



Assamese Bhaona and Its Spiritual Impact on Assamese Society: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Bhaona is one of the most influential traditional theatre forms of Assam, created by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th–16th century. Rooted in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, it combines drama, music, dance, dialogue, and spiritual teachings to communicate the values of bhakti (devotion), morality, social harmony, and ethical living. This seminar paper explores the spiritual significance of Bhaona and its role in shaping Assamese society. The study examines how Bhaona served not only as a devotional art form but also as a medium of social education, moral transformation, and cultural integration. Through analytical perspectives, the paper highlights its impact on collective consciousness, social unity, and moral behaviour across centuries. The paper also discusses methodological approaches, the significance of the study, analytical observations, findings, and concluding reflections. Ultimately, it asserts that Bhaona remains one of the most powerful spiritual-cultural institutions that continues to influence Assamese identity, socio-religious practices, and community life.

Keywords

Bhaona, Sankardeva, Assamese society, Neo-Vaishnavism, spirituality, Bhakti movement, Ankiya Naat, culture, moral values, traditional theatre, community harmony.

Introduction

The rich cultural heritage of Assam has been shaped by several religious and artistic traditions, of which Bhaona stands out as one of the most profound contributions. Introduced by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva and further enriched by his disciple Madhavdeva, Bhaona represents a synthesis of literature, music, dance, and devotional expression. Unlike other theatrical forms that emphasize entertainment alone, Bhaona retains a strong spiritual foundation. Its primary objective was to spread the teachings of Bhakti and to establish an egalitarian socio-religious structure.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Sankardeva emphasized devotion to a single God (Eka-Sharana Naam Dharma), equality of all human beings, and the purification of mind and soul. To communicate these ideas to the masses—many of whom were illiterate—Sankardeva used art as a didactic instrument. Bhaona emerged as a powerful tool for educating society through aesthetic pleasure (rasa) and moral instruction.

In contemporary times, Bhaona is not merely a performance. It is a sacred ritual, a collective experience, and a cultural festival that embodies Assamese spirituality. Its enactments, songs, music, costumes, and symbolic

gestures build a bridge between religion and social consciousness. This seminar paper offers an analytical understanding of how Bhaona influences spiritual behaviour, moral thinking, and social unity among Assamese people.

Methodology

The present study uses a qualitative analytical method. The following approaches were adopted:

1. Textual Analysis

Study of Ankiya Naat, Kirtan-ghosha, Bhaona scripts, and commentaries.

Review of literary sources on Sankardeva's philosophy and Vaishnavite literature.

2. Historical Interpretation

Understanding the socio-political context in which Bhaona originated.

Examination of its evolution from the medieval period to the modern era.

3. Observation of Performative Traditions

Analysis of stage structure, costumes, music (gayan-bayan), acting styles, dialogues, and symbolic expressions.

4. Sociological Perspective

Study of the influence of Bhaona on collective worship, spiritual consciousness, community unity, and cultural identity.

Observation of contemporary community Behaviour during Bhaona festivals.

5. Analytical Interpretation

Drawing connections between Bhaona's spiritual messages and their impact on Assamese values, practices, and ideology.

The study relies on secondary data from research articles, books, Satra documents, and cultural reports, along with interpretative analysis.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in its attempt to explore not simply Bhaona as a theatrical art, but as a socio-spiritual force. The observations in this study offer relevance in the following areas:

1. Understanding Cultural Identity

Bhaona has shaped Assamese identity for centuries. Studying its spiritual impact helps understand how culture and religion are interwoven in Assamese life.

2. Spiritual and Moral Education

Bhaona spreads ethical values such as humility, devotion, compassion, and non-violence. Examining its educational role highlights its contribution beyond entertainment.

3. Preservation of Heritage

In the age of globalization, the study of indigenous art forms becomes crucial for cultural preservation and reinterpretation.

4. Community Cohesion

Bhaona functions as a tool for social integration, bringing diverse groups together in shared devotional experience.

5. Academic Relevance

The study contributes to literature in disciplines such as performing arts, cultural studies, theology, and sociology.

Understanding the spiritual influence of Bhaona is meaningful for educators, researchers, cultural activists, and policy makers interested in safeguarding traditional knowledge systems.

Discussion

1. Origins of Bhaona and Its Spiritual Foundation

Bhaona emerged as part of Sankardeva's larger mission to reform society through the principles of Neo-Vaishnavism. Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat plays were originally written to simplify spiritual teachings and make them accessible to common people. His dramas portrayed episodes from the Bhagavata Purana and other scriptures, but the performance style, musical elements, and language (Brajavali) were designed to emotionally connect with the rural Assamese audience.

At its core, Bhaona is a spiritual journey. The entire performance—from the opening Bargeet to the concluding naam prasanga—functions like an act of devotion. The performers, musicians, and spectators all take part in a shared religious experience.

2. Ritualistic Elements and Devotional Atmosphere

Bhaona begins with ceremonial rituals performed by the Sutradhar, who is not merely a narrator but a spiritual guide. His entrance, adorned with the gamosa and holding a baton, symbolizes purity and authority. He chants invocations, praising the divine and inviting the audience to participate in the spiritual energy of the performance.

The Gayan-Bayan ensemble plays an essential role in setting the devotional mood. The rhythmic sounds of khol, taal, and bhor-taal, accompanied by melodious Bargeet, elevate the consciousness of the audience.

The presence of symbolic elements—such as mythological characters, bright costumes, and traditional masks (in some Bhaonas)—creates an atmosphere of divine storytelling. The audience does not view Bhaona as a play; they experience it as a sacred event.

3. Spiritual Messages in Bhaona

Bhaona scripts convey several spiritual and ethical messages:

Eka-Sharana Bhakti (single-minded devotion to one God)

Purity of mind and soul

Importance of righteous living (dharma)

Compassion, humility, and non-violence

Universal love and brotherhood

These teachings, delivered through dramatic representation, become easier for the community to internalize. Characters such as Prahlad, Gopi, Krishna, and Rama serve as moral exemplars.

4. Bhaona as a Tool for Social Reform

One of Sankardeva's primary aims was to eliminate social divisions and caste barriers. Bhaona played a major role in this. Since its performances were open to all people—irrespective of caste, class, or profession—it helped create a more egalitarian social structure.

The Satra institutions, where Bhaona evolved as a refined art, promoted collective worship, sharing of food (prasada), and community living. These practices strengthened social unity and diminished discrimination.

5. Emotional and Psychological Impact on the Audience

The experience of Bhaona is immersive. The rhythmic music, expressive acting, moral lessons, and devotional ambience produce powerful emotional responses. Many spectators feel spiritually uplifted, and this emotional purification reinforces moral behaviour and faith.

Psychologically, Bhaona serves as:

A means of stress relief

A spiritual outlet

A form of emotional meditation

A reconnection with cultural roots

These psychological impacts also promote mental harmony in the community.

6. Bhaona's Role in Cultural Continuity and Identity Formation

Across centuries, Bhaona has played a crucial role in preserving Assamese traditions. It keeps alive the philosophy of Sankardeva, the language of Brajavali, traditional musical instruments, dance techniques, and devotional songs.

Bhaona creates a sense of pride, belonging, and shared cultural identity. Every village that hosts a Bhaona participates in collective preparations, reinforcing local unity and inter-generational bonding. Young people learn about their heritage through participation, ensuring cultural continuity.

7. Contemporary Relevance and Global Spread

Even in modern times, Bhaona remains deeply relevant. Villages still organize annual Bhaonas during festivals like Palnaam, Janmastami, and Holi. Satras continue to nurture performers and musicians.

Bhaona has also gained international recognition. Performances have been staged in Mauritius, London, New York, Bhutan, and Dubai, showcasing Assam's spiritual heritage globally. In diasporic communities, Bhaona serves as a cultural anchor.

Findings

The analytical study reveals several key insights:

1. Bhaona strengthens spiritual consciousness in Assamese society.

It connects individuals to devotional practices, moral principles, and collective worship.

2. The theatre form serves as an effective medium of moral education.

Bhaona simplifies complex philosophical ideas and makes them accessible.

3. It has played an instrumental role in social reform.

By promoting equality and integrating diverse communities, Bhaona contributed to social harmony.

4. Bhaona is a cultural institution that bridges art and spirituality.

Its musical, performative, and visual elements work in harmony to create a sacred experience.

5. The Satra system has preserved and transmitted the tradition for centuries.

Satras act as cultural schools and spiritual centres.

6. Bhaona creates emotional and psychological well-being.

It reduces stress, reinforces moral discipline, and builds inner peace.

7. It remains relevant in modern society and retains its popularity.

Bhaona continues to adapt while preserving its traditional essence.

8. The art form contributes to Assamese identity formation.

Through collective participation, it nurtures cultural pride and social unity.

Conclusion

Bhaona is not merely a theatrical performance; it is a spiritual institution deeply rooted in Assam's cultural and religious history. Its origin in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, guided by the vision of Srimanta Sankardeva, underscores its purpose as a tool for spiritual upliftment and social transformation. This analytical study reveals that Bhaona played a fundamental role in shaping Assamese society by promoting moral values, devotional practices, social equality, and cultural unity.

The emotional depth, aesthetic beauty, and philosophical messages embedded in Bhaona have helped generations cultivate a sense of discipline, compassion, and spiritual awareness. Even today, its relevance is undeniable as it continues to act as a medium of community bonding and cultural education.

As Assam moves towards modernization, preserving and promoting Bhaona becomes essential—not only to honour the legacy of Sankardeva but also to safeguard the spiritual and cultural backbone of Assamese identity. The continued performance of Bhaona in villages, Satras, urban centres, and international platforms demonstrates its timeless appeal and enduring influence.

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