâonâ were reminded about their spiritual duties and the tenets of devotion through the above symbolic tools. A Bhaona is generally performed in the Kirtanghar. Naivedya has to be offered to God in that place before starting the performance. This is compulsory, even if the Bhaona is held in some place other than the Kirtanghar. It implies that the Bhaona is actually a form of worship of the Supreme God by the devotee actors. Prayer to God by singing Nandi verse at the very outset, wishing welfare and salvation for all by singing Muktimangala Bhatimâ verse at the end, etc. also signify the importance on spirituality by this performance. The Muktimangala Bhatimâ is absent only in the play Patni prasâda. The background of this play has already been described. So this exception is not surprising. Moreover the spiritual aspect has been duly highlighted in this play also through several songs.

Srimanta Sankaradeva did another noteworthy act by composing these Ankiyâ plays. This was the introduction of prose style in Assamese language and literature. All literary works till the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva were composed in verse. It was He who used prose for the first time in the Ankiyâ plays. So the prose style came into being in the Assamese literature with these Ankiyâ plays only. This prose was innovative and different from the colloquial prose form. Unfortunately the script of the first ever Ankiyâ play, Chihna yâtrâ, is not available. So we will have to consider the second play, Patni prasâda, as the first available instance of prose form in Assamese literature.

Some people hesitate to confer the status of first prose writing to the Ankiyâ plays since these were a little poetic and since these were written in the Brajawali form of language. But we should consider these plays as an innovation in the medieval Assamese literature, which later became an indispensable part of the literature. Now we cannot and do not exclude these plays from the realm of Assamese literature. They should be considered as the first instance of prose in Assamese literature.
It has been stated earlier that Srimanta Sankaradeva departed from the tradition of Bharata’s *Nātya shāstra* in the context of *rasa*. Actually he had departed in several other aspects also. For instance, he did not abide by the prohibitory norms of this scripture. Some activities are not enacted in the Sanskrit plays.

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\text{Durāhvanang badho yuddhang rājyadeshadi biplavah}
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\[
\text{Bibāhobhojanang shapotsargow mrityu ratang tathā}
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This means that the scenes of calling from a distance, battle, revolution, killing, death, wedding, eating, giving curse etc. are not depicted in the Sanskrit plays. But Srimanta Sankaradeva did not abide by these prohibitions. For instance, he incorporated a scene of eating in the play *Patni prasāda*. Again, the play *Rukmini harana* has scenes of battle and wedding; in fact these constitute the very subject matter of this play. The play *Keli Gopāla* has the scene of killing. The playwright incorporated as many as three prohibited elements in his last play *Sri Rāma vijaya*. These are ‘battle’, ‘killing’ and ‘wedding’. Thus Srimanta Sankaradeva developed his own play-form, independently from the Sanskrit play-form.

It may be mentioned that *Sri Rāma vijaya* was the last play as well as literary work of Srimanta Sankaradeva. He composed this play in 1490 Shaka or 1568 AD, at the request of Chilarai. The *Svayamvara* of princess Sita and the wedding of *Lord Rama* was the main theme of this play. Srimanta Sankaradeva arranged the enactment of this play at the request of Chilarai and even directed it himself in spite of his old age. This proves the special interest of Srimanta Sankaradeva in plays.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was encouraged to evolve his own form of play because of his flair for it as well as his inimitable expertise in this medium. He departed from the Sanskrit plays in the respect of *Sutradhāra*’s role. The *Sutradhāra* does not have any duty in the Sanskrit plays after the introduction of the subject matter, when he comes off the stage. But he remains there from the beginning till the end in Srimanta Sankaradeva’s *Ankiyā* plays. The *Sutradhāra* keeps the audience abreast of the developments in the story from time to time and also explains the spiritual significance of these. He assists the *Khol* players and the singers too. If necessary, he participates in acting also.
Srimanta Sankaradeva presented his spiritual sayings through the character of Sutradhāra since he was using his plays as a proselytizing medium. It is significant that he himself acted in this role in his maiden play Chihna yātrā. That highlights the importance attached to this role by the playwright. The above analysis also proves that the Sutradhāra of Ankiyā play was not derived from the Sutradhāra of Sanskrit plays. Rather Srimanta Sankaradeva created this character from the indigenous cultural heritages like toy-dance and Ojā páli. There are many similarities of the Sutradhāra of Ankiyā play with the Ojā (compere) of Ojā páli. The characteristics of the Sutradhāra of toy-dance also resemble that of the Ankiyā play to a great extent. The fact that the Saint was attracted to composing and enacting some more plays after his cousin Ram Rai had organized a toy-dance is also significant in this context. This proves that the former was an admirer of toy-dance.

It may be mentioned that there are instructions like “Iti Sutra niskrāntah” in some places of the Ankiyā play. But in reality the Sutradhāra remains in the arena of acting through the entire performance. So we can term these words as later entries. The elaborate and independent functions of the Sutradhāra of Ankiyā play proves the originality of this character created by Srimanta Sankaradeva. For instance, the Barbhangi and Sarubhangi presented by Sutradhāra of Ankiyā play are not found in any other play-form or in any scripture on acting. Thus the ingredients of Ankiyā play establish it as an independent form of play.

References and Notes: -

1. It has been mentioned in hagiography that Srimanta Sankaradeva held Chihna yātrā at nineteen years of age. Guru charit : Srimanta Sankaradevar lilā charit, (in Assamese), Ramcharan Thakur, edited by Harinarayan Dutta Barua, 6th edition, Guwahati, 1985 AD, pp. 315-316.

2. Katha Gurucharit, (in Assamese), Chakrapani Vairagi, composed in about 1758 AD and collected by Dr Banikanta Kakoti, edited by Upendra Chandra Lekharu, 15th edition,
Guwahati, 1987, p. 36. Since the play Chihna yâtrâ was enacted in a very elaborate and prolonged manner, we can guess that it had a written script. The well planned event would not have been possible without a written script.

3. As many as twenty eight boxfuls of ancient books have been damaged at Ganakkuchi Than due to ill preservation. Since Madhavadeva resided there, we can guess that many of Srimanta Sankaradeva’s own hand-written scripts had been preserved there. Unfortunately, these have been lost for ever.


6. Sri Sri Sankaradeva, (in Assamese), Dr Maheswar Neog, 5th edition, Dibrugarh, 1985 AD, p. 77, 129. Neog himself also opined that this play was composed at Dhuwahata. [ibid, p. 88] But the hagiographies do not support this view.

7. Mahâpurusha Sankaradevar samparke Chaitanyapanthir apaprachâra, (in Assamese), Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, part II, in Natun dainik, edited by Surjya Hazarika, Guwahati, October 19, 1997 AD.


9. Gurucharit Kathâ, (in Assamese), Chakrapani Vairagi, [name not mentioned], composed in about 1758 AD and collected by Dr Naren Kalita, [unedited], in Katha, Vol 1 No 1, Guwahati, 1992 AD, pp. 146-147. The collector has also wrongly opined in his brief foreword that Patni prasada, Kaliya damana, and Parijat harana were composed at Gajalasuti. Actually only Patni prasada was written at Gajalasuti. Remaining two plays
were written at Dhuwahata. Moreover Ram Rai did not stay with Srimanta Sankaradeva at Gajalasuti, as opined by the collector.


14. Ibid, p. 353. Mahanta even cites the lack of stage as a reason of not including the *Ankiyâ* plays within the ambit of drama. Such analysis is only result of ignorance. The *Ankiya* play’s arena of acting was unique and not like other plays elsewhere.


17. Ibid, p. 29.


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