

ANKIYA NAAT of Assam

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.

Although the plays composed by Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had received popular acceptance, the term *Ankiya Naat* was not found during Sankardeva's life time. This nomenclature gained currency in subsequent time only. Twelve such plays, scripted by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva between them are found on record. According to some *Carit Puthis* (biographies) Sankardeva started as a play-wright by planning and presenting the '*Chihna-Yatra*' and proceeded to compose a few more subsequently. The '*Chihna-Yatra*' has no written script, the written scripts of his other plays either. 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 are also known as '*Jhumur*'.

Ankiya Naat are also called as Ankiya *Bhaona* . There is no significant difference between these two terms. Generally, Naat is referred to the writer document and Bhaona is the performance of the play. Both the words are interchangeable. The Bhaona is often performed in the Namghar in a Sattrra or a village. If the given space in a Namghar being inadequate spectators make – shift arrangements (rabhaghar) are often made by extending both sides of the verandah.

The actual performance of a Bhaona is preceded by a series of rituals. Such rituals start with the very opening of a play (naatmela) at least a fortnight earlier. The opening ritual consists of a naam-kirttana and a reading of the whole play in the Namghar. A large number of people attend the ceremony. Since then the rehearsal of the play begins. Everyday a player offers a sarai (a trayful of pulses and grams) seeking blessings for his performance. The preceding day is called bar-akhara (main rehearsal) in which a full and final rehearsal of the entire play is staged which is again witnessed by a large gathering including the elders of the village who suggest tit-bits to the actors. A discussion on giving a final touch to all necessary arrangements including the rabhaghar volunteering, seating accommodation, light, costumes, cosmetics, masks, effigies and all

other accessories is also held among the participants and village youths and respective disciplines are entrusted upon responsible persons.

The day of the performance is a festive one with congregational chanting of prayers (naam-kirttana) by the village superiors. The persons playing principal roles observe fasting and seek the blessings of the holy assemblage for the smooth running of the performance and for any omission or commission.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ONE-ACT PLAYS:

Certain common and general characteristics are noticed in all one-act plays which are as follows:

- (i) The dominant role of the *Sutradhara* (interlocutor);
- (ii) Abundance of lyrical songs, slokas and *payars* (versified prayers);
- (iii) Use of Brajavali language;
- (iv) Use of versified prose; and
- (v) Dances with songs.

(i) The dominance of the Sutradhara (Interlocutor) :

The *Sutradhara* plays a significantly dominant role in performance of the *Ankiya Naat*. With a view to uplifting the spiritual level of the people in Assam through the medium of acting and to propagate the ideals of devotion to Lord Krishna among all sections of the society and also not to confine the role of *Bhaona* (plays) as only a source of public entertainment, Sankardeva introduced the *Sutradhara* as per his own imaginative power. Instead of confining the role of the *Sutradhara* within the prologue (*Purva Ranga*) itself, he has used this role as the coordinating character in the entire play, and also as the link between the play and its audience. In addition, depending on time and place of the story, the *Sutradhara* is used to ensure the un-interrupted progress of the play. Sankardeva has presented this character as the director of the play as well. During the course of the prologue, the *Sutradhara* performs as a singing dancer and also as an appraiser besides announcing the theme of the play to the audience.

In *Ankiya Bhaona* the part played by the *Sutradhara* mainly includes the following aspects:

- (1) *Nandi*: This relates to singing in praise of the deity or the king who happens to be the principal character of the play.
- (2) *Announcer*: While in conversation with the *Sangi* (an associate character) the title of the play and its synopsis are announced by him to the audience.
- (3) Introduces the hero and other characters to the audience, while they appear on the stage, by way of dancing and singing.
- (4) He explains to the audience the scenes of the play that will be enacted serially and without interruptions. In that process he recites the *slokas* in Sanskrit, sings in Brajvali, prays and narrates descriptions in a very attractive, yet serious way. But he does not sing songs pertaining to personal sorrows and pleasures of the characters.
- (5) As done by the prompter in the modern plays, the *Sutradhara* indicates the time when a character has to deliver his or her dialogue on the stage.
- (6) He gives a description of the scenes or events that cannot be shown on the stage, so that the audience could get a clear idea of such events.
- (7) He leads the entire group of artists in singing the *Muktimangal a Bhatima* (the concluding prayer in verse) at the end of the play.

(ii) Abundance of lyrical songs, Slokas and Payars :

In an *Ankiya Naat* one can find plenty of songs (*geets*), dances and music. The staging of such a play becomes complete only in coordinated display of all these ingredients. Songs based on classical *ragas* (modes) are found from the beginning to the end. Body gestures of different limbs are applied by the characters to denote such things or actions that cannot be shown on the stage. Like the *Bhotimas* (a kind of devotional and adoration songs) the recitations too are a kind of songs in practice. On most occasions, such songs and recitations are accompanied with dances. This confirms that staging of an *Ankiya Naat* without dances is never considered complete. Needless to say that such songs and dances are always accompanied with instrumental music.

Apart from the *Sutradhara* the other characters also come to the stage in dancing styles only. Instruments, such as *Khols* (long shaped drums), *Taals* (cymbals), developed by Sankardeva and used for the *Nrittya* (Dance) became integral parts of the *Ankiya Naat* subsequently.

Not only the prologue and the concluding part, but the entire course of the play also progresses through lyrical songs. The audience can easily understand the scenes even if the dialogues are given a miss. They do not find any problem in understanding the theme of the play as well as the various phases through which the characters

perform; the mental state and other co-related stages through which the players proceed towards the final course of the play. All throughout the play, the events to come are indicated at the beginning through *slokas* and songs (*geets*) which the author takes recourse to. In the course of the play too, songs are presented to show the various stages of troubles and emotional moments which the characters may have to pass through. The *Ankiya Naat* have four kind of songs:

- (i) Devotional- like the *Bhotimas*.
- (ii) The musical modes- like *ragas* (modes) and *talas* (measures) in which a song is presented.
- (iii) Descriptive rhymes and metric prayers (*chapays*) and
- (iv) Songs presented during entry of the characters into the stage, describing their physical shapes, gestures, and movements.

The literary worth of these songs is no less than their musical value. Contemplative meters, alliteration, embellishment, rhymes, figures of speech and pleasant descriptions and thought-provoking perceptions are all mingled in such songs (*geets*) that make them really melodious. They present the clear picture of the things and situations which these songs are used to depict.

As already mentioned, all such scenes, events, situations and place of events which cannot be performed on the stage are left to the *Sutradhara* to describe through songs and gestures for the audience to perceive correctly. Also, as stated before, the use of Brajavali is another distinct element of the *Ankiya Naat*. Of course, the use of Brajavali throughout the play is found in the plays composed by Sankardeva only. Its use, after Sankardeva, started to decline. Even in the plays composed by Madhavdeva use of colloquial language outpaced Brajavali to a great extent.

(iii) The use of Brajavali Language :

Another specific characteristics is the use of Brajavali language in the *Ankiya Naat*. While this language in Assamese is called 'Brajavali', there is a similar language in Bengali known as 'Brajabuli' but they are not the same. It is spoken language prevailed in Mithila region during 14th & 15th Century AD. The Vaishnavite poets of mediaeval era adding their own colloquial words and changing the form of the words here and there in those used by poet Vidyapati in his books, the poets in subsequent times laid the foundation of this language. As in the case of *Pali* used by the Buddhists, which is not a specific literary form or a language of any particular region, but was created to be understood easily by all sections of the people, so was the case of Brajavali too. Again, as in *Pali*, which was created based on the language spoken in Magadha region with

some changes mutatis mutandis to include words spoken in other regions too, the Brajavali language was also created mixing Maithili and Awahatti words with those of the Assamese language in its modes and style of spoken and written expressions. However, some slight influence of Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Brajabhasa (Hindi as spoken in Western parts of U.P.) is also noticed in Brajavali language, used by Mahapurush in their writings. Similarly, verbs, adverbs and pronouns used in the *Ankiya Naat* are also found in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Brajabhasa too with slight variation in forms. For instance, we can point to words like ‘*kabahu*’, ‘*yaker*’, ‘*yaise*’, ‘*kaise*’, ‘*yasu*’, ‘*mohi*’, ‘*hoi*’ which are found in Maithili, Awadhi and Brajabhasa too. This might be due to the impact of the year-long pilgrimages undertaken by the Mahapurush to such regions. The sentences quoted in verbatim bellow will give an idea of the type of amalgamation that Maithili has had with the Assamese Brajavali language:

“He’ parama Iswara, tohari pada prahare swamimari yaye. Ihaka dosha bareka marasaGosain. Tohari aagu khudra patanga.Ihaka mari kona yasa sadhaba. Yata lagemane sasti pawala.” *-Kaliya Daman*

[Oh God, our husband is going to die due to your kicks. Kindly pardon him for this time. He is a small fly in front of you, what glory will you achieve by killing him? He has got enough punishment.]

Again,

“Hamo kata tapa kariya devaka bare briddha bayase krishnaka putra pawalo. Sehi prana putra brikshya pariya kshyanike mari yaya; Gosainra Barase erawalla. Toho Kinimitte manusa bheli; rakshyasito adhika bheli; apona putraka khaite sawala. Krishnaka nakhai hamako khawa” *-‘Arjun Bhanjan’*

[After a lot of penance, and with the blessings from the God, I have got Krishna as my son at this advanced age. That son, dearer than my life, was going to die in a moment due to falling of the tree. He escaped from death only because of

divine blessing. Why have you become a woman? You are worse than a titan; you want to eat your own son! Eat my flesh in place of Krishna.']

(iv) Use of rhetoric prose :

The fourth distinct peculiarity of an *Ankiya Naat* is its versified prose. Its use in Sankardeva's plays is the first instance of such type of prose found in Assamese literature. However, it does not represent the pure Assamese prosy form. The pure form of Assamese prose in proper shape is found only in the writings of Baikuntha Nath Bhagawat Bhattacharya (Bhattadeva) which became the sole medium of producing perfect prosy writings. Mahapurush (Sankardeva) had perhaps used prosy dialogue in his plays as found in the north Indian languages. Vidyapati and play-wrights such as Govinda, Umapati etc. of Maithili had composed songs only in Maithili language, while they used Sanskrit or Prakrit in the dialogues. Sankardeva had shown great pioneering traits by composing songs and dialogues in the regional language.

But this form of prose follows a style different from the spoken one. For this reason, it should be termed a rhetoric or versified form only. Here, it may be kept in mind that the *Sutradhara* and other characters too deliver their dialogues in rhetoric mode even though composed in the prosy form. In the prosy sentences used in the plays, the harmony 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 found in the plays which is very much different from the commonly used prose. The excerpts quoted below are examples of the harmonious application of the above stated factors distinctly found in the prose used in the plays.

“Srikrishna Rukminika bhakati basya huya bibidha bihar madana khela lila-keli kautuka kariya Rajakumarika parama manorath purala. Se' Nripatinandinika mahodaya millala. Jagataka Param-a Guru Narayana, tanikara parama soubhyagini bhela. Navatarani Padmini sata-sahasra pawala. Indrakajata Sampatti nija mandire millala. Srikrishna charanapankaja paramanande paricharya kare sarbatha rahal” -(Rukmini Haran)

[Being pleased with Rukmini's devotion, Lord Krishna played various forms of love sports with the princess and fully satisfied her desire. The princess felt greatly honoured and extremely fortunate to be tied with the God of the universe. She received thousands of newly blossomed lotus as well as the fortunes of Indra in her own temple. She kept on serving at Krishna's lotus like feet all along very gladly.]

Needless to say that spreading devotional ideal is the main objective of the *Ankiya Naat*. Therefore, the play-wrights have tried their level best to focus the devotion to Krishna through various angles of their plays. Devotional ideal is another characteristic of the *Ankiya Naat* that leads to the path of Bhakti. The particular language is used to give a divine touch to all characters of Naat. Brajavali created a different environment in a higher pedestal than one provided by colloquial dialects of that period. Even though they have remained steadfast in focusing this aspect, the writers have not ignored the amusement side too. They have maintained a balance between the devotional aspect and the amusement factor judiciously, and have, thus, maintained an equilibrium between high ideals of the dramatic creation or literary characteristics on one hand, and religious propagation on the other. Thus, the *Ankiya Naat* have become a symbol of lofty ideals as much as high standard of Assamese dramatic literature as a result thereof.

(v) Music and Dance :

The *Ankiya Naat* do not aim at focusing their characters through dialogues unlike the western plays. Nor do they aim at projecting the variegated picture of life and the world either. They intend to create an impact of devotional sentiment on the minds of the audience through dances, songs and acting which depict the deeds of the God in His various incarnations. Therefore, these plays give preference to devotional sentiment over actual dramatic flavor. By generating devotional sentiment (*Bhakti Rasa*, the principal aim of the *Ankiya Naat*) rather than a dramatic suspense or flavor, the audience is taken to a spiritual environment. The actions, creation of conflicts between characters etc are of secondary importance. However, creation of certain characters is indispensable in order to present the divine deeds and make them understandable and entertaining to the audience. In that process, certain scenes of conflicts and clashes have also been added in the plays without which it would be difficult to attract the audience. Since not much importance is given on such conflicts or discords, the *Ankiya Naat* are virtually devoid of serious conflicts. Some sort of ostensible clashes are seen in '*Rukmini Haran*', '*Parijat Haran*' and the '*Ram Vijoy*' *Naat* but these are not an integral part of those plays. On the other hand, there are practically no clash or conflict in '*Patni Prasad*', '*Keli Gopal*' and also in the Madhavdeva's *Jhumuras*. We can find only a semblance of discord in those plays. It is for this reason, we notice only the external form of a drama in the *Ankiya Naat* which are bereft of vital dramatic elements. Descriptive coherence of speech or dialogue and abundance of songs may create a contemplative situation only but never any conative dramatic environment.

Being required to retain the mythological stories in their un-deviated form, the authors of the *Ankiya Naat* have not tried to present a separate identity to the characters, nor their nature as per variation in situations. Although human nature and behaviors may be noticed in them, they are never human beings; they are either gods or demons even though some sorts of human nature and behaviors are evident in them. Therefore, the characters in the plays are not dynamic, but static. The Vaishnavite poets clearly aimed at propagating the deeds of Lord Krishna and make the people sing and listen to his glories. Their objective is mainly to demonstrate devotional sentiment and the sport of waves for the audience to relish. Those poets did not aim at thickening the dramatic sentiment for the audience to enjoy. Neither did they emphasize the importance of portraying the characters and variegation of the story. Although most of play-wrights have hesitated to take full liberty to portray the characters somewhat differently from their descriptions found in the original stories, some very talented authors have been able to present their characters brightly within the limited scope available to them. For instance, Sankardeva has succeeded to portray lively characters like Satyabhama, Narada, Parasuram while Madhavdeva has shown child Krishna with similar liveliness. The characters; such as Madanamanjari, Lilavati, Kanakavati etc. who are either friends of Sita or Rukmini, and the *Bhats* (panegyrists) like Haridas Surabhi, Vedanidhi Bipra etc are Mahapurusa's own creations.

2. THE PECULIARITIES OF SANKARDEVA'S PLAYS:

Certain peculiarities are commonly found in the plays of Mahapurusa Srimanta Sankardeva which are as follows:

- (a) Most of his plays are based on Tenth Part of the *Bhagawat*. Only '*Ram Vijoy*' has been based on the '*Ramayana*'.
- (b) In most cases he has started his plays with a couple of *slokas* (hymns); one of them is based on a meter called '*Sardul Vikririti*' (a kind of classical meter).
- (c) We find two *Bhotimas* (songs praising the God), in most of his dramas except in the '*Ram Bijoy*' and the '*Rukmini Haran*' each of which contains four such *Bhotimas*.
- (d) The language of his plays is very rich in literary beauty. Sankardeva has made it most interesting and enjoyable, by his judicious use of prosodies and occasionally with a local touch as and when he considered necessary.
- (e) In certain cases similar descriptions of characters and environments are noticed in his plays. Sita and Rukmini, for instance, have been described almost in identical fashions.

- (f) Again, similarity in the behaviors of the Kings towards their rivals at the sight of the beauty of the heroine is found in his plays. Such scenes are found in the *Ram Bijoy* and the '*Rukmini Haran*' Naat.
- (g) Sankardeva applies generally short versified meters in the songs of adoration composed in Sanskrit.
- (h) He has portrayed Lord Krishna (Lord Rama in *Ram Bijoy*) as the hero of his plays where he has attempted to focus the human characteristics of the heroes who stun the human beings with their natural and supernatural acts.
- (i) Although we find elements like sexual sentiment, heroism, dreadfulness, tragedies etc in Sankardeva's plays, he mainly devotes to propagate devotional sentiment only through his dramatic works. Even though sexual sentiment has a significant place in his plays like '*Keli Gopal*' '*Rukmini Haron*' and the '*Ram Bijoy*', Sankardeva has succeeded in converting it to devotional sentiment finally.
- (j) He has mostly taken recourse to a character called '*Bhaat*' (panegyrist) to describe amorous attraction between the hero and the heroine and their union. Such characters have been given a prominent role in the *Ram Vijoy*' and the '*Rukmini Haron*' Naat.
- (k) One must acknowledge the unique impact of the dramatic songs which is primarily the reason behind the attraction of Sankardeva's plays. Such impact is more prominent in the '*Keli Gopal*' play.

3. SANSKRIT DRAMAS AND ANKIYA NAAT:

While discussing about styles and usages of the *Ankiya Naat* one has to consider their similarities and differences with the dramatic traditions of the Sanskrit plays. In this context, noted writer Kaliram Medhi had mentioned in details in the fore-words of his compilation of '*Ankiya Naat* titled '*Ankawali*'. Written in English, the preface of this book has indicated the main similarities found between the Sanskrit plays and the *Ankiya Naat*. Writer Medhi had mainly mentioned about the similes noticed in the texts of the plays. Besides these, we can also point to the directions prescribed in the '*Natya Sastra*' authored by sage Bharat Muni, in context of acting and dancing mentioned in the prologues. These directions are followed by several regional dramatic institutions, such as '*Kathakali*' and '*Kuriyattam*' of Kerala and '*Yakshya Gan*' in Andhra and Tamilnadu. Sankardeva has applied such prologues in his plays with his extra-ordinary imaginative power. Prologues containing *Gayan-Bayan* (songs with instrumental music) and also different forms of instrumental plays (*Dhemalis*) can be called the *Purbaranga* (prologue) of the *Ankiya Naat*. Besides this, *Gyan-Bayan* accompanied with *Khols* (long

shaped drums), *Taals* (cymbals), *Daba* (a large variety of drum) and *Kali* (clarion) etc are together a great dramatic institution by themselves.

In the beginning of his preface, writer Medhi has mentioned about the similarities between prologues in Sanskrit dramas and those found in the *Ankiya Naat*. Prologue (*purbaranga*) means the programmers preceding commencement 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 *Nandigeet* (adoration song by the *Sutradhara*). The part preceding the *Nandigeet* is called 'Purbarang' (prologue). Before commencement of an Assamese One-act play, a dramatic environment 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* all of which are different forms of sports with music and instruments. Then, the *Sutradhara* enters the stage and begins his dancing. The use of the term *Dhemali* instead of *Purbarang* should be carefully noted. The dances performed by the musicians playing *khols* (a kind of long shaped drums) and *Taals* (cymbals) are called 'Dhemali', the forms of which are determined by the foot-work, body movements and hand gestures of the artists. In *Dhemalis*, dances push the songs to the back seat. The strokes on the *Khols* (drums) vary as per foot-work and hand gestures of the drum beaters (*bayans*). Since these prologues are performed with dances and gestures, they are called the *Dhemalis* meaning sports. The use of the word 'Rang-Dhemali' in our language is understood easily by all. The word 'Rang' has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Ranga' which means acting. Clubbing *Rang* with *Dhemali*, the word *Rang-Dhemali* has been coined in our language as in the compounds words like 'Kaj-Karma', 'Hat-Bazar' etc. The origin of 'Dhemali' is 'Dhab' which implies movement; so, it is called a *Dhemali* which implies movements and gestures. We do not find acting in *Dhemalis* of *Ankiya Bhaonas*, but there are body movements and gestures in dances performed in a cyclic style. As such, the use of the word *Dhemali* appears to be quite appropriate. In northern India, dances and songs presented in the *Holi* festival are called *Dhamars* or *Dhamals*. A kind of songs sung in a particular mode called 'Geya' is also known as 'Dhamar'. But their relation with the *Dhemali* played in *Ankiya Bhaonas* cannot be established. In short, *Dhemalis* mean such actions which demonstrate physical movements and gestures. In the sports played by the children we find enough body movements in their races, for instance. Dancing by the *Sutradhara* (interlocutor) while singing *Nandi* and *Bhotimas* in the *Ankiya Bhaonas* after every stage is performed traditionally.

The impact of Sanskrit plays is 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 conclusion of the play. As in the Sanskrit plays, we find two *Nandi Slokas* in the Assamese *Ankiya Naat*, particularly in those composed by Sankardeva. In the first *Sloka*, Lord *Krishna* (Lord Rama in *Ram Bijoy*) is adored while the second one is presented giving a brief account of the play's theme. This *Nandi Sloka* reflects the spiritual aim contained in the play.

The other principal connective of *Ankiya Naat* with the Sanskrit traditions and similes is the *Sutradhara*. This character, which plays a vital and dominant role in the *Ankiya Naat* has been created in line with the one found in the Sanskrit plays, as well as in the '*Natya Sastra*' of Bharat Muni). As in the Sanskrit dramas, the theme of the play in *Ankiya Naat* is explained to the audience by the *Sutradhara* on the stage, through *Nandi geets*, *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 stage in Sanskrit dramas as the narrator of the events in the play.

Be it in accordance with the Sanskrit plays or with the specific objective of propagating devotional ideals as the case may be, Sankardeva concludes his *Naat* with a *Muktimangal* in the same way as '*Bharat Bakya*' (message given by Bharat Muni) in the Sanskrit plays. In Sanskrit dramas, the principal character recites the '*Bharat Bakya*' praying for well-being of the audience, while in the *Ankiya Naat* the *Sutradhara* leads the entire group of artists in presenting '*Muktimangal*' pleading God for the welfare of the entire people of the society as a whole in their present and subsequent births.

In the performing of *Ankiya Bhaona* too, the play-wrights use gestures, attires, and other required accessories (*Aharya*) and also focus on devoted acting. Although, all the nine forms of literary sentiments (*Nava-Rasa*) are found in different *Ankiya Naat*, yet all such sentiments are mingled finally in devotional sentiment only.

As per the *Natya Sastra*, acting is based on four elements, i.e. physical movement and gestures expressing thought-provoking sentiments and gestures like smiles, laughs and tears; and '*Aharya*' (costumes, cosmetics and make-ups etc). Although all these four elements are there in the *Ankiya Naat* too, we do not find symbolic gestures to express any situation or thought there. The characters, however, take recourse to physical or body movements, to indicate the realistic substance of the events. Use of such movements and gestures are readily found in the dances of *Sutradhara*. The use of colour and masks has a specific role in such plays. It appears that the *Ankiya Bhaona* strictly follow the directions mentioned in the *Natya Sastra* in this

context. In the Sanskrit plays, scenes or events not practicable to be shown on stage are left to the audience to conceive or realize from descriptive narrations. In the *Ankiya Naat*, scenes, not practicable or worthy of showing on the stage, are left to the *Sutradhara* to narrate and explain to the audience.

Also, as in the Sanskrit dramas, where besides Sanskrit, Prakrit and its words in distorted forms are also used, the writers of *Ankiya Naat* too use Sanskrit and Brajavali languages besides Assamese in most cases.

Invariable use of versified prose and songs are also found in *Ankiya Naat*, as in their Sanskrit counter parts, like voices from the Heaven heard in the plays, mainly in the dialogues of the *Sutradhara*, where he says, “*Akaxe Deva Dundubhi Bajata*” (divine beats are heard from the Heaven) found in the prologue. Such voices are sometimes found in main course of the plays too.

4. IMPACT ON SOCIO-RELIGIOUS LIFE:

The main objective of *Ankiya Bhaona* is to attract the audience to religious and devotional aspect by glorifying the Almighty and also the gods and the goddesses projecting their deeds through visual media. Secondly, they also aim at entertaining the people. In medieval Europe, certain theatrical institutions had been established, mainly concerning the Church. The dramas staged there were one-sided and religion oriented. Those were classified into three categories- mystic plays, miracle plays and moral plays. In the first two categories of plays mystical deeds of Lord Jesus and the Apostles were shown while in the third category the human personality and transitivity and their actions and reactions in minds were displayed. In the initial stage, the Church had not taken these shows favourably. The conservative Churches were the reason behind the demise of the Roman theatre. But subsequently, the Church started to relent indirectly, if not directly, and allowed staging of dramas based upon stories relating to Lord Christ and Genesis of the Bible, within the Church campus but not inside the Church. Those theatrical performances provided exquisite amusement to the audience and helped a lot in propagating Christianity. In course of time, the Church Fathers started to lose their grip on such theatres. They began to be staged on the cross-roads and in places of public gatherings. As mobile stages were created on wheel cart and the green-rooms beneath such carts, these theatres were a source of amusement to the audience. The audience were stunned at the appearance of the followers of the *Satan* with dreadful masks, or the angels with beautiful wings, on the stage. These theatrical institutions subsequently gave birth to traditional plays in due course of time.

The Assamese *Ankiya Naat* too is primarily a religious institution. Besides entertaining the audience, the *Bhaona* attracted their minds towards the Vaishnavite Bhagawati *Dharma* (religious faith). Even though this institution was used as a channel to propagate religious faith, the authors did never overlook the aspects like proper costumes, accessories, equipment and conducive arrangement required for their perfectly faultless presentation. Because of this reason, the *Ankiya Naat* began to be highly appreciated as an artful manifestation.

Artists and artisans were coming up in various places to produce equipment, accessories, cosmetics, masks, costumes and musical instruments and such other things as may be required in staging of the plays. The skills of artisans passed on to generation creating awareness for economic opportunities. Even in present day scenario, the artifacts developed around *Ankiya Naat* provides sources of earning to some people in the society. Thus, this institution succeeded in guiding the society through a truly decent path. Based on this institution, musical groups of *Gayan-Bayan* (instrument players and singers) began to spring up in nooks and corners of the villages and they started practicing these arts on regular basis. Thus, through this institution, the good-will and friendly ties flourished among different sections in the society and the people were inspired to work in a spirit of co-operation and mutual understanding. Witnessing on the stage, the triumph of virtue over the evil forces as well as the supernatural feats of the divine powers, the people became inclined to believe in religion and the God. Thus, they enhanced their spiritual standard to a large extent.

5. THE PLAYS COMPOSED BY MADHAVDEVA:

Mahapurush Madhavdeva, following his mentor's example, is known to have composed six one-act plays. However, it is suspected that some subsequent writers wrote some more plays in his name. The critics are all one in their opinion that the plays '*Chor-Dhara*', '*Pimpara Guchuwa*', '*Bhojan Behar*', '*Arjun Bhanjan*' and '*Bhumi Letowa*' were definitely composed by Madhavdeva, but the sixth one has not been ascertained yet. As per some biographies written subsequently, Madhavdeva had also composed '*Ram Yatra*' and '*Govardhan Yatra*' and performed their staging as well. The play '*Ram Yatra*' was too lengthy and not suitable for staging and hence it was destroyed as mentioned in the '*Katha Guru Carit*'. But, the biography is silent about the fate of '*Govardhan Yatra*'. As mentioned in the biography, Madhavdeva, in compliance with the request of *Vishnu Ata*, had composed the play '*Nrisinh Yatra*' and performed it on the stage playing himself the title role. Although, not much is known whether he had himself composed this play or done it by another writer and got it staged, yet it will not

be wrong to presume that Madhavdeva was the actual author of this play. The '*Nrisinh Yatra*' written by Daitari Thakur, was composed only after era Madhavdeva .

The doubtful plays do not have '*Nandi*' nor any *sloka* in the middle and in the concluding parts either. But the ones free from any shade of doubt have begun with the '*Nandi Slokas*'. In fact, commencing the play with *Nandi Sloka* has been followed traditionally in the same way as in the Sanskrit plays. Again, Radha has been portrayed as the principal female character in '*Bhusan Haran*' '*Rass Jhumura*' and '*Kotora Khela*' although *Radha* has no place in the *Mahapuruxia* religious faith; nor there is any scope of worshipping *Radha* and *Krishna* together. For this reason, some of the critics do not subscribe to the theory of *Madhavdeva's* giving *Radha* a place in his plays. The language of these plays too are not very refined at times. Although five of the *geets* (songs) found in those plays are included in the *Bor-Geets* of *Madhavdeva's* composition, many critics opine otherwise. In '*Rash Jhumura*', depicting *Radha* as the heroine, the composer has shown the sexual sentiment of love. Since Sankardeva had already composed a play on the same subject, the possibility of writing another play by Madhavdeva on the same theme appears very remote. While composing '*Rash Kriya*'. Sankardeva did not deviate from the descriptions found in the '*Bhagawata*'. However, the '*Rash Jhumura*' does not present full descriptions of '*Rash Kriya*' as found in the '*Bhagawata*, where *Radha* has not been portrayed as a heroine. In the play '*Kotora Khela*', the last two lyrics are, of course, compositions of Madhavdeva; but there is enough scope to doubt about the author of the first few songs. The subject materials of the play do not belong to the *Bhagawata*, but appear to have been taken from *Dan-Khanda*' and '*Nouka Khanda*' etc. showing love affairs between *Radha* and *Krishna*, as envisaged in '*Sri Krishna Kirtan*' composed by the *Vaishnav* writer of Gouda in Bengal.

6. CLASSIFICATIONS OF PLAYS :

The plays composed by Mahapurush Sankardeva are known as '*Yatras*' or '*Ankiya Naat*' but with the exception of '*Arjun Bhanjan*' all other plays of Madhavdeva are called '*Jhumuras*'. The difference between a *Nat* or *Yatra* and a *Jhumura* can be distinguished from Arjun Bhanjan getting the status of a drama. In this play, Madhavdeva has shown, a complete story as in the plays of Sankardeva's composition. But on the other hand, in '*Chor Dhara*', '*Pimpara Guchuwa*', '*Bhumi Letowa*' and '*Bhojan Behar*' composed by Madhavdeva, a complete story is absent. Such plays based on part of a story, or a minor event, are called '*Jhumura's*'. In the book titled '*Sangeet Damodar*' there is mention about '*Jhumur*' as a *Raaga* (a musical mode) depicting sexual passion and its symptom: "*Prayah Sringara-bahula Madhavika Madhura Mriduh. Ekaika Jhumuri Loke Barnanadi Niyamejjita*". The dance performed by the woman in Santhal

Paraganas of present day Jharkhand (Choatal – Tribe) in a cyclic fashion or followed one by the other, is known as '*Jhumur*'. A kind of song called '*Jhumur*' is also found in northern India including a dance called Jhumuri in Mithila. In ancient Assamese literature the use of an eight-lettered rhyme is found where each line has eight letters, for which the lines are short in length. Perhaps for this reason, the short plays of Madhavdeva are called the '*Jhumuras*'. The dominance of female characters in such songs is evident in '*Jhumur*', or '*Jhumura*' mentioned in the phrases of words like '*yuvatiyutha sata gayata Jhumuri*' found in '*Padakalpataru*' (a collection of Bengali Vaishnavite poems). As such, the relation of women with *Jhumur* dance and *Jhumura* songs is intimately close.

Madhavdeva, during his lifetime, had never used the word '*Jhumura*' in any of his plays. Perhaps, the author of the '*Rash Jhumura*' had applied this word in his writings after Madhavdeva's demise. It is a matter of some doubt if Madhavdeva was or was not the author of '*Rash Jhumura*'. '*Rash Jhumura*' as a dance is still performed in the Kamalabari Sattrra and Garamur Sattrra of Majuli.. The use of *Jhumura* is found in the biography titled '*Sankardeva and Madhavdeva*' written by Daitari Thakur. Yet all said and done, it can, however, be assumed that the name '*Jhumura*' was coined in post-Madhavdeva era. Probably the word gained currency from seventeenth century onwards.

The plays composed by Mahapurush Sankardeva are based on plots taken from *Puranas* with a lot of ostensible conflicts in those plays, though not essentially very deep. But, plays composed by Madhavdeva are not based on such full mythological stories or sub-stories. Hence, the scope of conflicts are very limited in his plays. These plays are mainly based on some naughty deeds of Lord Krishna during his childhood days at certain specific times. These are of events of very short durations. Each of these plays has been based on particular situations having no scope of developing a story. Because of such factors, the dramatic conflicts in these plays appear to be comparatively light and shallow.

Performance of Bhaona is a community task with satisfaction of participants in their spiritual endeavor. Mahapurush Sankardeva laid the foundation of Assamese society by perfectly bringing the local artifacts and culture into the spiritual path of Vaishnavism. The devotional and ritualistic aspects of the performance completes the life of the villagers of Assam without the need for arduous 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.

This article is compiled mainly with the help of following references.

Dr. Satyendra Nath Sharma "Ásomiya Natya Sahitya"(2013), Saumar Prakash, Guwahati

Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, 'Bhaona': "The Traditional Vaishnavite Theatre".

Sh. Tulshi Narayan Mahanta of Sri Sri Thakarial Sattrra has translated the article from Assamese language to English with great efforts.