

The Vaisnava Drama of Assam

Farley Richmond

www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents Farley Richmond's brilliant piece on Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat, The Vaisnava Drama of Assam. Herein, in one single essay, we have almost everything that we should know about the [religious theatre of Sankaradeva](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org). The current piece is redacted from the Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute, Nagaon (2006). The photographs are reproduced (in non-commercial use) from the JSTOR internet archive [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3206631>]. The original paper was published in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May, 1974), pp. 145-163, Johns Hopkins University Press.

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[The designation of the author is reproduced unchanged from that given in the original paper (cited above) - *editor*]

Editing note(s):- Diacritics has been used sparingly; generally only the long diacritic (macron) pertaining to a/A has been highlighted and that too, depending upon the context.

See Also: - [The complete translation of Sankaradeva's Parijata Harana Nata](#)

I

About the same time that Martin Luther was preaching the gospel of religious reformation in Europe, the poet-saints of India were proselytizing a revision of orthodox Hinduism popularly known as Vaisnavism. Simply stated, Vaisnavism stresses the right of the individual to communicate directly with god without passing through intermediaries or performing prescribed rituals, much as the mystics of medieval Europe had claimed was possible. Quite naturally this heretical doctrine challenged the sacerdotalism of brahmanical Hinduism which maintained, among other things, that man must first undergo either severe austerities (yoga), seek to gain knowledge, live a virtuous life, make sacrifices, engage in charitable activities, or perform meritorious deeds before hoping to escape from the cycle of

rebirth and to experience final union with god. Vaisnavism derives its philosophical principles from the *Bhagavata-purana*, a Vedantic text, which is regarded as the word of God, revealed by Him through His earthly incarnation, **Krsna**. **Krsna** makes it quite clear in this work that He is the Supreme Being and Ultimate Essence of the universe, to whom all creatures should bow down in reverence. The uniqueness of the monotheism of the Vaisnava faith lies in the notion that man, the worshiper, is inseparable and indivisible from God, whom he worships. They are one and the same being. Of the various means used to propagate this new faith among the masses of India's villagers, theatre became one of the most successful, owing in no small measure to its ability to draw large audiences together to watch entertaining stories with didactic messages¹. Many of the dramatic forms still current in India owe their existence and continuity to the inspiration of the poet-saints who realized this potential². The dramatic forms that emerged in fifteenth and sixteenth-century India take their unique shape according to the philosophy of the particular poet-saint who inspired their creation, differing from each other only in minor details, just as the Vaisnava philosophies do from one region to another.

In general all the theatrical forms have the same general objective, to popularize and reinforce *bhakti*, an intense feeling of devotion and love among the *bhaktas* (devotees) of the God **Visnu**, particularly in His manifestation as **Krsna**. Most of the theatre forms enjoyed and continue to enjoy a popularity unprecedented before in the history of the theatrical arts of India and as yet their appeal is unsurpassed, except perhaps by that of the cinema, which in recent times has captured the imagination of India's masses.

Among the diverse forms of theatre created in the sixteenth century to propagate Vaisnavism, **Ankiya Nat of Assam** is one of the most unusual, because it blends religious philosophy with indigenous forms of folk entertainment and techniques of performance derived from the classical tradition of Sanskrit drama³. Although **Ankiya Nat** displays none of the spectacular characteristics of

¹ Other methods used to popularize Vaisnavism during this period were religious psalms, songs, and poems; individual and group dances; puppet shows, painting, sculpture and story-telling. In recent times, **Mahatma Gandhi**, who was an ardent devotee of **Rama**, one of Visnu's major incarnations, helped to sustain the unifying thrust of Vaisnavism at large public gatherings through songs in praise of Rama. It was on such occasions that he gained unprecedented support for his campaign to end British rule by peaceful means.

² The most comprehensive coverage to date of the theatrical movement generated by the Vaisnava philosophy is found in Adya Rangacharya, *The Indian Theatre* (New Delhi, 1971).

³ The most authoritative account of Ankiya Nat is in Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times* (Gauhati, 1965). Professor Neog kindly arranged for me to see performances in the *Sattras* of Nowgong, Bardowa, Kaliabari, Kamalabari and Puranigudam Parghat during a short visit in October 1970. His book and conversations serve as the basis and inspiration

Ramalila, perhaps the best known of the Vaisnava theatrical art-forms since it annually attracts hundreds of thousands of faithful pilgrims to shrines and holy places in North India, **Ankiya Nat** has managed to survive to the present day more or less in its original form. In this it is unlike Jatra of Bengal State which has survived and grown primarily because it was willing to give up the traditional Vaisnava content and form to accommodate the shifts and changes of the political and social life of the times.

Ankiyā Nāt⁴ is the creation of **Sankaradeva** (1449-1568 A.D.), the father of Assamese Vaisnavism and its foremost preceptor.

An examination of his religious philosophies, which were completely formulated by the time he turned his attention to drama, may help to shed some light on the ulterior motives behind his plays. In Sankaradeva's view, the individual soul of man (*jiva*) is the creation of God and different from Him only in that it is clouded by God's *maya*, an illusion that what one experiences through the senses is real and permanent, when in truth the only ultimate reality in the universe is God. The struggle of the bhakta (devotee) is to overcome maya by devoting himself entirely to the worship of God, who through His grace may in turn lead the devotee to self-knowledge and thus release him from the cycle of rebirth. Sankaradeva beautifully and simply expresses these views in one of his songs: -

Thou art the cause and effect (of the world of being), the universe of the static and the moving, even as an ear ornament is inseparable from the gold of which it is made. Thou art the animals and the birds, the gods and the demons, the trees and the shrubs. Only the ignorant taketh Thee as different (from the Universe).

Being under the spell of Thy maya, none knows that Thou art the Soul. Thou art at the heart of all beings. Blind to this truth, they go to seek Thee outside. Thou art the sole Truth; all else is illusory. The wise know this and meditate on Thee within their hearts.

I crave not for happiness, nor am I in need of salvation. Let there be naught but devotion at Thy Feet. Let my mouth recite Thy Name, let my ears listen to Thy Tale; let Thy Lotus Feet shine in my heart. Let not the company of Thy devotees ever forsake me; this is the kindness I beg at Thy Feet⁵.

Sankaradeva's significant deviation from other Vaisnava philosophies is in the stress he places

for this article. I am eternally grateful to him and to the Mahantas, or superiors, of the monastic institutions which I was privileged to visit. On the form and content of Ankiya Nat, see also Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1965) and B.K. Barua, *Sankaradeva, Vaisnava Saint of Assam* (Gauhati, 1960).

⁴ The term *anka* in Sanskrit means act or merely one-act. *Nāt* is probably a corruption of *nāta*, *nātaka*, or *yātrā*, terms used by Sankaradeva to describe his dramatic works. Therefore, *Ankiyā Nāt* means a short form of drama employing music, songs, dances, dialogue and narration.

⁵ From Sankaradeva's *Kirtanaghosa*, a collection of devotional songs, quoted in *Sources of Indian Traditions*, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York, 1958), I, 359.

on the power of *maya* to conceal God and thus confuse and mislead the individual soul as it struggles to achieve enlightenment. He also departs from the views of other poet-saints in India in his belief that once free of *maya*, the devotee will not join or find total union with God and lose his identity but rather will continue to serve Him as His devotee in the Celestial Abode (Vaikuntha), in the same relation to him as a servant to his master.

If one assumes that man's soul is clouded by *maya* or the illusion that what he sees and experiences is real, then the performance of a play represents a deliberate attempt by the playwright to duplicate the effect of *maya* on the audience, through the story, actors, costumes, props, music and dance. Obviously this exercise would be purposeless unless in the process the theatrical event demonstrated the power of *maya* by persuading the spectators that what they see is real when in fact they are witnessing a demonstration of the transcendent personality of God who is immanent in the world and at the same time transcends it. Sankaradeva may have meant the drama to serve as a revelation of the nature of *maya*, persuading the spectator as he sees into the mystery of the experience to conclude that he too is an actor in a universal play conceived out of God's *maya*, just as the actors depicting the characters before him are the *maya* of the playwright. If this is what Sankaradeva had in mind, then his plays are more than the means to convert large numbers of people to the Vaisnava faith or even to sustain and fortify convictions already held. They dramatize a deep philosophical principle about the nature of reality and the role of man in the universe. Significantly, the poet-saint chose to create plays himself rather than to assign one of his disciples to the task.

Four simple principles throw further light on the tone and subject-matter of the plays. ***Deva, Guru, Nama, Bhakat*** are central to Sankaradeva's brand of Vaisnavism; the new devotee, for example, vows to obey them.

To begin with, the devotee is enjoined by his guru or preceptor to take sole refuge in **Krsna**, who represents the one and only God (**Eka-Sarana**). *Deva* signifies that **Krsna** is the only God to Whom the proselyte must pay homage. Sankaradeva firmly states: -

There is only one single scripture (the *Bhagavata-purana*), one that was recited by the Son of Devaki. There is only one single Deity, that is, the Son of Devaki (Krsna), works or rites are also one, being the worship of that deity. And there is only one mantra (sacred word or phrase) which is the Name of that God⁶.

⁶ Sankaradeva's *Bhakti-ratnākara*, quoted in Neog, pp. 347-48.

Therefore, for the purposes of creating plays, Sankaradeva and all later Vaisnava playwrights of Assam were obliged to limit the scope of their subject-matter to that which celebrates the Name and power of One God. The rituals that precede each performance contain none of the usual salutations and entreaties to such deities as Ganesa, the elephant-headed god who is said to bring good luck to the players, or Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, so commonly found in the overtures to other forms of traditional theatre in India.

The second obligation of the devotee who is initiated into the Vaisnava faith is to pay homage to the **Guru**, without whose foresight the religion would not have been sustained. After Sankaradeva's death, his devoted disciple **Madhavadeva** asserted that Sankaradeva should be praised not as a human being but as an incarnation of God. To Madhavadeva and subsequent Vaisnavas of Assam, Sankaradeva resembled Krsna in that He was the spiritual Guru Who gave them their knowledge of the faith. Just as Krsna revealed Himself to His disciple Arjuna, so did Sankaradeva reveal the Word of God to His followers by translating the *Bhagavata-purana* into Assamese and by interpreting its meaning through his poems, songs, and dramas.

Since the death of Sankaradeva, the spiritual leaders of Assam have been obliged to compose and produce at least one Ankiya Nat before their death as a sign of devotion to Krsna and to Sankaradeva, their spiritual mentor. Invariably the sources of their inspiration are the epic literature surrounding Krsna's life and adventures, of which the *Bhagavata-purana* is an outstanding example, or the Ramayana. By performing Sankaradeva's dramatic works and those of his successors, the actors and the spiritual leaders of the faith show their respect for their spiritual leader as well as celebrate the Name of the Lord.

A third principle held dear by the proselyte is that of **Nama**, or the repetition of the Names of the Lord, silently or aloud, in the company of other devotees. The Vaisnava literature of Assam is replete with works which assemble long series of the Lord's Names, a thousand to be precise, arranged in varying orders to produce highly rhythmic, song-like sounds when chanted at prayer times. Sankaradeva's most revered disciple Madhavadeva composed the last half of his major literary work, the **Nām-ghosa** (The Announcement of the Names of God), entirely out of various combinations of the Lord's Names.

At the time of initiation, the proselyte is introduced to a secret formula consisting of four of

God's Names (*Rama-Krsna-Narayana-Hari*). The first two of these, **Rama** and **Krsna**, are the famous epic characters about Whom most of the Ankiya Nats are written, primarily because they are the best-known and most beloved of Visnu's incarnations. Sankaradeva composed five of his seven Ankiya Nats with **Krsna** as the central figure, choosing to deal exclusively with incidents from the middle part of his earthly life. They are ***Cihna-yātrā***, (Dramatic Procession with Paintings) the exact contents of which have yet to be determined; ***Kāli-damana-nāta*** (The Subjugation of the Serpent Kali); ***Patni-prasāda-nāta*** (The Favors Shown by Krsna to the Wives of the Brahmins); ***Rāsa-krdā*** (Krsna's Playful Sport with the Milkmaids of Vrndavana); ***Rukmini-harana-nāta*** (The Abduction of Rukmini.); and, ***Pārijāta-harana-nāta*** (The Theft of the Flowering Parijata Tree).

Most of these incidents have also served as sources for other Vaisnava poet-saints. In Andhra State, Siddhendra Yogi makes particularly good use of the story of the flowering tree in his famous *Bhama Kalapam* (Satyabhama's Devotion), performed in the Kuchipudi style of dance-drama. Venkatarama Sastri adapted the abduction of Rukmini for Bhagavata Mela of Madras State in his dance-drama entitled *Rukmini Kalyanam* (Rukmini's Wedding). The dalliance of Krsna with the milkmaids is a favorite theme in Raslila of Braj and serves as one of the opening sequences in traditional Tamasha plays of Maharashtra State. The least popular of the incidents from the life of Krsna that Sankaradeva chose to dramatize are those of the Brahman women and of the subjugation of Kali, although in medieval Indian painting the former has been beautifully and numerously illustrated and the latter was adapted into dramatic form by Bhasa, the famous Sanskrit playwright. Sankaradeva's only dramatic work to be inspired by the Ramayana is his ***Rāma-vijaya*** (The Triumph of Rama)⁷.

The fourth principle is that of ***Bhakat***, which literally means the congregation or company of bhaktas, devotees in the service of God. Sankaradeva praised this aspect of the religion as being superior to the common practice among orthodox Hindus living by the brahmanical code of making pilgrimages to shrines and holy places. The need for a place where Assamese Vaisnavas could meet together prompted Sankaradeva to institute the tradition of the *Sattrā*, a monastery or residential establishment where devotees regularly congregate to celebrate the Name of the Lord through public prayers or by witnessing religious entertainments. The *Sattras* of Assam are more than religious

⁷ An English version of this play, slightly adapted by the translator, is in Manomohan Ghosh, *Contributions to the History of the Hindu Drama: Its Origin, Development and Diffusion* (Calcutta, 1958), 14-38. The only other available English trans. of an Ankiya Nat is ***Pimparā-guchuvā*** (The Removal of Ants) by Madhavadeva, Sankaradeva's disciple, in Maheswar Neog, *Bilvamangala's "Krsna-stotra"* (Gauhati, 1962), 46-51. Although extremely short, it provides a charming picture of Krsna's childhood pranks. Hem Barua provides interesting plot summaries of the plays of Sankaradeva's immediate successors.

institutions. Sankaradeva conceived of them as social and cultural centers where people from all walks of life, irrespective of the accident of birth and rank, could gather as equals to commune in peace and tranquility with each other and with their God. It is in the *Sattrā* that the Ankiya Nats are performed.

II

The *Sattrā* proper usually consists of a square enclosure, with four openings or gates. Four rows of interconnected huts or houses called *hāti* form the perimeter of the institution. The rows are made up of small living quarters for the monks or visiting members of the laity. At the center of the compound is the most important and largest building on the premises, the prayer hall (*nām-ghar*), often used as a court room or for public meetings because it is usually the most spacious building in a village. Normally the prayer hall is a two-roofed, thatched structure, rectangular in shape and about fifty feet long. The axis of the building usually runs from east to west. At the eastern end is the *manikut*, the “house of jewels”, probably so called because it contains a shrine where valuable articles of religious significance are kept. Unlike the *sanctum sanctorum* of Hindu temples, the *manikut* does not house a statue of the presiding deity, primarily because Sankaradeva preached against idol worship and excommunicated those who dared to practice it after their initiation into the faith. Instead, a copy of the *Bhagavata-purana* is reverently kept on a wooden throne to symbolize the presence of **Kṛṣṇa**.

Ankiya Nats are traditionally performed in the prayer hall with the musicians and actors facing the *manikut*⁸. The positioning of the players in relation to the *manikut* suggests that the play is given for the benefit of the deity who is the most honored spectator. From what little we know about Greek theatre, the god Dionysus may have been accorded similar honors at the City Dionysia⁹. And there is evidence that many of the Roman gods may have been shown this courtesy during the performance of plays¹⁰.

⁸ Sometimes when there is no permanent *Sattrā* in a village, either a temporary building (*rabhā*) similar to the prayer hall in appearance is constructed, or in former times temporary structures were erected at the court of a king who had requested that a particular play be enacted.

⁹ Arthur Wallace Pickard - Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (London, 1968), p. 58, says that an image of the god was brought to the playing area and ceremoniously installed opposite the skene near the seat of the priest of Dionysus. A similar arrangement is made for the presiding deity of the temple at Melatur, Madras State, where *Bhagavata Mela* is annually performed as a ritual honoring Kṛṣṇa's birthday.

¹⁰ See J. A. Hanson, *Roman Theatre-Temples* (Princeton, 1959).

Prior to the performance of an Ankiya Nat, a rectangular passageway formed by the rows of permanent pillars supporting the central roof of the prayer hall is marked off to keep overzealous devotees from interfering with the movement of the actors. The entrance to the prayer hall, opposite the *manikut*, is used as the main entrance for the musicians, stage manager, and actors. The long narrow passageway between the entrance and the *manikut* serves as a neutral playing space, similar to the *platea* of medieval European performances.

The spectators sit on the ground or on mats along either side of the pathway facing each other so that the actors perform in their midst. This arrangement helps to promote the feeling of intimacy between actors and spectators; since this conveys the idea that the actions of the play are occurring for the first time, it supports the speculation that Sankaradeva may have meant to heighten the effect of *maya* in the minds of the spectators. The closeness of the actors and spectators is emphasized by the use of playing spaces behind the spectators at the extreme corners of the prayer hall. These special acting areas symbolize various places - a forest, a shrine, or whatever is traditionally associated with the character who occupies it. Again, this practice has a European parallel in the medieval “houses” or “mansions”. Often the actors shout their dialogue back and forth above the heads of the spectators from the passageway to the symbolic places. This is especially exciting when a moment of physical conflict erupts in the dramatic action, such as the conflict with Kali, the snake God whom **Krsna** overcomes in battle, or between **Krsna** and Sisupala, the demonic suitor for the hand of **Krsna**’s intended, Rukmini.

One of the most exciting moments to be seen in the Ankiya Nat is the battle scene between **Rama** and the demon brothers of Ravana, King of Lanka. In Bardowa-Sattrā, the birthplace of Sankaradeva, the fierce-looking, gigantic effigies of the demons are brought into the darkened hall by torchlight and cast foreboding shadows on the walls and ceiling of the narrow enclosure. Effects such as this are difficult to replicate in forms of Vaisnava theatre which are staged out-of-doors. Like so many other forms of traditional theatre in India, the visual appeal of Ankiya Nat lies in the costumes, masks, effigies, and props rather than in the virtually nonexistent scenery. Sankaradeva is reported to have painted scenic backgrounds on sheets of paper for his first play, *Cihna-yatra*¹¹, but he apparently discarded the practice in his later works. Today the simple decorative scene-pieces at the extremities of the prayer hall symbolize mountain, forest, or throne-room.

¹¹ Neog, p. 170.

The traditional Assamese costumes of the heroes, kings, and warriors are thought to have been discarded in the late nineteenth century in favor of apparel worn by the Jatra players of neighboring Bengal, a region which had strong cultural and political influence over Assam at that time. In recent years the female characters have also discarded older garments in favor of the typical Assamese two-piece *sari*. The only participant in Ankiya Nat who seems to have preserved a costume thought to have been worn at the time of the form's creation is the stage manager, who wears a full white skirt resembling that of the Kathak dancers of North India, a thin, white, long-sleeved shirt buttoned below the arm-pit, a richly embroidered waist-band and collar studded with pearl-like beads, and a turban resembling that of the Moghul emperors or of the male Kathak dancers.

Many of the plays require the actors to impersonate monkeys, bears, horses, elephants and serpents. To aid the imagination of the spectators, the actors use special effigies (*cho*) constructed from bamboo frames covered with cloth or papier-mache painted in a stylized fashion to symbolize the personality and temperament of the particular characters for which they are created. Other items of disguise are the face-masks (*mukhā*) which include that of the ten-headed demon king Ravana, his giant supporters Subahu and Marica, the four-headed god of creation, Brahma, and **Garuda** and **Jatayu**, mythical, bird-like creatures with beaks and wings. Sometimes even the clowns of the demon-kings wear masks, with distorted facial features constructed of clay, wood or bamboo, and cloth. The effigies, masks, and costumes of Ankiya Nat are preserved in a special room called the *cho-ghar* (room of the effigies), which is one of the Sattrā houses. The *cho-ghar* also serves as a dressing room where actors can put on their makeup and wait for their entrances.

Ankiya Nats are usually presented on special occasions during the year, such as **Kṛṣṇa's** birthday or the birthday or memorial day celebrations for **Sankaradeva** or some distinguished local preceptor. Other auspicious occasions for dramatic performances are at the full moon or at any time between harvest and planting (roughly mid-January to mid-April), when the villagers are relatively free from agricultural work and can take the time to relax and participate in devotional celebrations.

The auspiciousness of the performance is nowhere more apparent to the spectators than during the preliminary rituals (*dhemālī*) that precede the dramas¹². The exact number and type of these rituals

¹² The Sanskrit word for preliminaries is *purvaranga*. Sankaradeva seems to have adapted three of the nineteen items prescribed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata to precede the performance of Sanskrit plays: - *nāṇḍī*, the benedictory prayer; *prarocanā*, propitiation of the audience; and *prastāvanā*, the introduction to the subject of the play, delivered by the stage

varies from Sattrā to Sattrā depending on the traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. The preliminaries practised in Sankaradeva's own time are uncertain, in part because he gave them no set form. Traditional performances of Ankiya Nat are all-night affairs, beginning after the evening meal and continuing from approximately nine until daybreak. However, performances may be shortened without any forewarning, even when the show is in progress. On one occasion an influential audience member requested the players to abbreviate the action, whereupon the stage manager, without much difficulty, juggled the dramatic action to bring the performance to a speedy conclusion. The spectators did not seem particularly displeased. In any case, only the most interested among them sit close enough to the playing area to hear the songs and dialogue, which for the most part are drowned out by the music and the chatter of the devotees who use the occasion to catch up with local gossip. At the conclusion to the performances the spectators pick up their belongings and leave without the slightest show of appreciation for the players. This should not be regarded as rude behavior, for throughout the whole of India only in the Westernized productions in urban areas do audiences applaud the actors at the show's end.

Prior to a performance I attended at the town of Nowgong on October 9, 1970, a day-long celebration of holy songs was sung by devotees in the confines of a temporary prayer hall before the *manikut*. The actors and the stage manager, according to tradition, undertook a fast and sought the blessings of important members of the assembly in the hope that no offence to God would be committed by them during the show. By nine in the evening hundreds of people had gathered to watch the proceedings under the roof of the prayer hall and in the surrounding field.

A special archway of lights (*agni-gad*) was raised just inside the entrance to the prayer hall. Such an arch is constructed of two bamboo sticks held upright and joined at the top by another stick of bamboo. Small lighted torches are placed in holes drilled at the top of the bamboo arch. The shape of the arch differs from place to place. As far as I know, it is not to be found anywhere else in India. The arch may symbolize the bridge between the physical and the spiritual world or merely the point of transition between the *maya* of the real world and that of the drama.

Once the arch was firmly in place, a white curtain (*ār-kāpor*) was stretched in front of it as

manager. Because they were incorporated into the Ankiya Nat, they are not regarded as part of the *dhemāli* preliminaries. For details regarding preliminaries in other forms of traditional theatre see Richmond.

members of the *gāyana-vāyana* orchestra made their entrance¹³. They began to play after a short song-poem (*mālitā*) describing a *raga* was sung. The curtain was removed and the congregation shouted “Jaya Hari bolā! Jaya Rama bolā!” (Say Victory to Hari (Kṛṣṇa)! Say Victory to Rama!) Then a long series of elaborate rhythmic passages began in which the drummers made their way slowly in line toward the *manikut*. On their return toward the entrance, they proceeded to step sideways along the passageway to the accompaniment of a more rapid rhythm. Dispersed along its length, the drummers knelt where they were and two men holding torches took positions at the extremities of the line. As they did so the drummers played yet more complicated rhythmic passages. Finally they rose and performed elaborate hand gestures in between slaps on their drums. As they began to sway from side to side the tempo increased. At times they called out *bols*, intricate vocal patterns which signify the rhythms to be used by the drummers. At other times they raised their hands above their heads reverently, as though in prayer. The drummers assembled once again at the entrance to the prayer hall while the torch bearers stationed themselves at the posts of the arch and the cymbalists faced the *manikut*. Then a slower passage of drumming began as the drummers moved in pairs toward the *manikut*. When they had formed two long rows stretching the full length of the passageway, they changed the tempo, lifting their drums above their heads as they twisted and swirled in unison, almost as though they were dancing. Upon completion of this section of the preliminaries, the drummers began an extremely complicated set of movements in which they crisscrossed their way along the passageway from one end to the other.

Our host at Nowgong became somewhat dismayed that this part of the preliminaries had already taken an hour and fifteen minutes and the musicians had barely got beyond the first stages. He urged them to proceed to the most sacred part of the preliminaries, the songs in praise of **Kṛṣṇa** (*ghoṣās*). Abiding by his wishes, the musicians began a series of five songs, sung a verse at a time by the leading cymbalist with the other musicians joining in a choral refrain. During this procedure the chief drummer, followed by the other drummers of the company, advanced to the *manikut* where the head of the Sattrā (Sattrādhikar) offered him *prasāda* (sacred food, which is first offered to God and then distributed among the devotees). Then the head of the Sattrā crowned each of the drummers with *bakula* flowers

¹³ *Gāyana* means singer or cymbalist and *Vāyana* means drummer. These are the chief musicians of Ankiya Nat. The singers play the *bartāl*, large cymbals measuring about two feet in diameter and possessing an unusually high dome. *Bartāl* produce the most deafening sounds. The drummers play the *khol*, a large barrel-shaped drum resembling the mrdanga of South India. The drum is strung around the neck of the musician and played on both ends just below the waist. Among the other musical instruments played in Ankiya Nat is the *kālī* or *kālīyā*, which looks like an oboe and sounds like a mukhaveena. In some Sattras **Kṛṣṇa** makes his entrance as a *sankha*, or conch shell, is sounded. At Kaliabari-Sattrā, a small gong was used to announce the beginning of Sankaradeva’s play *Rukmini- harana-nāta*. The party of musicians at Nowgong consisted of twelve *khol* drummers, six *bartāl* cymbalists and two *kālī* players.

fastened together to make small circular garlands. In Assam the drummers are paid such high honors because the people believe the drum to be a sacred instrument. Then the cymbalists were also honored in the same way, although they do not hold the same place of respect as the drummers. All the musicians then took their places near the entrance to the prayer hall as the *kālī* player began a raga.

Shortly thereafter the **stage manager** made his dramatic entrance accompanied by exploding fireworks. As the white curtain stretched before the arch of lights was quickly pulled aside, he was discovered bowing in the direction of the *manikut*, his head, hands, elbows, and knees reverently touching the earth in supplication before God. To a slow hypnotic rhythm from the drums he began to rise, swaying from side to side as though in a deep trance, until finally he stood erect. As the tempo increased, he danced in a sweeping clockwise circle around the playing area. Again and again he reverently touched the playing area, bowing in the direction of the *manikut* to show his respect for **Krsna**. Upon completion of his dance he recited the first sloka (a Sanskrit verse with four lines) of the *nāndi* (benediction) from the drama to be enacted, *Candrahāsa* (The Struggles of Prince Candrasa). The sloka praised **Krsna** as the “banisher of sorrows, Whose Name is a boat which carries devotees across the limitless ocean of the world of the senses”.

As punctuation, he followed the verse with a short dance much like the first. Then he recited the second sloka of the benediction. This sloka focused on the subject matter of the drama, the devotion of a prince who, with the help of **Krsna**, is finally reinstated on his throne after overcoming an evil minister. At the conclusion of the Sanskrit sloka the stage manager sang a song (*gita*) accompanied by a raga played on the *kālī*. Then he announced to the assembly, “Now that the benediction is over, I will speak to you after I pay homage to Narayana (Krsna)”. He bowed once again to the *manikut* and addressed the spectators with a *prarocana sloka* (introductory verse), “You must be careful and listen well to the play *Candrasa* if you wish to achieve final beatitude”. Whereupon he recited in the Brajbuli language a *bhatimā*, a short ode in praise of Krsna, spoken throughout on one note. The stage manager employed elaborate symbolic hand gestures (*mudras*) to express the meaning of the text.

At last he addressed the people in Assamese, saying, “Oh good people, Krsna will appear in this play. Listen to it and see it well. What is this? I hear a musical voice from above, played on a divine drum. Oh, I know what it is. Krsna is about to appear, He who is as beautiful as a million Kamadevas (love-gods)”.

A feeling of excitement swept the hall. Quickly a beautiful red curtain rather than the white one used in the preliminaries was stretched taut between the arch of lights. **Krsna** appeared at the entrance of the prayer hall. Exploding fireworks accompanied his appearance as the curtain was pulled aside. As the actor made his way along the pathway, dancing slowly toward the *manikut*, the spectators sitting nearby reached out and reverently touched his feet and bowed their heads. At that moment they take the actor to be the very incarnation of God Himself. Eventually Krsna took his place on a chair symbolizing a throne near the *manikut* where he remained until the other major characters had made their entrances. Only then did the drama begin. The long preliminary rituals took nearly four hours to complete. And it should be remembered that they were abbreviated out of deference to the request of our host.

III

In general, *Candrasasa* and all other productions seen in Assam during my short stay there followed similar patterns¹⁴. Beginning with the entrance of the stage manager and the hero, all the other characters enter in order of their importance to the plot of the play. Customarily they perform a special actor's dance (*bhāwariyār nāc*). The less skilled performers use only the most simple of dance steps. Some of them do little more than move from one stylized pose to another as they make their way along the passageway to their designated position. By contrast, the stage manager, the heroic male characters such as **Krsna** and **Rama**, and their female counterparts, such as Rukmini, Satyabhama and the Gopis (milkmaids), perform elaborate dances which take considerable skill and practice to execute. These dances (*bhangi*) are known by the name of the character who performs them, *Krsna-bhangi*, *Gopi-bhangi*, etc. For each dance there are different rhythmic patterns and dance steps, depending on the character's particular temperament and mood in the dramatic action which follows. The musicians refer to these rhythmic patterns as *slokanaths*. At the beginning of the first *slokanath* of the *Gopi-bhangi*, for example, the drummer speaks the vocal rhythmic pattern (*bol*) peculiar to it, in order to establish the exact tempo. Next he beats the pattern on the drum. With the rhythmic pattern established, the actor makes his entrance and begins to dance. After all the characters have entered, performed their

¹⁴ The other productions included *Bhakta Hanumanta* (Hanuman, the Devotee), at Bardowa-Sattrā, *Rukmini-harana-nata* (The Abduction of Rukmini), an adaptation of Sankaradeva's script, at Kaliabari-Sattrā, and Sankaradeva's *Parijata-harana-nata* (The Theft of the Flowering Parijata Tree) at Puranigudam Parghat village. The monks of Kamalabari-Sattrā, located on an island in the Brahmaputra river, gave a dramatic reading without the aid of costumes, props, or dances of Madhavadeva's *Pimparā-guchuvā* (The Removal of Ants) during my visit.

specific dances and taken their places on the passageway or near one of the symbolic stations at the extremities of the prayer hall, the action of the play begins.

The entire performance is under the close supervision of the stage manager who is sometimes helped by an assistant (called *sāngi* or *pātak*). The role of the stage manager in Ankia Nat is like that of a guru to his pupils. He remains on the stage throughout, from the beginning of the preliminaries to the final invocation in praise of Krsna, which he traditionally delivers. Besides participating in the preliminary rituals, he has the important task of announcing all the characters before their entrances and calling attention to their exits. He often prefaces the speeches and songs of Rama and Krsna with “**Rama bola**” (Rama says) or “**Krsna bola**” (Krsna says), as if to imply to the spectators, “Pay attention! These are important words to listen to!” When he thinks it necessary, he halts the action to deliver a discourse on the ethical and spiritual meaning of the plot. At times he describes the proceedings or bridges gaps in the action with improvised narration. He pays close attention to the actors’ execution of the precise details of the performance as the playwright conceived and arranged it. He is not hesitant to prompt an actor who has forgotten a line or to chide him for mis-speaking his dialogue. When he thinks it necessary he quotes the stage directions from the text as though to order the actors to follow them to the letter. His active participation in the process of the play, in which no part is specifically written for him, reminds one of the French director pictured in the painting of the martyrdom of St. Apollonia guiding his amateur actors through a performance with his baton and text in hand.

The stage manager is assigned his important position by the head of a *Sattrā* because he is regarded as the most talented member of the lay and monastic community of the area. Besides organizing the entire performance virtually on his own, he has the difficult charge of recruiting and training the actors. From its beginnings in the early sixteenth century, Ankiya Nat has been the province of amateurs. As far as is known there have never been professional companies of actors organized to perform it, a fact which further emphasizes that its purpose is strictly religious and not secular.

Second only to the stage manager in importance are the actors who impersonate **Krsna** and **Rama**. Sankaradeva is thought to have acted both parts during his lifetime. Sometimes the head of the *Sattrā* himself will consent to play one of these roles. Members of his immediate family, a Brahman, or someone of the lay community within the jurisdiction of the *Sattrā* who is respected by the elders, are also suitable candidates for the heroic roles. At one village the actor playing Krsna was a graduate

student in engineering. Usually a handsome lad is chosen. Unlike the Raslila and Ramalila, here the age of the boy is not important. Acting Rama or Krsna is looked upon as an honor by the amateur performer, particularly since he is regarded as an incarnation of God from the moment he enters the playing area.

Originally women were not permitted to play roles on the stage, due in part to the conservative attitude of the society. But today some *Sattras* disregard this restriction. When Sankaradeva's *Parijata-harana-nata* (The Theft of the Flowering Parijata Tree) was performed at Puranigudam Parghat village, young girls of Brahman families took the roles of Krsna's wives, Rukmini and Satyabhama, Indra's wife Saci, and Aditi, mother of the gods. However, this very recent trend has not found favor among the elders of the more traditional *Sattras*, such as Bardowa and Kamalabari. Generally it falls to the monks of the monasteries to play the roles because they are clean-shaven and keep their hair long.

In a very few Ankiya Nats the heroine is of equal importance to the hero. Sankaradeva wrote *Rukmini-harana-nata* (The Abduction of Rukmini) around Krsna's wife. But as though to reinforce the fact that Krsna dominates the religious sentiments of the work, the stage manager tells the spectators,

See, Oh people, see. Rukmini places her affection at Krsna's Feet after merely hearing of His qualities from the wandering minstrel's mouth; but, ever kind to His devotees, Krsna submitted to her and made her his wife. Oh! how could I describe the greatness of *bhakti* (devotion) of Hari!¹⁵

In this instance, Sankaradeva avoids the erotic (*srngara*) implications of Rukmini's falling in love with Krsna by having the stage manager interpret it as a gesture of submission, like that of a servant before his master, a submission heavily stressed by Vaisnavism¹⁶.

A company of amateur Ankiya Nat players normally consists of no more than fifteen members. The bulk of the work falls to the stage manager who besides dancing and fulfilling the tasks described

¹⁵ Quoted in Neog, p. 202.

¹⁶ More unusual is Sankaradeva's *Parijata-harana-nata* (The Theft of the Flowering Parijata Tree). In it, the female roles also occupy an importance equal to that of the male. The play centers on the jealousy of Satyabhama, one of Krsna's wives. Satyabhama thinks that Krsna loves Rukmini more than he does her because he has given Rukmini a beautiful, fragrant flower from the heavenly *parijata* tree. To satisfy Satyabhama that she holds an equal if not greater place in his affections, Krsna agrees to bring her the whole tree as a gift. Obviously the incident provides ample opportunity for an actress to show the strong contrasts in the heroine's temperament and Sankaradeva has not hesitated to write these into her part.

above must also chant the numerous Sanskrit *slokas* and sing the preliminary *bhatimās* (songs) written for him by the playwright. Heroes, heroines, and a few minor characters carry the weight of the dramatic action through their dialogue, punctuated by a few songs and at times a Sanskrit *sloka* or two. The current term for actors is *bhāwariyā*, one who impersonates another's character. Their major task, however, is to dance and performers were referred to in Sankaradeva's time as *nartakas* or *natuwās* (dancers). At climactic moments in the dramatic action, such as a battle scene, the actors break into a fighting dance (*yuddhar nāc*), which pits the hero against many opponents, some of whom wear large masks and carry maces or bows and arrows.

Ordinarily the actors who play the minor roles do little more than speak a few lines in Assamese, pose according to the dictates of their character or dance a few steps alone or in the company of the hero or heroine. Since there are always members of the *Sattrā* community who are eager to act in Ankiya Nat, the stage manager has no difficulty finding actors. However, the level of their performance is invariably quite low. They never seem to sustain their characters, dropping them to talk with a friend or neighbor when they get bored with the play's action.

Sankaradeva composed Ankiya Nats without including any such comic character as the Vidusaka, or jester, so indispensable to most Sanskrit plays. In recent times the urge to introduce comic servants or buffoons into the Ankiya Nats to provide relief from the general monotony of the didactic stories has preoccupied the stage managers and heads of *Sattras*. The antics of the clowns increasingly determine the success of the performances, often to the detriment of the original compositions. At Kaliabari-Sattrā's production of *Rukmini-harana-nata*, for example, the clowns completely diverted the spectators' attention from the solemn occasion of the seating of Rukmini's suitors. They used broad gestures behind the backs of the kings to satirize their pomposity. At one point they even hit a king on the head with a club, which produced an uproar of laughter from the spectators when they realized that this improvised action had taken the actor playing the king completely by surprise. On another occasion in the same play, the servants picked up and carried out a king who had been so awed by Rukmini's beauty that he fainted. The actor playing the king struggled to free himself, but to no avail. Even during the scene in which Rukmini selected a husband, when they were obviously supposed to sit quietly in the background, they indulged in a minor skirmish, hitting and slapping one another on the head and legs, seemingly oblivious of the disturbance they were causing.

For the most part Ankiya Nat, like other forms of Vaisnava drama, is the product of didactic

purposes stemming from religious origins. It was not created for the courts of kings, as was the Sanskrit drama; nor was it developed to provide a livelihood for a community of artists, as were the Bhavai of Gujarat and the Tamasha of Maharashtra; nor has it been marketed as a concert piece for modern, middle-class, urban audiences in India or abroad. It must be judged first for the work it does to sustain and spread the faith among the Assamese people and not for its artistry.

Admittedly the level of performance in Ankiya Nat is low by any standards. It has no theoretical manual which sets forth rules for its proper execution as do Kutiyattam and Kathakali. That no sophisticated and demanding public developed to discourage the artists from displaying amateurish traits, and that no professional company was ever assembled to sustain it, may also account for some of the unevenness in its execution. However, the job of evaluating it rests with the *Sattr*a authorities who can best judge its effectiveness in sustaining devotion and attracting new initiates. Unless and until they see a need to bring Ankiya Nat up to a higher level of performance, it is not likely that it will receive much attention in India or abroad. Perhaps that is why it is not generally known in theatrical circles outside Assam. Balwant Gargi, in *Folk Theater of India*, finds room for only a few short descriptive paragraphs¹⁷. And the most recent, comprehensive survey of Indian theatre devotes no more than a few short sentences to it¹⁸. I am inclined to believe that these critics have neglected its important contribution to the Vaisnava religious movement which swept through India. They may have also underestimated the potentials of this unique form as a possible influence on the works of modern playwrights and theatre directors in India and abroad who have recently been seeking inspiration for their work among forms of traditional drama¹⁹.

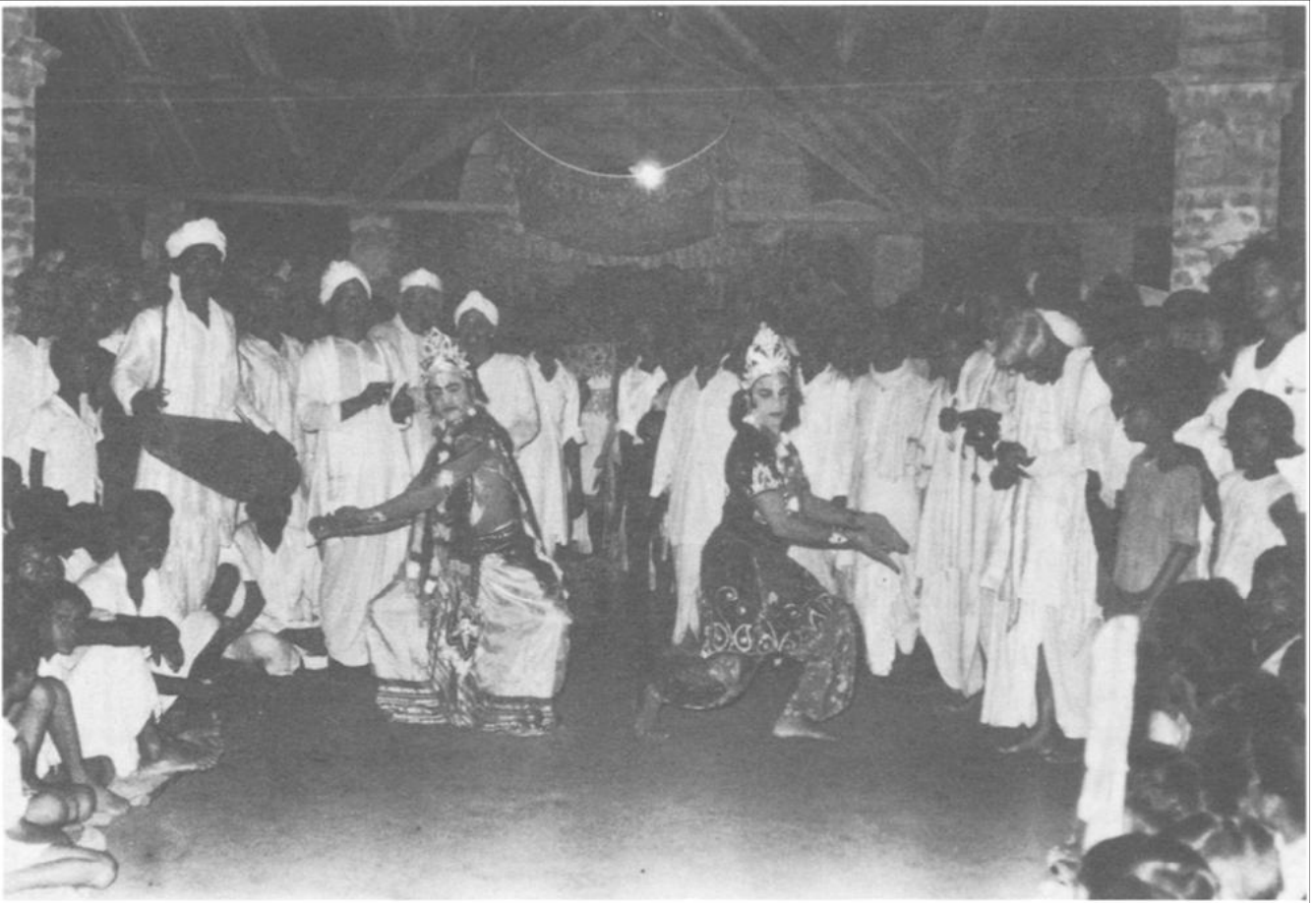
¹⁷ (Seattle, 1966), p. 195.

¹⁸ Rangacharya, *The Indian Theatre*, p. 65, 86-87.

¹⁹ *Sangeet Natak* (New Delhi), 21 (July-Sept. 1971) is devoted entirely to the relevance of traditional theatre to contemporary theatre. Articles in *Sangeet Natak*, 22 (Oct.-Dec. 1971) reveal to what extent the techniques of the traditional theatre have begun to influence contemporary playwrights and producers.

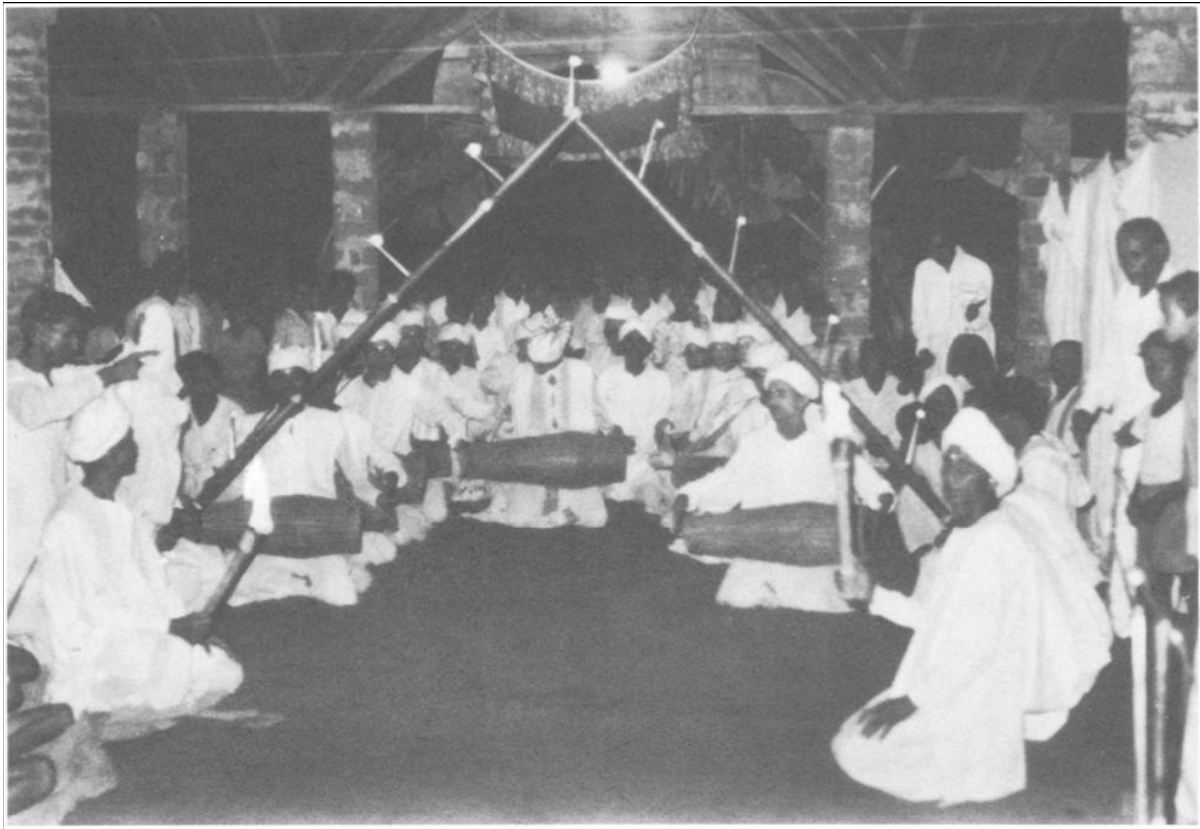


Sisupala, the demon competitor for Rukmini's hand, challenges Krsna to fight during a scene from *Rukmini-harana-nata* performed at Kaliabari-Sattrā.



Krsna and His brother Balarama perform an entrance dance during Sankaradeva's *Rukmini-harana-nata* at the Kaliabari-Sattrā. And an effigy of the giant demon brother of Ravana kept in the house of masks at Bardowa-Sattrā.





First preliminary rituals of the drummers behind the arch of lights at Kaliabari-Sattrra and the stage manager's dance during the preliminary rituals.





Hanuman, the monkey general, confers with Rama in the Bardowa-Sattrā production of *Bhaktā Hanumānta*. The stage manager stands between the actors, closely following the text of the play.



Vaisnava devotees of the Nowgong-Sattrā sing religious songs accompanied on the bartal before a temporary manikut. And Lakṣmana consoles his brother Rama on the pathway in front of the manikut of the Bardowa-Sattrā Nam-ghar during a performance of *Bhakta Hanumanta*.



See Also: - [The complete translation of Sankaradeva's Parijata Harana Nata](#)