

A Critical Study Of Style And Technique In ‘Ankiya Naat’ Of Assam

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ABSTRACT:

Assamese drama started with Sankardeva's 'Ankiya Naat' in the 15th century. In order to reform the society of his time, Sankardeva propagated Neo-Vaisnavism bhakti cult and to pass the essence of his bhakti cult to the common people Sankardeva composed many *Kavyas*. Sankardeva presented his *Kavyas* in a kind of drama built on classical concept fusing music, dance and dialogue together which later styled as *Ankiya Naat*. A study of the *Ankiya Naats* of Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva reveals that there is much influence of Sanskrit plays on the *Ankiya Naats* composed by the Mahapurusha. There are much similarities between *Ankiya Naat* and Sanskrit Plays. We can see this similarity in the prologues of Sanskrit dramas and the *Ankiya Naat*. This influence of Sanskrit plays is also felt in the *Ankiya Naat* while performing Nandi and singing by the *Sutradhara* (after the prologue) and also on his adoration songs, as well as in the '*Muktimangalan*' performed at the end of the *Naat*. In this paper a sincere attempt has been made to discuss the significant features and the influence of Sanskrit Plays in *Ankiya Naat* of Sankardeva.

Key Words: Ankiya Naat, Theatre, Neo-Vaisnavism, Bhaona, Bhakti, Sanskrit

Introduction:

The history of Assamese drama started with Sankardeva's 'Ankiya Naat' in the 15th century. Sankardev, the great Vaishnavite saint, poet, artist and social reformer travelled different religious places of ancient India and these made him a resourceful scholar. As a much-travelled saint of his time, Sankardev became familiar with such dramatic manifestations such as Raslila, Ramlila, Yatra, Kathaka, Yaksagana, Bhagavatam, Bhawai etc. which were very popular at that time in different parts of India. As a Vaisnavite scholar, Sankardev composed a number of *Kavyas* for propagating the spirit of Vaisnavism among the people. Many of his *Kavyas* were used in the pre-Vaisnavite forms of dance recitals like the Deodhoni-nac, Putala-nac, and Oja-pali. Sankardeva understood that the appeal of his *Kavyas* was oracular rather than visual. So, he presented his *Kavyas* in a kind of drama built on classical concept. Thus, Sankardeva organised a dramatic performance which was styled as '*Cihna-Yatra*', which literally stands for a 'show on painted scenes.' This show was developed later into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue which later styled as *Ankiya Naat*. "The *Ankiya Naat* (traditional Assamese one-act plays) are the true index of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev's creative genius. These plays, composed on the combined formats of Assamese puppet dances of pre-modern era, Ozha-Pali, and also other Indian theatrical institutions as well as techniques and practices followed in the Sanskrit plays, have been termed the *Ankiya Naat* produced and presented by the Mahapurush in Assam." (*Ankiya Naat of Assam*, n.d.)

Objectives:

The objectives of the paper are (1) to make a critical study of the style and technique used in the *Ankiya Naat* composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, (2) to differentiate between *Ankiya Naat* and *Jhumur*, (3) to discuss the characteristics of *Ankiya Naat* and (4) to discuss the influence of Sanskrit on *Ankiya Naat*.

Methodology:

Descriptive and analytical method has been used in the paper. This paper is based on secondary data collected from different sources like edited books, research papers published in journals, periodicals and internet.

Discussion:**Ankiya Naats Composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva:**

The *Ankiya Naats* written by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had received much popularity during their life time. But the term *Ankiya Naat* was not coined during their life time. This taxonomy was coined in subsequent time only. As explained in some *Carit Puthis* (biographies), Sankardeva started as a play writer by planning and organizing the '*Chihna-Yatra*' and thereafter he composed a few more afterward. The six plays composed by him are- '*Patni-Prasad*', '*Keli-Gopal*', '*Rukmini- Haran*', '*Parijat Haran*' and the '*Ram Bijoy*'. The plays of Madhavdeva are '*Chor-Dhara*', '*Pimpara Guchuwa*', '*Bhojan Bihar*', '*Arjun Bhanjan*', '*Bhumi Letowa*' and the '*Nrisinha Yatra*'. These six plays written by Madhavdeva are also known as '*Jhumur*'. All the plays composed by Mahapurush Sankardeva are called *Ankiya Naat* and those composed by Madhavdeva except *Arjun Bhajan* are known as '*Jhumur*'. The difference between *Ankiya Naat* and a *Jhumur* can be distinguished from '*Arjun Bhanjan*' getting the status of a drama. Madhavdeva has presented a complete story in '*Arjun Bhanjan*' like Sankardev's plays. But in other plays of Madhavdeva viz. '*Chor-Dhara*', '*Pimpara Guchuwa*', '*Bhojan Bihar*', '*Bhumi Letowa*' and the '*Nrisinha Yatra*', there is not a complete story. Such plays based on part of a story, or a minor event are called '*Jhumur*'. (*Gayan*, 4)

Difference between Ankiya Naat and Ankiya Bhaona:

Ankiya Naat and *Ankiya Bhaona* are both interchangeable. There is no significant difference between these two terms. *Naat* is referred to the written script of the play and *Bhaona* is the dramatic performance of the play.

Performance of Ankiya Naat:

The *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona* is usually performed in the *Namghar*. The performance of a *Bhaona* is preceded by a few rituals. Such rituals start with the very opening of the rehearsal of the play at least a fortnight earlier. The opening ritual starts with *naam-kirttana* and a reading of the whole script in the *Namghar* in the presence of a large number of people. Everyday a player artist of the group offers a *sarai* (a tray full of pulses and grams) and seeks God's blessings for his successful performance. The preceding day of the performance is called *bar-akhara* (main rehearsal) in which a full and final rehearsal of the play is staged and this is enjoyed and criticized by a large gathering including the elders of the village. On that day a detail discussion regarding arrangements including the *rabhaghar*, volunteering, seating accommodation, light, costumes, cosmetics, masks and all other accessories is also held among the participants and villagers and different duties are distributed among responsible persons. The day of the performance of *Bhaona* is a celebratory one with congregational chanting of prayers (*naam-kirttana*) by the superiors. The persons who play the principal roles observe fasting and seek the blessings of God and the holy congregation for the smooth running of the performance and for any unintentional omission or commission during the performance of the *Naat*.

Features of Ankiya Naat:

A few common and general features are noticed in all the *Ankiya Naats* composed by Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. These are as follows:

- Role of the *Sutradhara* (interlocutor);
- Use of lyrical songs, slokas and *payars* (versified prayers);
- Use of Brajvali language;
- Use of versified prose;
- Devotional Ideal; and
- Dances with songs.

Role of the Sutradhara (Interlocutor):

The *Sutradhara* plays a significantly dominant role in performance of the *Ankiya Naat*. The role played by the *Sutradhara* mainly includes the following aspects:

- *Nandi*: It relates to the eulogy in praise of the deity or the king (the principal character).
- *Announcer*: The *Sutradhara* announces the title of the *Naat* and the summary of the *Naat* in the form of a conversation with the *Sangi* (an associate character) to the audience.
- The *Sutradhara* introduces all the characters to the audience, while they appear on the stage.
- The *Sutradhara* narrates to the audience the scenes of the *Naat* that will be enacted serially and without any break. Here he recites the *slokas* in Sanskrit, sings in Brajavali, prays and narrates descriptions in a very attractive but serious way. But the *Sutradhara* does not sing songs relating to personal sorrows or happiness of the characters.
- The *Sutradhara* indicates the time when a character has to utter his or her dialogue on the stage.
- He describes the scenes or events which cannot be shown on the stage, so that the audience could get a clear idea of those events.
- The *Sutradhara* leads the entire group of performers in singing the *Muktimangal a Bhatima* (the concluding prayer in verse) at the end of the *Naat*.

Use of lyrical songs, Slokas and Payars:

In *Ankiya Naat* we can see the use of songs (*gits*), dances and music. Songs are based on classical *ragas* (modes) and are found present from the very beginning to the end of the *Naat*. Usually such songs and recitations are accompanied with dances. Stage performance of an *Ankiya Naat* without dances is never complete. Besides, these songs and dances are always accompanied with instrumental music. Instruments, such as *Khols* (long shaped drums), *Taals* (cymbals), developed by Sankardeva and used for the *Nrittya* (Dance) are integral parts of the *Ankiya Naat*.

The use of Brajavali Language:

Another specific characteristic is the use of Brajavali language in the *Ankiya Naat*. The origin of the *Brajavali language* was a similar language in Bengali known as 'Brajabuli'. It was spoken language which prevailed in Mithila region during 14th & 15th century AD. The Vaishnavite poets of mediaeval era developed this language adding their own colloquial words and changing the form of the words.

Use of Rhetoric Prose:

Another specific characteristic of *Ankiya Naat* is its versified prose. Its use in Sankardeva's plays is the first example of such type of prose found in Assamese literature. However, it does not represent the pure Assamese prosy form found only in the writings of Bhattadeva. In the prosy sentences used in the *Ankiya Naats*, the concord between the phonetics and frequent application of alliterations and re-alliterations in conformity with declination of words as per their tunes, has given a distinct prosy form which is very much different from the commonly used prose.

Devotional ideal:

Spreading devotional ideal is the main objective of the *Ankiya Naat*. Devotional ideal of the *Ankiya Naat* leads to the path of *Bhakti* which was the main objective of Sankardeva behind composition of the *Ankiya Naats*. Therefore, he tried their level best to focus the devotion to Krishna through various angles of the *Naats*.

Music and Dance:

Music and dance form the most essential features of *Ankiya Naats*. The *Ankiya Naat* aims to create an impact of devotional sentiment on the minds of the audience through the use of dances, songs and acting. These dance, songs and acting presents the deeds of the Gods and Goddesses in their various incarnations. These plays give preference to devotional feeling over actual theatrical flavor. By creating devotional feeling (*Bhakti Rasa*) rather than a dramatic suspense or flavor, the audience is taken to a state of spirituality. There are four kinds of songs in *Ankiya Naat*. They are (i) *Bhotimas* (devotional) (ii) *Raags* (modes), *taals* (measures) (iii) *Chapari*

(rhymes and metric prayers) (iv) Songs presented during entry of the characters in to the stage, describing their physical shapes, gestures and movements. (Gayan 3)

Influence of Sanskrit in Ankiya Naat:

A study of the *Ankiya Naats* of Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva reveals that there is much influence of Sanskrit plays on the *Nakiya Naats* composed by the Mahapurusha. There are much similarity between Ankiya Naat and Sanskrit Plays. We can see this similarity in the prologues of Sanskrit dramas and the *Ankiya Naat*. Prologue (*purbaranga*) is the programmers' preceding starting of the actual play. This includes *Pratyahar* (playing of the *Mridanga*), *Avataran* (positioning of the singers and the instrument players), *Ashrawanya* (tuning of the musical instruments), *Sangswadan* (readying the instruments to play), *Asarita* (testing of tunes and beats of the instruments), *Stuti* (hymns), *Charit Nritya* (dance and hoisting of the flag with worship) followed by *Nandigit* (adoration song by the *Sutradhara*). The part preceding the *Nandigit* is called '*Purbarang*' (prologue). Before starting of an *Ankiya Naat*, a dramatic situation is created with playing of instrumental music and performing different modes of dancing, such as *Saru-Dhemali*, *Bor-Dhemali*, *Deva-Dhemali*, *Naat-Dhemali* and *Guru-Dhemali*. Then, the *Sutradhara* enters the stage and begins his performance. The use of the term *Dhemali* instead of *Purbarang* is noteworthy. The dances performed by the musicians playing *khols* (a kind of long shaped drums) and *Taals* (*cymbals*) are called '*Dhemali*'. The forms of *Dhemali* are determined by the foot-work, body movements and hand gestures of the artists. The strokes on the *Khols* (drums) vary on the basis of the foot-work and hand gestures of the drum beaters (*bayans*). Since these prologues are performed with dances and gestures, they are called the *Dhemalis* which means sports. The use of the word '*Rang-Dhemali*' in our language is easily understood by everyone. The word '*Rang*' has been derived from the Sanskrit word '*Ranga*' meaning 'acting'. Clubbing *Rang* with *Dhemali*, the word *Rang-Dhemali* has been coined in our language. The origin of '*Dhemali*' is '*Dhab*' which implies movement; so, *Dhemali* implies movements of body and gestures of hands. Though there is no acting in *Dhemalis* of *Ankiya Bhaonas*, but there are body movements and gestures in dances. *Dhemalis* mean actions which demonstrate physical movements and gestures. Dancing by the *Sutradhara* (interlocutor) while singing *Nandi* and *Bhotimas* in the *Ankiya Bhaonas* after every stage is performed customarily.

The influence of Sanskrit plays is also felt in the *Ankiya Naat* while performing *Nandi* and singing by the *Sutradhara* (after the prologue) and also on his adoration songs, as well as in the '*Muktimangalan*' performed at the end of the *Naat*. As we see in the Sanskrit plays, two *Nandi Slokas* are also found in the Assamese *Ankiya Naat*, particularly in those composed by Mahapurusha Sankardeva. In the first *Sloka*, Lord *Krishna* is adored while the second one is presented giving a brief account of the theme of the play. This *Nandi Sloka* reflects the spiritual endeavor contained in the play which is the main concern of the *Ankiya Naat*.

The character of *Sutradhara* in the *Ankiya Naat* has been created in line with the one found in the Sanskrit *Naats* and the '*Naatyasastra*' of Bharat Muni. As in the Sanskrit plays, the theme of the *Ankiya Naat* is explained to the audience by the *Sutradhara* on the stage, through *Nandi gits*, *Bhotimas* and *slokas*. But, as against confining his role in the prologue and the concluding part in *Ankiya Naat*, the *Sutradhara* is linked with every part in Sanskrit plays as the narrator of the events in the play.

Like the Sanskrit play writers, the writers of *Ankiya Naat* also use Sanskrit and Brajavali languages besides Assamese in many cases. In the Sanskrit dramas, Prakrit is used in addition to Sanskrit language. Invariable use of versified prose and songs are also found in *Ankiya Naat*, as in Sanskrit plays.

Conclusion:

The *Ankiya Naat*, which is known as the traditional Assamese one-act plays, is the true manifestation of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev's artistic intelligence. *Ankiya Naat* is the foundation of Assamese drama. With a view to propagate the bhakti cult of Mahapurush Sankardeva, he used *Ankiya Bhaona* as a medium. Mahapurush Sankardeva laid the foundation of Assamese society by perfectly bringing the local work of art and culture into the spiritual path of Vaishnavism. The devotional and ritualistic aspects of the performance inspired the life of the people of Assam without the need for laborious efforts. The great Neo-Vaishnavism movement in the North Eastern part of India has contributed to Indian Classical Heritage through the art of *Ankiya Naat*. The influence of Sanskrit Plays into the *Ankiya Naat* of Sankardeva has also shown exchange of intercultural values prevalent in

the society of his times.

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