

## **Ankiya Nat of Assam: A Socio-Historical Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Assamese drama begins with Sankardev. He composed six unique dramas combining with his talent and the elements of folk dramatic performance of that time and the base of Sanskrit Natya Shastra. He preached Vaishnavism to improve the society of Assam at that time and composed plays for the same purpose. The history of ancient Assamese play can be divided into three parts. Plays of Sankardev period, plays of post Sankardev period and plays of modern times. Assamese drama was produced according to the movement of the society of Assam. In Sankardev plays, the purpose of religion is seen to be manifest in a serious way. In post Sankardev Period, The Ahom kings invited Assamese drama to the royal court and performed it. From that time, Assamese play turn into medium of entertainment. Under British rule, these plays acquired elements of Bengali culture and lost their originality. This paper is an attempt to examine the history of Assamese drama from a socio-historical perspective.

Keywords: Ankiya nat, Sankardev, Religion, entertainment. Vaishnavism.

### **Introduction:**

The play is called visual poetry, but the success of this poem comes from acting. The Greek philosopher Aristotle called the play a simulation of action. The *Natya Shastra* of Bharata Muni, the primary theatrical literature of India, states that imitation of the deeds of God, God, kings and householders is called drama. Western scholar Aristotle and Eastern activist Bharata Muni defined the play in the same way. Clayton Hamilton says- “that the drama is the only art, excepting oratory and certain forms of music, that is designed to appeal to a crowd instead of to an individual”(30).

The play is a primitive art of imitating human life and is built on love, imagination, beauty etc. The play was produced in various artistic endeavours in life. The seed of the play was planted when the primitive man made a lively description of the hunt in front of the

companion after returning from the hunt. In ancient times, the play originated from dances and songs held at the temple of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and pleasure. Various literary philosophies around the world also state that plays were produced by religious events. The priest resorted to acting to teach the English religious books to the public and it was from this act that mystery and miracle plays were born (Goswami 129).

The history of Indian drama started from very old days. After the writing of the *Natya Shastra* by Bharata Muni, various regional folk theatre events and many Sanskrit plays were composed in the period of 1<sup>st</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. It is worth mentioning that in Assam, various folk theatre ceremonies were performed since the old days (Sarma, *Asomiya Natya Sahitya* 2-6 ; Bhattacharya 96-97). It is well known that *Kalika Purana* mentions that Odra Magadhi continued to exist in ancient Pragjyotishpura and Kamarupa. Written in the antique Assamese language, Charyapada stated that folk theatre were performed in Assam in old days. In The *Krishna kirtana*, It was mentioned about the contemporary folk drama of Assam (Devgoswami 47). By deriving elements from previous Sanskrit theatrical trends and folk theatre, Sankaradeva composed the first Assamese drama in 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> century. In Shankardev's time, there were many folk-dramas. Ramachana Thakur mentions in the *GuruCharit* that Sankardev performed Ojapali to show Jadagish Mishra at that time.

Based on this rich folk drama, Sankardeva produced the Ankiya Nat through the Brajabuli language. Simultaneously, Sankardeva started a primary base of Theatre in Assam through Chinayatra. (Sarma, *Asomiya Natya Sahitya* 8; Bhattacharya 33). But there was no written copy of this theatre. After this decisive performance, Sankardev composed 6 plays. This play is called Anakiya Nat. Ankiya Nat has some unique features. Satyendranath Sharma has shown these characteristics as follows: (a) The dominance of the Sutradhara (Narrator) (b) The use of poetic righteous songs, slokas and Bhatima (A kind of prayer song) (c) Brajavali language, (d) rhythmic prose (e) Music and dance (Sharma1) The plays of the ankiya nat model are a kind of dance-drama in which there are songs and dialogues in Brajavali interspersed with slokas and other pieces in Sanskrit. There are no scene and act divisions and different episodes are strung together through the Sutradhara. The play written in the model of Ankiya Nat is called Anakiya Saileer Nat (style of Ankiya drama). The history of old Assamese plays is divided into three phases. 1) Nata of Sankari era (2) Nata of Post-Shankaradev period (3) Nata of modern era

Drama of Sankari era:

The father of Assamese drama is Sankardev. To write these Natas, Sankardeva created an artificial language, called Brajavali. It was made from a mixture of Maithili and Old Assamese language. The name of his plays are *Patni-prasada*, *Kaliyadamana*, *Keli-gopala*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Parijat Harana* and *Ramvijay* (Sarma, Asomiya Natya Sahitya 11; Bhattacharya 32). B K. Kakati has correctly described Shankardev's Nata-

But the ultimate source of the Assamese drama, divested of outward form is in all probability the choral performance of the Assamese Ojapali. Sankardeva appears to have improved this kind of performance have given birth to the Assamese Drama. (19)

The structure is the same in these plays of Shankaradeva. The play is initiated by a Nandi sloka (Sanskrit verse) and the application of other Sanskrit slokas in the middle of the play, the story was taken from the *Bhagavata Purana* and the Ramayana, the presentation of the Sutradhara with other characters of the play, the song with Indian classical Raga and Tala. The application of prayer songs, Brajabuli language dialogues were used in his plays. (Sarma, 19; Bhattacharya 25).

In the Sankaradeva's Nata, there is a certain mode of performance. At the beginning of the play, Guyana-Bayana sing and dance like the Purvaranga of Sanskrit drama, then the narrator or Sutradhara starts the play with his dance and recites the slokas. The narrator announces the story and then the actors are introduced through the directive of the narrator. B .K Baruah says-

Through the new genre is popularly known as Ankiya nat, it bears no resemblance to the anka type of Rupakas of Sanskrit. Ankiya Nat is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaishnava faith. It should be borne in mind that Sankardeva himself called these dramatic compositions nat and nataka after the Sanskrit terminology. Other titles used by the Vaishnava poets for this type of plays areyatra, nrita and anka.(19).

It is not found what is the correct written date of Sankardeva's Natas except *Ramvijay*. Scholars like Maheshwar Neog, Satyendranath Sarma, Binichi Kumai Baruah, etc. described their approach, saying that *Patniprasad* is the first drama of Sankardeva (Neog 77; Sarma

44). At the same time, other scholars such as Kaliram Medhi, Harchindra Bhattacharya would like to say that *Kaliyadaman* is the first play of Shankaradeva (Bhattacharya 33). In *Ramvijay*, Sankardev added the date of his last play. This was the Saka era of 1490 or the Indian calendar year of 1490. Prior to this play, Sankardev completed all his other plays.

Madhavdev, a suitable disciple of Sankardev, also wrote *Arjunbhanjana*, *Chudhara*, *Pimpara-gucoa*, *Bhumi Letoa*, *Bhujana Bihar*, *Bhushana Harana*, *Kotura Khela*. (Sarma, *Asomiya Natya Sahitya* 61; Bhattacharya 51) Many changes are seen in the plays of Madhavadeva after Shankaradeva) Madhavadeva composed *Arjunbhanjana* only in that way. Madhavdeva's other plays were different from the plays of Sankardev. The plays of Madhavadeva were composed with certain kinds of situations in comparison to the story. The most commonly used Brajabuli language in the Sankardeva drama changed to Madhavdev's play in the ancient Assamese language. The plays of Madhavadeva are called Jhumura. (Sarma11).

At that time, as now there were no professional actors; they were recruited from the villagers. Assamese acting is thus the work of amateurs. The roles of the principal characters of Krishna and Rama and their consorts are played by some handsome young man specially of the higher castes, as they in their dramatic role have to receive obedience oh the other actors and of the audience. (Baruah 25). At that time there was the idea of caste discrimination in the society and the performance of Ankiya drama reflected the result of caste discrimination. However, the problem of caste discrimination in Assam was less than in other states of India.

There Sankardev constructed a two-roofed prayer hall called the Namghar. All the performance of Ankiya plays were held in Namghar. For the construction of Namghar, Shankardev used wood and bamboo, which were found in the villages of Assam, and even poor people could easily construct it. Everyone could enter Namghar without any restrictions. That is why everyone participated in Ankiya plays at that time. Because of this, this drama easily made a place in the minds of people.

Nata of post-Sankardev era:

Shankardev had already formed a powerful tradition of Anakiya drama. Inspired by this tradition, playwrights of the Post Sankardeva era composed plays. One of the playwrights of the same era, Gopal Dev composed three plays: *Janam Yatra*, *Nandotsav* and *Gopi Uddhav*

*Sanghabhada*. (Sarma78). Sangatradeva's influence is seen in the plays of Gopal Dev. But originality is also seen in Gopal Dev's plays (79). But like Madhavdev's Jhumra, Gopaldev also did not follow the previous structure of the play. Among the other dramatists of this time, the name of Ramcharan Thakur and his son Daitari Thakur is notable. Ramcharan Thakur composed *Kansa Badha* drama. The character of this drama is very similar to the plays of Sangarkadeva. Daitarii Thakur composed two plays named *Narsingha Yatra* and *Shyamanta Haran* (78).

There was also a theatrical composition of Sanskrit language in Sangkari era. Kabichandra Dij composed *Kamkumar Haran*, *Gaurikanta*, *Bighnesh Janmayjay*, Dina Dabij's *Sanghakasura Badh*, Dharmadev Goswami composed the *Dharmadeya* etc. (Bhattacharya 71). But after this no Sanskrit drama is found.

Sankardeva had used the play as a medium of propaganda. The influence of vaisnava religion became powerful in the time and the relevance of the plays as a way of religion increased. At this time, a name house was established in every Hindu village of Assam. It was a custom to perform drama once in a year in the Namghars. There was a rule in that time, during the festival, a bhaona should be performed. There was a tradition of performing bhaona in the birth and death dates of the gurus. (Hazarika 31). Sri Ram Ata, a contemporary of Jadumadeva, a disciple of Gopaldev, wrote *Subhadra Haran Nat. Mahabharata* was the origin of this drama. Taking satras as the center, the Satradhiakars had written a lot of dramas. Similarly, the play composition had increased in Assam.

Another reason for the increasing number of Ankiya plays was due to the adherence to Ahom kings. This literature and Shilpa were advanced with the patron of the king. Ramakant Ata, son of Damodar Ata, composed the drama *Kansabadh*. Kesavananda Devgoswami has said that the Ahom king Siba Singh was pleased to see the acting of the *Kansbadh* drama in the Leadership of Ramchandra Aata and invited this bhaona to the state capital. Ahom king Rajeshwar Singha composed a play called *Keechak Badh*. Gunabhiram Barua mentions in *Assam Buranji* that this king built the *Keechak Bodh* Bhaona in Desi Bhasa. For this reason, the king was given the title of Kabi Churamani. Lakshidev, the son of Bhadradeva of Narua Balisatra, wrote seven akhaya plays. These plays were *Ravana Badh*, *Sindhura Yatra*, *Janma Yatra*, *Gobardhan Yatra*, *Narasinha Yatra*, *Haramohan* or *Mahesh Mohan* or *Kumar Haran*. Lakshmidev's son Bhabakanta has composed plays like *Baman Bijaya*, *Balichalan* and

*Balibadha-Sitasamban*. During these times, a lot of evidence of the play is found in all the satras. The eighteenth century playwright, Koibalyanandan has composed some plays such as *Amrit Mathan*, *Mrithika Bahujan* etc. It is noteworthy that in his play a ray of blank verse was seen before Mikel Madhusudan Dutta of Bengal.

In the later eras of Shankaradeva, wars were described extensively. In these plays, wars were depicted in a very attractive way, so as to attract the audience. Satyendra Nath Sarma, the pioneer of Assamese dramatic literature, has mentioned that playwrights were attracted to stories of warriors, controversies, atrocities and murders (86).

The tradition of composing Ankiya drama had spread further in post S (Baishya) ankardev era. A lot of satras were established in Assam. The tradition of writing play was empowered. The play composition has grown so much that the story of the play was getting affected. Many dramatists, with the same story, composed the play by making a general change of the story. In the naming of the play also, a new name was given after general change of the first drama's name.

Ankia plays of modern era:

After the Yandabo Treaty of 1826, the rule of Assam went to the East India Company. From this time, the modern era of Assamese literature began. The British invited some Bengal people to work in Assam. These people would keep going their culture and Bengal culture got a boost in Assam. On the other hand, after 10 years of rule, the British replaced the Bengali language as the official language instead of Assamese. Due to political instability and suppression of Burmese, the people of Assam lost their self-consciousness. For this reason, Assamese considered Bengal to be advanced rather than their own and tried to emulate them. In the beginning of the English language, the Assamese aristocracy thought that it was a matter of pride to dress like the British, speak Bengali properly or wrongly. Honored people like Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, Maniam Dewan, Dinanath Bezbaruah, were attracted to the Bengali language and felt inferior about the Assamese language and culture. At that time, young Assamese patriots like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Hemachandra Barua were also attracted by English behavior (Baishya 9).

Meanwhile, the American Baptist missionaries entered Assam for the purpose of spreading religion. Seeing the condition of the Assamese people, they employed themselves in the work

of Assamese language rescue. By publishing a literary magazine called Orunodoi, They succeeded in raising the lost value of Assamese language and brought modernity in Assamese literature. Untraceable Assamese literature was reborn in a new form with Western influence.. It would not be wrong to say that the entire Assamese literature was eradicated due to the invasion of Burma. Some feature of Assamese literature survived only as Ankiya drama. During this time, the Ankiya dramas were being composed in small numbers in the shadow of Sattas and were also being performed. In this regard, Satish Bhattacharya has said that among those plays that were found in later times, some plays that were composed during that time to preserve the tradition of drama writing. This opinion is based on logic (Bhattacharya 23).

Ankiya drama has started to change in the later times of Shankardev. But its original structure was intact until then. In later times, In modern times, Bengali language and culture infiltrated Satriya culture and the Assamese drama lost its original structure. Some Ankiya Natas composed in modern times include *Subhadra Harana* of Harinandan, *Sambhar Badh* of Ramakanta, *Debasur Youdha* of Maheswardeb, *Dasarathar Sarga Gaman*, *Babhnan Yodha* of Bhairab Chandra etc.

In spite of these political events, the Burmese attacks and the British right to Assam, Ankiya drama in Brajabuli language was going on in Assam. Drama of this language was going on in the central areas of Nagoan, Tezpur etc. During this time, new plays were being made in Upper Assam, especially in Auaniati Satra and Kamalabari Satra. Assamese language was used in the plays of Auaniati instead of Brajabuli language. Kamalabari Satra composed Faujia plays by combining Bengali, Assamese, Hindi and Brajabuli languages, and later plays use only Assamese language. Tirthanath Sharma writes that the characteristics of the Bengali language were found in the lyrics of the plays of Aunati Satra. The reasons for this were that in this era, Bengali language predominated among the people. The Satradhikar of Auaniati Satra, Duttadev Goswami's mind was attracted to Bengali songs, Bengali yachts, Bengali kirtans. (Sarmah 286). Nineteenth-century theatrical stories were taken from the epic and the *Bhagavata* to other Puranas, Upanishads and Fantasies also. Dramatists began to write plays in the sense of writing plays rather than the quality of plays. Influences of Bengali language can be seen in the plays of Auaniati satra. The Plays of Aunatiati Satra were composed in

such a way, which can be useful for performing both in the modern stage and on the ground of the Namghar. Later on, such plays were composed in other satras also.

During the flourishing period of Bengali language plays in Assam, Pitambar Devgoswami, the Satraghikar of Garamur Satra, composed plays in the Assamese language, both as modern Assamese dramas and as Ankiya dramas. He composed three plays named *Ghosayatra*, *Yudhishtirar Ashwamedha Yagya* and *Ram Banbas*. It is mentioned by Devabrat Sharma that Freedom fighter and cultist Pitambar Devgoswami participated in this field and became the first playwright to write a play in Assamese for the first time. Within five years he wrote five plays for Bhaona. These plays became popular, soon after, the composition of Assamese drama spread in all directions and replaced the BanglaYatra. (Sharma 88)

There were more reasons to compose this drama in Assamese instead of Brajvali language. Assamese had become inferior in mind due to the prevalence of Bengali language in Assam. All Assamese people had forgotten the dignity of the past. For this reason, after losing autonomy, Shankaradev's plays, which were also known for the form of a great drama, started writing and acting only for enjoyment. In this context, Jatin Goswami has written that Ankiya play has the specified form of raga and tala. Many Sanskrit verses were used in this play. To be a sutradhar, who should have mastered in dance-song-music. In the villages of Assam, the meeting of people who knew the raga tala was reduced. The acting of this drama is very difficult. Sanskrit Education was reduced in modern times. It takes rehearsals for several days to perform a play, but for different reasons it became impossible to continue the practice for that long. For these reasons, the fascination for Assamese language plays was increased (79).

It was observed that in the modern era, the play's composition grew in Upper Assam and decrease in Lower Assam and at last it was disappear from there. The political instability of the region is undoubtedly the reason for stopping the drama performance in Lower Assam (Sarma 94). In Kamupiya Damodariya Sattara, Damodardeva thought that the Ankiya drama could be inconvenient in devotion, so he neither prohibited nor encouraged to practice Ankiya drama. (Sharma, Asomiya Natya Sahitya 375).

Apart from the Sankari ideals in these times, plays were made and propagated in many different forms from time to time. Dhura Nat , Faujia Nat , Yata etc. are examples of these

plays. But soon all Assamese people understood the importance of mother tongue and started composing drama in Assamese. For this reason, many plays are now composed in Assamese language and the acting of these plays is a popular medium of moral education and entertainment.

The play is being written in the satras of Assam from the time of Sankardev to the present day. However, in some satras, the play composition is stopped due to lack of playwrights. In more than half of the total satras, the play's composition is still ongoing. Currently, Brajavali language's Ankiya drama is prevalent in Nagoan, Sonitpur, Morigaon district of Assam., The practice of these plays in the Assamese language are going on in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golaghat, Majuli etc. of Upper Assam. Along with the Assamese language drama, the Brajavali language drama continues to function in the same way in these districts till date.

It is noteworthy that Anakiya plays are being translated into many languages at the present time. These unique plays are also being acted in those languages. In the year 1975, the Kamalabari satra of Assam introduced the drama *Ramvijay* in Indonesia, and the play was introduced outside the country for the first time. After this, Anakia drama continues to be performed in the country and also outside of the country..These plays have been translated into international languages such as French, English, Nepali etc., and many tribal languages like Mising, Garo, Bado, Deori Karbi etc. Now a day, all the people are being given the pleasure of Anakiya Drama in their own language. In this way, Ankiya plays were spread in the world. It is now turning into a medium of entertainment through religious worship.

## Conclusion:

Sankardev was a great playwright who used modern elements in his play. The Ankiya Nat tradition is a living tradition. The people of Assam still take pride for Sankardev and his creations. As Ankiya Drama, Sankaradeva developed all the creative arts. He taught people to dance, play drums, sing, perform. Even today, people have devotional feelings about Ankiya drama. Everyone participates in it. To get rid of problems or anyone who is suffering from a serious illness, he gives one of the plays to be performed at Namghar and bears all the costs of that play. Nowadays people also make money through Ankiya nat. Because it is not only a ritual play, but also a medium of entertainment.

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