



Bhaona In Assam: Tradition, Transformation, And Modern Expression

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Abstract

Bhaona is a unique traditional theatrical art form from Assam that emerged in the 15th–16th century with the influence of Srimanta Sankardeva and his follower Madhavdeva. Originating from the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, Bhaona was first showcased in Namghars and satras as a way to disseminate religious teachings and ethical principles through tales from the epics and Puranas. The performance is characterized by its distinct elements including Ankiya Naat, the incorporation of Borgeet, elaborate costumes, intricate masks, and the Sutradhar, who leads the audience through the story. Traditionally, Bhaona highlighted devotion, community involvement, and the safeguarding of Assamese cultural identity. With time, Bhaona has experienced notable changes while maintaining its essential essence. Through social change, urbanization, and engagement with contemporary theatre, the themes, performance venues, and presentation methods of Bhaona have broadened. Although mythological tales are still key, current topics and straightforward narratives have also been incorporated into today's performances. Contemporary lighting, audio equipment, stage setups, and scripted conversations have rendered Bhaona more appealing and accessible to today's viewers, particularly the youth. In this paper it has been tried to explore historical perspective of evolution of Bhoan through different phases of time. Moreover, it also tried to express that the contemporary form, of Bhaona maintains a harmony between tradition and innovation. Performances are currently held in auditoriums, festivals, and also on national and international stages, highlighting Assamese culture beyond local limits.

Key Words: *Bhaona, Tradition, stages of development , Assam etc.*

Introduction

Bhaona is a 500-year-old ritualistic theatre form from Assam, pioneered by the 15th-century saint-reformer Mahpurux Srimanta Sankardeva as a synthesis of spiritual devotion and high artistry. Traditionally performed in Namghars (prayer halls) and Sattras (monasteries), a Bhaona performance transforms these sacred spaces into vibrant arenas where mythological stories—primarily from the Bhagavata Purana and the Ramayana come to life through a blend of classical dance, rhythmic music, and dramatic dialogue. The performance begins with the Sutradhar (narrator-director), who enters through a processional arch of nine lamps called the Agnigarh, representing nine modes of devotion, and guides the audience through the narrative with choreographed movements and songs in Brajavali or modern Assamese.

The performance of Bhaona by the actors, known as Bhaoriya, are dressed in elaborate, glittering costumes and ornate headgear, often wearing hand-crafted Mukha (masks) made of bamboo, clay, and cloth to represent divine deities or terrifying demons. The performance is characterized by its highly formal structure, led by the Sutradhar (narrator/director) and accompanied by an orchestra of Gayan-Bayan (singers and instrumentalists) playing the Khol (drum) and Taal (cymbals). Distinctive features include the use of elaborate, vibrant costumes and Mukha (masks) made from local materials like bamboo and clay to represent divine or demonic characters. While it remains a sacred tradition rooted in centuries-old practices, Bhaona has evolved and modern adaptations, such as Matribhashar Bhaona (performed in the mother tongue) and even international English versions, ensuring its continued relevance as a symbol of Assamese cultural identity on global and digital platforms. Bhaona remains a vital pillar of Assamese cultural identity, having evolved from a strictly religious tool into a globally recognized heritage form that includes modern adaptations like English Bhaona and large-scale festivals like Baresahariya Bhaona. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, Bhaona serves as a communal "folk media" that reinforces moral values, social harmony, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

The main objective is to explore the how traditional Bhaona changes to modern form through time. Over time, Bhaona has undergone significant transformation while retaining its core spirit. With social change, urbanization, and exposure to modern theatre, the themes, performance spaces, and presentation styles of Bhaona have expanded. While mythological stories remain central, contemporary issues and simplified narratives have also found a place in modern performances.

Methodology:

Studying Bhaona, the traditional Assamese folk theater rooted in neo-Vaishnavite culture, requires a multifaceted methodology that combines Primary data collection fieldwork, textual analysis, and performance observation. This combined approach helps in understanding Bhaona as a living cultural tradition as well as its historical, religious, and artistic dimensions. Through field visits to Bhaona performances in Satras and village Namghars, direct observation of performance elements such as music, costumes, dialogue, and stagecraft, and interviews with performers, Satradhikars, and local audiences to understand its religious and social significance. Secondary data can be gathered from books, research articles, manuscripts, and historical

records related to Sankardeva and the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Audio-visual recordings and documentation of performances may also be analyzed to study changes over time. This qualitative approach is supplemented by analyzing historical texts such as Ankiya Nats by Srimanta Sankardev, alongside documenting elements like masks (mukha), costumes, music, and dances through audio-visual recordings, while examining changes due to digital media and globalization.

Results and Discussion

Over the centuries, Bhaona has transformed from a strictly monastic tool of proselytization into a vibrant folk medium. This evolution is most evident in the shift from the classical Ankiya Bhaona to Matribhashar Bhaona, which utilizes modern Assamese to make the dialogue more relatable to contemporary audiences. The performance scale has also expanded significantly; while it began as a localized village event, it has grown into massive communal spectacles like the Baresahariya Bhaona in Jamugurihat, where dozens of troupes perform simultaneously. Furthermore, the 20th and 21st centuries saw the breaking of gender barriers, with women now playing roles—including the lead Sutradhar—that were historically reserved exclusively for men.

Modern Bhaona has entered a stage of global and digital expression, positioning itself as a world-class heritage art. Modern adaptations now include English Bhaona, specifically designed to communicate Assamese cultural values to international audiences, with successful showcases in global hubs like Abu Dhabi. In the digital sphere, 2025 has seen the rise of dedicated Bhaona apps and high-definition streaming, allowing the diaspora to engage with performances in real-time. Despite these technological shifts, modern expression remains grounded in community identity; festivals like the Tezpur Bhaona Samaroh serve as critical platforms where youth are re-engaging with the art form, ensuring that Bhaona is not just a relic of the past, but a living, breathing dialogue between history and the future.

Bhaona in Assam emerged through unique historical phases, starting as a neo-Vaishnavite creation by Srimanta Sankardev in the 15th-16th centuries and transforming into various forms influenced by social reforms and cultural changes. Its development shows the incorporation of regional folk elements such as Oja Pali with Bhakti principles, moving from monastic ceremonies to popular village and commercial shows. The development of Bhaona in Assam has evolved through four distinct historical and cultural stages, transitioning from a strictly religious tool to a global performance art.

The first phase Formative Period (15th–16th Century) marks the birth of Bhaona as a revolutionary medium of spiritual and social reform, conceptualized by the polymath saint Srimanta Sankardeva. This era began with the landmark performance of Chihna-Yatra in 1468, where Sankardeva used painted backdrops and masks to depict celestial realms, effectively birthing the Assamese theatrical tradition. During this stage, Bhaona was meticulously crafted as "folk media" to disseminate Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy among diverse ethnic groups, bypassing the linguistic barriers of Sanskrit by utilizing Brajavali—a unique literary blend of

Maithili and Assamese. The plays of this period, known as Ankiya Naat, established the foundational structural elements that still define the art today, the central role of the Sutradhar as a spiritual guide, the rhythmic accompaniment of the Khol and Taal, and the integration of the Sattriya dance form. By the time of Sankardeva's disciple Madhavdeva, the formative stage had successfully institutionalized Bhaona within the Sattrā (monastery) system, transforming it from a singular performance into a permanent pillar of Assamese cultural and religious identity.

During the second phase of Post-Sankari and Expansion Period (17th–18th Century), Bhaona evolved from a localized reformist tool into a widespread institutionalized tradition across the Brahmaputra Valley. Following the demise of the founding saints, the Sattrā (monastery) system became the primary custodian of the art form, leading to a prolific output of new plays as every new Sattradhikar (monastic head) was traditionally expected to compose an original drama. This era saw a significant linguistic and thematic expansion, as the rigid use of Brajavali began to incorporate more local Assamese idioms, and narratives shifted from purely devotional themes to include more dramatic, heroic, and war-centric episodes. It was also during this stage that Bhaona gained royal patronage from the Ahom monarchs; historical records indicate that King Sunenphaa (Pramatta Singha) and King Rajeshwar Singha invited troupes to the capital to perform for state guests, such as the Kachari and Jaintia kings. This transition from the village prayer hall to the royal court not only elevated the socio-political status of Bhaona but also solidified its role as a unifying cultural force among the diverse ethnic communities of Assam.

The Third phase Secularization and Folk Integration Period (19th–Early 20th Century) marked a pivotal transition where Bhaona moved beyond the sacred confines of the Sattras and into the broader public sphere, evolving into a populist folk medium. During this era, the theatre form began to incorporate outside influences, most notably from the Bengali Jatra, leading to the emergence of sub-genres like Dhura Bhaona and Phaujiya Bhaona which prioritized entertainment and emotional drama over strict monastic codes. The performance space expanded from prayer halls to massive public fields, exemplified by the formalization of Baresahariya Bhaona in Jamugurihat, where the festival became a symbol of community solidarity rather than just religious devotion. This period also saw the introduction of more secular characters, such as the Bahuwa (clown) and Dut (messenger), who used colloquial humor to engage the audience, making the art form more accessible to a socially diverse population. By the early 20th century, Bhaona had effectively bridged the gap between a high religious art and a popular "people's theatre," establishing its role as a primary vehicle for Assamese cultural expression during a time of significant socio-political change.

The phase Modern and Digital Transformation Period (Late 20th Century– to the recent time), Bhaona has undergone a profound metamorphosis, evolving from a traditional regional ritual into a globally recognized performance art. This era is defined by significant social shifts, most notably the inclusivity of women and youth, as female performers now regularly take on lead roles, including the Sutradhar, in both urban and rural settings. In the recent time, the language of Bhaona has expanded to include English adaptations and modern Assamese to connect with the diaspora and international audiences, with landmark

performances reaching global hubs like Abu Dhabi and other Indian metros like Chennai. This period also marks a high-tech leap; digital tools, including specialized apps and high-definition social media streaming, are used to document scripts, manage choreography, and broadcast festivals like the Tezpur Bhaona Samaroh 2025 to a worldwide audience. Despite this modernization, there remains a concerted effort to preserve the authentic craftsmanship of Majuli's mask-making and the sacred acoustics of the Khol, ensuring that the digital age enhances, rather than dilutes, the spiritual essence of the tradition.

Bhaona preserves its foundational spiritual and structural essence by functioning as the main medium for Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavite beliefs within the holy environments of Namghars and Sattras. Even with the challenges posed by globalization, the essence of the performance stays rooted in the Ankiya Naat tradition, maintaining the vital role of the Sutradhar as a spiritual leader and utilizing the Khol and Taal to establish its distinctive rhythmic ambiance. The material culture of the art form persists with the ongoing use of traditional Mukha (masks) and the symbolic Agnigarh entrance, guaranteeing that the aesthetic integrity set five centuries ago is inherited by future generations. Despite the emergence of contemporary developments such as Matribhashar Bhaona and digital streaming, these advancements act as a safeguard that enables the foundational essence the spread of Bhakti and community unity to continue being the core of Assamese cultural identity.

Conclusion:

The development of Bhaona in Assam has evolved through four transformative stages, beginning with its Formative Period (15th–16th Century) when Srimanta Sankardeva created the art form as a "folk media" to propagate Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy through Ankiya Naat scripts written in the literary language Brajavali. During the Post-Sankari and Expansion Period (17th–18th Century), the tradition was institutionalized within the Sattra (monastery) system and gained royal patronage from the Ahom kings, who utilized it for state diplomacy. The Secularization and Folk Integration Period (19th–Early 20th Century) saw Bhaona move into public spaces, adopting populist elements from Bengali Jatra and giving rise to communal festivals like Baresahariya Bhaona. Finally, the Modern and Digital Transformation (Late 20th Century–2025) has defined the art through increased inclusivity, with women and youth taking center stage, and the adoption of global outreach strategies such as English Bhaona and high-definition digital streaming, ensuring its survival as a vibrant symbol of Assamese identity in the 21st century.

In its modern expression, Bhaona continues to balance tradition and innovation. Performances are now staged in auditoriums, festivals, and even national and international platforms, showcasing Assamese heritage beyond regional boundaries. The use of modern lighting, sound systems, stage design, and scripted dialogues has made Bhaona more accessible and appealing to present-day audiences, especially the younger generation. Despite these changes, the essence of Bhaona as a cultural, spiritual, and artistic form remains intact. Thus, Bhaona stands as a living tradition in Assam, reflecting continuity as well as adaptation in response to changing times.

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