

# Assamese *Bhaona*: A Cultural Appraisal

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**Abstract:** Sankaradeva's created *Bhaona* is the soul of Assamese society that holds the identity of the community. *Bhaona* as part of folk performing arts is the combination of acting, music and musical instruments. *Ankiya nat Bhaona* was the original form of *Bhaona* which has been appeared in the form of *Matribhashar Bhaona* in this contemporary time. There is a continuous effort to establish *Bhaona* in the world platform for which several *Bhaona* competitions are organized. At the same time we cannot ignore the negative side of the naive appreciation of such kinds of competitions. It will be worth saying that organizing of *Bhaona* competition by taking care of its authenticity can bring constructive cultural change to the tradition.

**Key words:** Folk performing art, *Bhaona*, *Matribhashar Bhaona*, Authenticity.

## 0.0 Introduction

*Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona* are the greatest contributions to the Assamese culture by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva. Being the part of folk performing arts *Bhaona* fulfills devotional purpose and folk amusement of Assamese people. Therefore it has a universal appeal in the culture and society of Assam. Initially the performances of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva's created *Ankiya Nats* were only known as *Bhaona*. The meaning has been extended in present days, therefore performances of Assamese devotional *nats* written after Sankaradeva and Madhabadeva are also known as *Bhaona*.<sup>1</sup>

*Bhaona* was used by Sankaradeva as vehicle to propagate Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. His experiences of different folk theatres like *Ramleela*, *Rashleela*, *Kathakoli* etc. inspired him to create *Bhaona*.<sup>2</sup> "Chinayatra" was his first *nat* (play). *China* means the recitation of the narrative through pictures and *Yatra* means a special kind of folk drama of that period. This "Chinayatra" resembles to Puppet show of his contemporary times. "Patni Prasad", "Parijat Haran", "Kaliya Daman", "Keli Gopal", "Rukmini Haran" and "Rama Vijay" are his six *Ankiya nats*. His disciple Madhavadeva too simultaneously wrote many *Ankiya nats*. These plays were performed to spread the sense of devotion and core of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. All these plays were written in Brajavali language. Now a day many plays of *Bhaona* are written in Assamese language and it has gained immense popularity. Many of the plays are translated to English language too.

<sup>1</sup> Barua, Prahlad Kumar, *Bhaona Samikhya*, P.29

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P.90

## 0.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study intends to-

- a. examine the position and significance of *Bhaona* in Assamese society
- b. analyse the changes in *Bhaona* performance
- c. examine the role of *Bhaona* competition to maintain the tradition of the performance

## 0.2 Significance of the study

This study has growing importance to keep Assamese *Bhaona* alive in Assamese culture. It can also make Assamese people aware about their unique identity where they have responsibility to keep Assamese culture vibrant.

## 0.3 Methods of the Study:

This study is guided by textual analysis in general. In order to observe the changes come to *Bhaona*, the study is informed by comparative method.

## 1.0 Elements of *Bhaona*

*Bhaona* is the composition of songs, dance, acting and musical instruments. These were included to this performance based on unique experiences of Sankaradeva during his pilgrimage.

## 1.1 Songs of *Bhaona*

Songs play an important role in *Ankiya Bhaona*. These are classical songs close to *Bargeet*, *Bhatima* etc. But in the days of *Assamese Bhaona* or *Matribhashar Bhaona* the vivid side of these songs is often ignored. These are given very less importance except the *Nandi geet* in *Suhai raga* performed by the *Sutradhara* and the *geet* in *Sindhura raga* performed during the entrance of *Krishna*. The songs of *Bhaona* in present days are close to the songs of *Dhura Bhaona*. This degradation of the songs has threatened the trend of Indian classical music continued through *Ankiya Bhaona*.

## 1.2 Dance

Dance plays a dominant role in Sankaradeva's *Ankiya nats*. All characters enter and depart through lyrical steps in specific *raga* and *taala*. The dance of the *Sutradhara* is basically *Satriya*. But the change in *Matribhashar Bhaona* does not let the dance of *Sutradhara* to be confined in *Satriya*. Even the *Gayana-Bayana* performs several foot works like *Sahini*, *Dhemali* etc. before the actual performance.

## 1.3 Characters of *Bhaona*

*Sutradhara* plays major role in *Ankiya Bhaona*. He starts the play and stays throughout the play. He reads *Nandi Sloka*. *Sutradhara* directs all characters of the *Bhaona*. At the end of the *Bhaona* *Sutradhara* directs to dance the main characters in the *taala* of *Kharman*. The play ends with *Mukti Mangala Bhatima*.

Apart from the main characters like *Vishnu*, *Krishna* and other minor roles, the *Gyana-Bayana* plays an important role in *Bhaona*. *Gayana* are the singers and *Bayanas* are those who play *khol*(drum), *taal*(cymbol) etc. The performance of the *Gyana-Bayana* is known as the *Purvaranga*. Another name of *Purvaranga* is *Ganika*. In *Purvaranga* various types of *Dhemalis* are used. Originally *Gayana-Bayana* continued for two or three hours, but now it is limited to fifteen or twenty minutes.

#### 1.4 Musical Instruments

Sankaradeva is remembered for his contribution in the field of musical instruments. He has created *Khol* for playing in *Bhaona*. He also included *Bhortal* in Assamese musical instruments.

This new invention had a bright impact in case of bell metal crafts. On the otherhand his intervention helped to enhance the social dignity of the *Musiar* class who were associated with remedial actions of these musical instruments.

#### 1.5 Costume

The performers or actors of *Bhaona* generally used the costumes which were available in their villages. The actors used paints for their makeup, befitting their roles. Earlier though performers used *hengul* (cinnabar) and *haital* (yellow orpiment), now a day the professional performers use artificial and easily available makeup.

#### 2.0 Changes in *Bhaona*

The *Ankiya Bhaona* has gone through several changes in the form of *Matribhashar Bhaona*. The dominant role of *Sutradhara* and the music has been replaced by attractive dialogues in the *Matribhashar Bhaona*. The makeup of the performers has been taken place by artificial colors. Similarly, the costumes of the performers have lost its folk essence and become modernized. Therefore, local stores have got a great opportunity to sell all necessary equipments to the performers.

The *Bhaona* has made its way to constructed stage from *Namghar* and *Satra*. Therefore, it has come out from several limitations. The roles of females have been played by female members today whereas in earlier characters were played only by the male members of our society. They prefer to have stylized ornaments instead of traditional ornaments. The place of the performance is also decorated with colourful light and traditional lightening is mostly avoided. All changes are made according to the demand of the audiences so that it can attain mass appeal.

In respect to the role of *Gayana-Bayana*, various *Dhemalis* were performed in *Ankiya Bhaona*. *Dhemali* is also known as *Sahini*.e.g. *Boha Sahini*, *Utha Sahini*, *Dhumuhi* or *Dhumuri*, *Na Dhemali*, *Bar Dhemali*, *Rag Dhemali* and *Suor Dhemali* or *Saru Dhemali*. In *Na Dhemali*, there are nine types of *Xosar* and in *Bar Dhemali* seven types of *Xasar* are used. The use of seven *Xasar* indicates the path of *Sapta-Vaikuntha* paintings of Srimanta Sankaradeva. At the end of the *Gayana-Bayana* they use the *Guru-ghat*. All of these represent the whole

*Purvaranga*. But now a day this complete form of *Gayana-Bayana* is not found in the *Matribhashar Bhaona*. In earlier time, these types of *Dhemalis* were repeated three or four times. But repetition is not there in today's *Bhaona*. Within a short span of time the foot and hand postures of the *Gayana-Bayana* attract the audiences. On the otherhand the songs in different *ragas* and *taals* are also influenced by many folk songs in case of tunes in today's *Bhaona*.

The evolution in *Ankiya Bhaona* has created the *Matribhashar Bhaona*. The classical tradition always has the tendency to move towards folk tradition. Accordingly, *Bhaona* has moved to a folk tradition and attained popularity both in rural and urban areas. At the same time too much of ignorance towards the classical or *Sastric* rules associated with *Bhaona* has threatened the authenticity of the Sankaradeva created *Ankiya Bhaona*. In the mean time the awareness come through *Bhaona* competitions or *Samaroh* has tried to enlighten the authentic features of *Bhaona*.

### 3.0 Role of Competitions in conserving *Bhaona*

Literature of any kind comes close to a community when it is written in their language. Sankaradeva and his disciples wrote the *Ankiya nats* in Brajavali language. But *Brajavali* language is difficult to properly understand in present days. Therefore, different *nats* for *Bhaona* are written in Assamese language in these days. It has brought *Bhaona* closer to the people of Assam irrespective of their caste, class and locality. At the same time it is also important to observe that the *Matribhashar Bhaona* should not deviate the unique and original features of *Bhaona*. In this regard, the performance of *Bhaona* in competitions tries to hold the authentic features like rituals, *raga*, *taala*, music etc. In spite of it, *Bhaona* competitions sometimes lead negative impact. It can be analyzed that-

- In the stage of competition the tradition of *Bhaona* can lose its sacred nature and uniqueness.
- The space which was created by Sankaradeva for performance of *Bhaona* may be disappeared in the close stage performance.
- Due to confinement of time in the competitions, *Bhaona* is becoming only representation of all rituals and performances instead of a complete one. Therefore, there is a possibility to lose its identity.
- *Bhaona* can become a commodity due to commercial impact in the form of cash prize in the competitions. As a result of it, the intention of Sankaradeva to use *Bhaona* as a mean to propagate devotion will be degraded.

Apart from these, it can be said that the inexpert and inexperienced judges, selected by many committees of *Bhaona* may not be able to give proper judgement to the performers. On the otherhand the audiences may not be able to maintain sacred behaviour in an open space of the competitions as they generally maintain in *Namghar* or *Satra*.

Due to all these suspicions many conscious people do not support *Bhaona* competitions. If the competitions intend to keep the originality of *Ankiya Bhaona* in the form of *Matribhashar Bhaona*, it will always upgrade the rich cultural repository of Assam.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

*Bhaona* is a rich cultural heritage of Assam. By the progress of time it continues in Assamese society with many changes and evolutions. In spite of immense popularity of *Matribhashar Bhaona*, many people or young generations are not aware about the tradition. Therefore, one should try to conserve this tradition with great interest and awareness in practice.

This article has find out that-

- *Bhaona* was created by Sankaradeva as a medium to preach Neo-Vaisnavism. It appears in present days in the folk form of a *Matribhashar Bhaona* in Assam. *Matribhashar Bhaona* is more popular than *Ankiya Bhaona*, but the performance of *Ankiya Bhaona* occasionally takes place in the villages of Assam
- *Bhaona* has gone through several structural changes. These are observed in case of space, time, skill of performance, costume, music etc. New addition to all these has given a new flavour to *Matribhashar Bhaona*.

The *Bhaona* competitions have played a significant role to popularize and practice *Bhaona* among the young generation. The negative influence of *Bhaona* competitions can be overcome by consciousness of Assamese people. However, the popularity attained by the competitions of *Matribhashar Bhaona* signifies the growing importance and relevance of this kind of folk performance in Assamese society.

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