

Srimanta Sankardev's *Ankiya-Nat* (A New Dramatic Genre in Assamese Literature)

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Social Scientist Linton said, "Culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they earn share and transmit from generation to generation". A culture however rich it may be fades in the long run unless practiced and promoted by the members of the society. It is an imperative necessity for a culture to grow with society. It should be passed on to next generation with higher values.

History of Indian theatre is spread over several centuries. Early glimpses of its existence can be seen in pre-historic cave paintings. Archeological findings related to Indus Valley Civilization testify to its being in Vedic and later Buddhist literature. Earliest extant dramatic works belong to the fourth century B.C. In the Gupta Age, Indian drama reached its zenith in the hands of Kalidasa.

Dramaturgists in India considered drama as an all encompassing life-size art. To quote Bharata, "There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art, no craft, no devise, no action that is not found in the drama". It was considered as most exalted art and a meeting place of all arts and sciences.

After the decline of Sanskrit drama in India, numerous new dramatic forms in various regional languages propelled by the Bhakti Movement emerged and contributed to the richness of Indian drama. These folk plays lavishly jumbled together, poetry, music, dance, drumming, exaggerated make-up, masks and singing of Chorus. Such art forms cannot be related to any specific authorship. In Assam, such art forms can be found as popular art forms like "Putula-Nach" (Puppet dance), "Dhullia nach" (Drumbeat dance), "Ozapalli", "Kusangan" and so on. These art forms were popular because thematically they deal with mythological heroes; medieval romances and social and political events, and it is a rich store of customs, beliefs, legends and rituals. It is a "total theatre" invading all the senses of the spectators.

Assam is a land of Shankari Culture. Formal history of Assamese drama started with 'Ankia-Nats' of Sankardev dating back to the 15th century when Sankardev the great Vaishnavite Saint, Poet, Artist and Social Reformer, started disciplined movement in this area of literary and histrionic expression. A much-travelled man, he must have been familiar with such dramatic entertainments as Ramlila, Rashlila, Yatra, Kathaka, Yaksagana, Bhagavatam and Bhawai, popular at that time in other parts of India. On the other hand, there were such rudiments of dramatic entertainments in Assam as Deodhoni-nac, Putala-nac, and Oja-pali performances. Among these Oja-pali was extremely popular and it continues till today as a very common entertainment in the rural areas of Assam. The Oja-pali party usually consists of four to five singers, and is divided into two groups each singing in chorus. The leader is called Oja, and his companions are called Palis. One of the Palis is called Daina-pali, the right-hand companion. The leader extemporises or unfolds the story, recites the refrain, and Palis repeat the refrain by playing on cymbals and keeping with the movements of their feet. In interpreting the verse-narrative, the Oja uses dramatic gestures, expressions, and movements. Occasionally, in the middle of the performance, the Oja pauses and converses with Daina-pali by way of expounding the story in order to give the entertainment the appearance of a dramatic dialogue. Many of the kavyas of Sankardeva were used in this pre-Vaishnavite medium of dance-recitals. Sankardeva realized that the appeal of his kavyas is oracular rather than visual. So with a master-stroke he transformed and elevated his rudimentary play into a kind of drama built on classical concept and grandeur. In doing so, Sankardeva must have harnessed to full the reminiscences of dramatic entertainments he

witnessed during his pilgrimage. Thus Sankardeva organised a dramatic performance styled as Cihna-Yatra, which literally stands for a 'pageant on painted scenes.' From the detailed description available in the biographies, it appears that *Cihna-Yatra* was probably a pantomimic show with a scenic background to emphasis the effect. The use of painted scenery so early as in the fifteenth century is a fact of definite significance for it is like a signpost for the question to what extent drama was developed. This pageant show was developed later into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue styled as Ankiya Nat. Thus what was merely a slender stream developed into a broad river; and the Vaishnava saint of Assam was responsible for the greatest turning point in the history of Assamese drama and stage. The operating one-act play in classical concept in all its splendour is structurally a beautiful synthesis of classical and folks traditions of the region.

Though this new genre is popularly is known as Ankiya Nat, it bears no resemblance to the anka type of Rupakas of Sanskrit. Ankiya nat is 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 are *yatra*, *nrita* and *anka*.

In technique, these Ankiya Nats follow to a certain extent the text on Sanskrit dramatic theory, particularly with reference to the use of Sanskrit verses and *nandi* introduction of the role of the Sutradhara and performance of the preliminaries (Purba-ranga). Unlike in Sanskrit plays, the Sutradhara is an integral part of an Ankiya Nat. In Sanskrit dramas, the sutradhara disappears altogether after the invocation. But it is different with the Assamese plays. Here, the Sutradhara remains all along on the stage. Further, the Suradhara in an Ankiya drama combines the functions of the producer and a running commentator. He dances with the orchestra, opens the play by reciting the *nandi* verse, introduces the characters, gives them directions, announces their exit and entrance on the stage, fills up lacunae in the action of the play by song, dance and speech. He also delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot.

Srimanta Sankardev originally wrote these dramas for the illiterate masses of Assam and the tribal population of Bengal and Bihar and they were performed in Satras (socio-cultural and religious centres) and Namghars (hall for congregational prayer). Sankardeva's approach was all encompassing and his contribution in building a unified social order was stupendous. He aimed to spread the message of Neo-Vaishnavism to the masses through the medium of drama. What we call today, Assamese Culture actually stands on the foundation of Vaishnavite Culture of which "Ankia-Nat" is a colossus.

Every forms of the traditional theatre provides a long series of preliminaries called "Purvaranga" consisting of prayer to the deity, singing with the accompanying music, introduction of the play and then going to its main action. This practice has been taken directly from the classical Indian drama. The purpose of all these preliminaries was to cover the time gap. But more than this the main idea behind these preliminaries was to evoke an atmosphere which goes with the total effect of the play.

The performance of "Ankia-Nat" starts with benediction in Sanskrit followed by eulogy to God in Brajabali. It is performed in four different sequences playing of the Dhamali, benediction introduction and presentation of the story or Nat and moral instructions or Mukti Mangal Bhatima. The play usually starts with playing of the drum accompanied by the big cymbal by the singer musician (Gayana, Bayana) in a group. The instruments are played in various movements in two paces called Saru-Dhemali and Bor-Dhemali. After brilliant display of Purvaranga, the Sutradhar enters the stage and here begins the actual performance. In "Ankia-Nat" the role of Sutradhar is most important, in absence of which the drama cannot move at all, whereas in Sanskrit drama the Sutradhar disappears from the stage after

invocation is over. As there are no more scenes in the play, the announcement for change of scenes is made by Sutradhar or by Orchestra with singing. As the majority of the audience were illiterate at that time the explanation was required at every succeeding stage of the drama. The Sutradhar had to attend to various tasks viz. production, direction and delivered commentary of the entire drama up to the end. As such, Sutradhar must be an expert in drama, music and acting and like a catalyst keep the drama moving from all angles. Sutradhar in “Ankia-Nat” is really a unique creation of Srimanta Sankardeva and deserves commendation.

Shankardev also made beautiful use of ‘Khol’ (drum) and ‘Tal’ in his “Ankia-Nat” performances. A large variety of dance numbers are sprinkled over the dramatic performance. Ankia-Nat therefore contributed to the healthy growth of the exquisite dance form known as “Satriya Dance”. Masks are important ingredient of Ankia-Nats. These are made of paper, bamboo and textile and are designed to give special facial expressions to the various characters.

The stories and legends of Bhagawatpurana and the Ramayana constitute the plot of “Ankia-Nats”. Bhagawatpurana is considered by the Neo-Vaishnavite Saints and their disciples as their guiding star and source of moral inspiration. Lord Krishna is the pivotal figure of the Bhagawatpurana and the Mahabharata and his activities are considered to be the subject for the authors of “Ankia-Nat”. Besides Srimanta Sankardeva other well known playwright of “Ankia-Nat” are Madhavdeva, Sri Gopal Ata, Ram Charan Thakur, Diatri Thakur and Dvije Bhusan. Sankardeva wrote as many as seven Ankia-Nats out of which ‘Chihnayatra’ is lost and only six Ankia-Nats are available now. These are ‘Kalia Daman’, ‘Patni-Prasad’, ‘Kalia-Gopal’, ‘Rukminiharan’, ‘Parijatharan’ and ‘Ram-Vijoy’.

Thus it can be rightly said that the Vaishnava Culture spearheaded by Srimanta Sankardeva ushered in the Golden period of Medieval Assamese Literature of which “Ankia-Nat” is an offshoot. It is a new dramatic genre in Assamese literature and provides a platform to the multifaceted Saint for the expression of all his creative talent in music, art, literature and drama and serves as a role model for all succeeding generation. Even today his Ankiya Nats are acted, Bargits are sung and kavyas are read with great enthusiasm. They are treasured as a part of Assamese culture and spiritual heritage.

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