



Ecocritical approaches to the Ankia Bhaonas: An overview with special reference to the Barechaharia Bhaona, Committee Bhaona and Hezari Bhaona performance.

Dr. Trailokya Borkakati
Asstt. Professor, Dept. Of English.
Diphu Govt. College.

Abstract :

'Bhaona is the performance of Ankia Drama. The Ankia drama is a special form of drama in Assamese literature composed in *Brajabuli* language by Sankardeva, a great Vaishnava Saint of Assam in the sixteenth century AD just to propagate his Bhagavata based faith of *bhakti*. Later, Madhavdeva and many other followers contributed to the world of Ankia drama. Bhaona performance specially flourished in Satras where it becomes a regular feature on all ceremonial occasions. With the increases of its popularities, it gradually spread to the villages also. Bhaona performance were held on distinguished occasions.

The Barechaharia Bhaona, Committee Bhaona and Hezari Bhaona are the festivals of Ankia Nat (Ankia Drama) performance where basically the mythological plays are performed. The Barechaharia Bhaona has been presented by the people of Jamugurihat area of Sonitpur district of Assam in a special form of performance to unite the areas through the Neo-Vaishnavite culture by performing the Ankia plays. The pandal of this Bhaona is made in the model of a lotus flower. The 'Simhasana' is established in the centre of it. The other remaining part in the circular pandal is called 'Khala' in the local language. The places for audiences and 'bhawarias' (actors) are divided by 2-3 feet high bamboo fencing. The Committee Bhaona festival is a unique, historical and traditional performance with its moral significance. The Committee Bhaona festival is observed every three years by the active participation of the people of Charaibahi of Morigoan district. Barechaharia Bhaona has been celebrating since 1797-98 and the Committee Bhaona of Charaibahi was performed at first in 1858.

The performers use variety of technique to draw the attention of the audience on the performance. Consequently the drama accommodates dancing, singing, instrumental music and bombastic speeches and other stylized type of performances. The pandals are made so simply in minimum cost and with the objects like bamboos, straw, betel nut trees, coconut tree leaves etc. which are available locally. It is created players through the use of conventional symbolic objects-masks, costumes, a special area of presenting the play etc. This paper is an attempt to present how this Bhaona folk art form has flourished and contributes to the integrity of our society through the art and craftsmanship by the artisans using the raw materials from our surroundings.

Full paper :

Ankiya Bhaona :

Bhaona is the performance of Ankiya drama. The Ankiya drama is a special form of drama in Assamese literature composed in *Brajabuli* language (Das, Narayan : 1990 : 99-100) by Sankardeva, a great Vaishnava saint of Assam in the sixteenth century AD just to propagate his Bhagavata based faith of *bhakti*. It is peculiar form of drama having certain touches of the

indigenous performance. In 14th to 15th century Sankardeva was the leader in preaching the bhakti movement, the 'ekasarana nam-dharma'. He had undertaken many techniques for preaching vaishnavism. Among these techniques drama performance was one of the most important and powerful features as through this performatory art the common people could be easily influenced. So the Ankiya drama is the outcome of the great Sankarite movement. He composed the dramas at a time when the Vaishnava movement was spreading all over India. The dramas proved to be a very successful vehicle for spreading the Vaishnava *bhakti* in Assamese society. Later Madhavdeva and many other followers contributed to the world of Ankiya drama. Bhaona performance specially flourished in satras where it became a regular feature on all ceremonial occasions. With the increases of its popularity it gradually spread to villages also. Even in royal courts it began to receive more and more appreciation. Bhaona performances were held on distinguished occasions. (Sarma S.N. : 1999 : 239)

Some important elements and features of Ankiya dramas are :

- (i) Use of some specific and common character. The character Sutradhara controls the drama. Krishna and Rama are presented as hero of the dramas.
- (ii) Use of masks (mukha) and effigies (cho) are important features of Ankiya drama. The khanikara (painter artist) had to make the masks, effigies and other accessories of Ankiya drama.
- (iii) The make up of Ankiya drama is also not less sophisticated than the use the masks and effigies. The colourful make up mainly depended upon the rank, age and family status of the actor and actresses.
- (iv) The Ankiya dramas are generally staged in the Namghar (the village prayer hall) premises. The introduction of Ankiya drama had a religious purpose. Therefore, it is staged on occasion like Janmastami, Dol Yatra and Rasa Purnima etc.
- (v) Music and dance are two most important and essential aspect of Ankiya drama. The whole story progresses through song and dance. Every character including male and female has to enter to the stage and introduce himself or herself by dancing. The dances generally used in Ankiya drama are – *Dhemalir nac*, *Sutradhar nac*, *Gosaipravesar nac*, *Gopi pravesar nac*, *Chali nac*, *Jumura nac*, *Rasa nac*, *Yoddhar nac*, *Bhawariar nac*, *Kharmanar nac*, *Naradar Bhangi*, *Bahuwar nac*.
- (vi) Another essential point of these dramas is the use of melodies. In these dramas the later dramatists use some new melodies which are not available in the dramatic works of Sankardeva. These new dramas of post Sankardeva era are also staged in different regions, besides the old Ankiya dramas. The dramas of the 19th century and the later period were written in Assamese language instead of Brajbuli.

Committee Bhaona, Barechaharia Bhaona and Hezari Bhaona :

The committee Bhaona of Charaibahi, Morigaon is a unique, historical and traditional performance of Ankiya plays having its own cultural significance. It is performed twenty to twenty four Ankiya plays in the same day after an interval of three years and now it turns to a festival which carries a bond of unity and mutual harmony of the different castes of the society.

The committee Bhaona has its own history. If we go to analyse its background of celebration of the Bhaona festival, we have to go to the history of the nineteenth century of our nation. The social, political situation controlled by the British administration and rise of Neo-Vaishnavite culture equally took part in the creation of the festival.

The celebration of committee Bhaona at first was a historical event. The picture appears before 1826. Due to the Yandaboo treaty on 24th October in 1826, Assam was also handed over to the British and the people of Assam had to suffer the cruel administration. The people of Charaibahi also was not out of it. As the conscious citizen the villagers took part against the cruelty of British and the British sentiment. In 1st November, 1858 by the British Government, Queen Victoria announced a proclamation or a public statement for the satisfaction of the Indian people. The proclamation brought a hopeful feeling to the people against cruelty and exploitation. This belief reacted everywhere in India and the people enjoyed joyfully and arranged dance, drama and different perform delivering a respect to the Queen. The people of Charaibahi along with the people of Assam performed drum, khol, ojpali, Bihu dance and different comedies. It can be guessed that, it was arranged at first on December, 1858 in the grazing reserve of Charaibahi. Later, this festival was converted to Committee Bhaona through an organizing mood in different stages. The people of the area united and performed "Ankiya Nat". It was performed under the proper arrangement of a committee and so it was named as Committee Bhaona .

The Barechaharia Bhaona is a kind of very festive Bhaona performance where twenty to twenty four Bhaonas are staged in the same pandal (Mandapa) simultaneously by the villages taking part from Jamugurihat area. This is the familiar Bhaona Festival of Jamugurihat area of Sonitpur district of Assam. The most significant features of this type of Bhaona is that it is the symbol of coordination among the various villagers.

The Hezari Bhaonas Festival of Karaiyani is a festival of Ankiya drama performance in Deol Mahotsava where eleven numbers of Ankiya dramas are performed simultaneously for two three times in two days. The area Karaiyani is situated in the 5 kilometers away in the north east of Nagaon town. The villagers of the participating village in this Bhaona festival are of Brahmin, Kayastha, Kalita, Koch and Chutia community people.

The creation of Bhaona by Sankardeva is an incomparable spiritual property to the Assamese culture, by which the people of Asom able to make a peaceful society besides the mental and spiritual recreation. The committee Bhaona Festival celebrated in Charaibahi is somewhat similar to the Barechaharia Bhaona of Jamugurihat, Sonitpur and "Hezari Bhaona" performed in Kariyani, near Nagaon town. In some other villages of Nagoan district also performed this type of Bhaonas. In pathari of Nagoan "Bareganya" Bhaona is performed and in Hatbor of kaliabor it is called "Hazari Bhaona". In Karaiyani also, it is named as "Hezari Bhaona". 'Barechaharia Bhaona' has been celebrating since 1797-98 and the Committree Bhaona of Charaibahi was performed at first in 1858. The Hezari Bhaona of Karaiyani is almost new. It has been performing since 1969. Though the emergence and history of the three Bhaona festivals are different but all the three festivals have some similarity in the field of performance and in their significance.

Similarities of Barechaharia Bhaona and Hezari Bhaona with the Committee Bhaona :

i. The Committee Bhaona, The Barechaharia Bhaona and the Hezari Bhaona, all the three Bhaona Festivals are the festivals of Ankiya drama performance where at least eleven dramas are staged simultaneously. The popularity of Neo Vaishnavite creations by Sankardeva such like the Bhaonas tremendously attracted the people and so in their different times of social distress or inconvenience the people of the areas of Charaibahi, Jamugurihat and Karaiyani became deeply attracted to the Vaishnavite faith.

ii. All the three festivals are performed through the participation of different castes and creed. The social integration and cohesion has been possible only through the ethical belief by Vaishnavite contributions of Sankardeva and his followers. Castism may not be the bar of the holy practices to the blessing of Almighty. Thus the neglect of caste rigidity as preached by Asom vaishnavism and practiced by the Assamese people.

iii. The making of pandals in a pattern and circular structure in all the three Bhaonas festivals are almost same. In the 'Kalang paria Bareganya Samaj', it is permanent but in Barechaharia Bhaona and Hezari Bhaona, it is built in the time of performance. The process of performance are not the same but some rituals are same. The 'Bhawariyas' move round the 'manikut' and the simhasana in all three performances. Selection of the players are done according to the popularity. The Ankiya plays full of fight, dance and moral themes are popular to the common people.

iv. The committee Bhaona performance is held after the interval of three years, the Hezari Bhaona is staged after the interval of five years and the Barechaharia Bhaona is performed according to the decision of the participating villages. None of the three Bhaonas are performed in every year. To perform all the three Bhaonas involve huge expenditure and elaborate preparation and the people consider these as prestigious activity of their society.

v. The common sentiments of the people are remarkable in the three areas. A festive atmosphere is created. The villagers prepare to welcome the guests and relatives in the period of the festival. A complete picture of serenity, festivity and fellow feeling among people of different castes, communities, sexes and age groups are distinct throughout the Bhaona Festivals.

Ecocritical approaches to the performance of these three Bhaonas :

Ecocriticism is a new critical method available to critics to analyze literature. William Rueckert coined this term in 1978, with the publication of his essay, "Literature and ecology : An experiment in Ecocriticism" and Cheryll Glotfelty popularized it in 1989. The other important names in the field are Scott Slovic, Lawrence Buell and Nirmal Selvamong who have done yeoman service to this field. Now, this field has grown like a big bayan tree (Frederick S. 2007 : 135)

Ecocriticism gives human beings a better understanding of nature. Mans voracious urge to conquer nature is a known fact. Nature is also a co-inhabitant and not a subordinate. Ecocriticism is not just studying nature as represented in literature, it helps human beings have a broader view.

The Ankiya dramas, as important part of Assamese literature and its performance of these dramas gave birth a prominent source of entertainment through mythical theme, stories and dances. The vaishnava saints and followers introduce Bhaona performance and festivals through satras and namghars (prayer hall) in natural atmosphere popularized Vaishnavism in Assam and adjacent areas. The growth and popularity of Bhaonas gave birth to a class of artisans who are specialized in the art of preparing costumes, decorations and accessories using a raw materials of our surroundings. These Bhaona performance art forms are not merely artistic and kinetic expressions of traditional Bhaona art forms but also means of understanding cultural patterns, levels of human existence, ethnic, social, religious, socio-economic, linguistic of the folk and close relationship with nature.

In the committee Bhaona, Barechaharia and the Hezari Bhaona performance and in the preparation to perform, it is observed as follows :

(i) Preparation to perform :

From the day onwards the rehearsal of the play begins and the actor offer 'sarai' (a tray full of pulses, grams and fruits) seeking blessing for successful performance. In the day of perform, the performers fast for the whole day programme (*Nama- kirtana* in the morning and afternoon) is held at the performing place. The *Gayana-Bayana* performs rehearsals in their own *Namghars*, the rehearsal of *bar-dhemali*, *saru-dhemali*, *ghosa-dhemali* etc in the style of *ranga* in Sanskrit play.

The arrangement of musical instrument and making of different instruments made of wood and bamboo etc to play the role of different characters in drama are made by the performers in their own cost. Every participating group is conscious about their needfulness of necessary materials and they arrange there according to these capacity.

(ii) Making of pandals :

The season of performance of the committee Bhaona is suitable to perform in the open field. So the pandals are made to simply with minimum cost and with the objects available locally. Bamboos, straw, Betel nut trees, coconut tree leaves, Leaves of different trees are used to make the pandals. Another some necessary part of stage for some particular drama are built outside the *rabha* and the main pandal. for e.g. the '*chakrabehu*' (a phalanx) where Abhimanyu is killed in the drama '*Abhimanyu badh*' is made in the open field at least 30-35 meters away from the *rabha* of the concerned khel. In the earlier ages or when the modern facilities if electricity were not available, the people had to use some lamps of mustered oil and they kept these on some stands or posts of banana trees. It is called *bhata*. But when the age of electricity came then this type of *bhata* lamp was removed. The different types of pandals are decorated by flowers and chaplets of flowers are used.

The pandal of Barechaharia Bhaona is made in the model of a lotus flower. The '*Simhasana*' is established in the centre of it. Around the '*Simhasana*' the place in the pandal is reserved for the '*Gosain Mahantas*' and for the invited devotees or personalities. The circular place behind this place is used to move the '*Gayana Bayana*' and the '*Bhawarias*'. The other remaining place in the pandal is called '*khala*' in the Assamese language. To make the pandal the fourteen to twenty one '*khalas*' are added around the place of *simhasana* and the pandals turn to circular form. The places for audiences and '*Bhawarias*' are divided by 2-3 feet high bamboo fencing. Separate welcome gates and Green rooms are made for every *khalas*.

(iii) Musical Instrument :

Musical instruments play and essential part in the Bhaona performance. The musical instruments generally used in committee Bhaona are *khol*, *mridanga*, *tal*, drum etc. and some of the characters use *tokari*, *dambaru*, flute etc.

The musical instrument like *khol*, *mridanga* are most essential in Bhaona festival. The *tala* (cymbal) is a common instrument and are generally three types- the bar *tala* (big size cymbal) or *bhor-tal*, *patital* (middle size cymbal) and *saru tal* (small size cymbal). The small size cymbal is also known as *khuti-tal*.

The characters like Narada, Siva use *tokari* and *dambaru* respectively. Another instruments like *Sankha*, *nagara*, *dhol* are also used sometimes according to the necessity of the play.

The music of the Bhaonas have attained an extraordinary position. Many musical instruments of different dramas create a new rhythm in the same pandal.

(iv) **Costumes :**

The heros of Ankiya drama like Krishna and Rama use colourful cloths. They use *Mukut* (head dress) in their head. This Mukut is defferent form the other *Mukutas* used by the different characters. The feather of peacock is stringed in this head dress. The Krishna performer uses garlands of flower and beads, ear-ring and 'nupur' in his feet and bracelet on his arm.

The male characters also use ornaments as per demand of their role. Among these ear-ring, string of beads, bracelet are mentionable in their regard. Besides these the characters always use some weapons in their hand. As for example- Krishna use a round missile weapon for which he is called '*Chakradha*' (Chakra-a round missile weapon). Some more articles may be mentioned. These are iron or bamboo made bow and *gada* (a fat, round weapon to fight) used by the characters like Rama and Bhima and some other characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata respectively.

(v) **Make up :**

Make up is also an important part of Bhaona performance. In old ages, there are mainly four materials in case of make up. These are *haital* (the yellow orpiment), *nil* (indigo) *sendur* (a red lead) and *dhal* (the white orpiment). A scholar Dr. Naren Kalita write that mixing mixing these materials some separate colours were prepared for this purpose. These are $haital+nil=green$, $dhal+sendur=pink$, $haital+sendur=pale\ red$, $nil+dhal=black\ green$ and $dhal+haital=yellowish\ white$. Now a days the synthetic colours from the local market are used by the bhawariya.

People believe that the colour of Krishna is always black green and the colour of *Asura* (the devil) is always black. So particular colours are used for particular characters. To fix the colour on the face of the players the *khanikar* (painter) had to plaster some mud of an insect (the mud thrown up by the *kumarani* – the insect) on the face of the players. Not to cease the colour they had mixed juice of earth worm sometimes.

(vii) **Masks :**

In the Bhaonas, the use of masks is seen in the characters of monkey, devil and the birds like *Garurpakshi*. The *bahua* (the comic character for entertainment of audience) also use masks.

In is seen that as a public entertainment the Bhaona performance plays a dominant role towards purity, integrity, fraternity and communal harmony. In the performance of the Ankiya dramas the elements from our surrounding play a great role. To stage the drama and to keep the atmosphere living and interesting all the rural artisans try to their best to create a natural atmosphere through the use of the elements from nature.

References :

English :

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Barman, Sivnath | 1999, <i>An Unsung colossus, An introduction to the life and works of Sankardeva</i> , Guwahati. |
| Bhattacharyya, Harichandra | 1964, <i>Origin And Development of Assamese Drama and the stage</i> , guwahati. |
| Bordoloi, Hiteswar, | 1996, <i>Ankiya Nat ; Theories and stage performance</i> ; An unpublished ph D. Thesis, Gauhati University. |
| Frederick S, | 2007, " <i>Suicidal Motive</i> " : An Eco-critical Reading of four poems. |
| Medhi, Kaliram | 1978, <i>Studies in Vaishnava Literature and Culture of Assam</i> , guwahati. |
| Sarma, S.N. | 1991, <i>A Few aspects of Assamese literature</i> , Asom Sahitya Sabha, Guwahati. |

Assamese :

Barua, Gajen (ed)	1975, <i>Barechaharia Bhaona (Pustika)</i> , jamugurihat.
Borah, Mohuram (ed)	1999, <i>Souvenior of Hezari Bhaona festival</i> , Karaiyani, nagoan.
Borah, Mohuram (ed)	2006, <i>Karapat</i> , Souvenir Hezari Bhaona.
Bordoloi, Nabakanta	1994, <i>Pobitara</i> , Souvenir Asom Sahitya Sabha, Morigaon.
Das, Narayan	1990, <i>Brajabuli Bhasa Aru sahitya</i> , Guwahati.
Nath, Chandrakanta	2004, <i>Committee Bhaona, oitihask Aru Anusthanik Dristipat</i> , Souvenir Karani, Charaibahi, Morigaon.
Nath, Nabaram	1980, <i>Committee Bhaona, Souvenir Rahar Rahdoi</i> , Raha, Nagaon.

