

DANCE, DRAMA AND MUSIC: AS A MEDIUM OF PROPAGATING NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM

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Abstract

This article talks about the dance, drama and music that have been used as a means of propagation of Vaishnavite faith in Assam. Assam witnessed an admixture of various religious cults before the advent of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. As the rest of India was undergoing the Vaishnavism cult, in Assam, the great saint Sankaradeva (1449-1568) A.D preached the *Ek Sarana Nama Dharma*, i.e. the faith of Neo-Vaishnavism in the 15th – 16th century. The main motive of such initiated in Assam was the complete chaos and hostility among the people in the name of religion. With the view to bring the laypeople together under the same roof, he started proselytizing the bhakti faith among them by using the medium of dance, drama and music, as he thought these audio-visual media would easily be comprehensible to the people. So, this medium, used in propagating the faith proved beneficial and brought a social, cultural and religious resurgence in Assam. Ankiya naat, Sattriya dance (the dances of the theatrical wing), the Vaishnava music plays a distinctive role and provide a fillip to the bhakti movement. The paper has focused on the dance, drama and music that have been employed in propagating Vaishnavism in Assam.

Research Method: This paper is based on historical and descriptive methods analysing various secondary data.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Ankiya naat, Sattriya dance, Vaishnava music.

INTRODUCTION

Sankaradeva was an incredibly multifaceted and multitasking personality in the annals of Assamese history. He initiated the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam after returning from his 12 years of pilgrimage. “He carried a deep impression of the nascent neo-Vaishnava movement that was pulsating in the heart of northern India and manifesting itself in devotional songs” (Neog 1998, 106). “The Vaishnava movement in Assam was not an isolated phenomenon. The Neo-Vaishnavism was only a revivalist movement, believed to have originated in the South and subsequently spread to the North. The Vaishnava movement in Assam was, therefore, a local florescence of the great Vaishnava revivalist movement started by Ramanuja in the eleventh century on the basis of the devotional cult of the Alvars of Tamil land. With the passage of time, the movement spread to the other parts of India through the efforts of Nimbark (11th century), Madhavacarya (13th century), Vallabhacarya (15th century), Ramananda (14th century), Kabir (15th century), Chaitanya (15th – 16th) and others. It was Sankaradeva who gave the movement a distinct shape and character of its own. He succeeded in establishing the Vaishnava Bhakti movement with a new interpretation suitably fitted to the people of this Lord” (Debajit Mahanta 2013, 235). Sankaradeva, with all his heart and soul, started preaching his faith known as ‘*Ek Sarana Nama Dharma*’ in Assam after observing animosity among the people in the name of religion. Several practices such as casteism, idol worship, animal sacrifices were widespread and firmly rooted in society.

To discard these ill-practices from society, he devised an audio-visual medium to propagate his bhakti tenets instead of simply reciting the religious discourses among the people. This audio-visual medium comprises none other than the dance (Sattriya), drama (ankiya naat), music (geet) and art composed by Sankaradeva. His faith *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* means worshipping single god Lord Krishna and surrendering oneself unto his lotus feet. “The process of initiation into Sankaradeva’s faith is called Sarana, which means taking refuge in Krsna. In it, the devotee being purged of all formalities and rituals has direct communication with the Lord. Sarana includes Cari vastu (four reals) such as nama, deva, guru and bhakat which are called the four fundamental elements of neo-Vaishnavism. Absence of idol worship is an important feature of Eka-sarana system. In all religious performances the sacred texts, more particularly the Bhagavata or the Kirtana-Ghosa are placed on a padestalled tray (thapana). The *thapana* symbolizes the steps for spiritual development of the devotee on his way to the realization of God” (Das 2011, 250). With this view of spreading the faith, Sankaradeva first constructed a prayer house known as ‘*thaan*’ at his residential place, Bardowa and started holding congregational prayer, religious discourses etc.

“The *Katha Guru Charita* and the later biographers relate how Sankara had a temple (*devagrha*), possibly a thatched house, built on the original site of his father’s residential, where he could sit together with other people, discuss religious matters and hold prayers” (Neog 1998, 106). Later the *thaan/ devagrha* came to be known as *Sattra*. The term *sattra* seems to have first appeared in the Satapatha Brahmina (Sarma 2013, 86) and occurred at numerous places in Bhagavata Purana where it denotes holding sacrificial sessions lasting for several days by the term ‘*Karma Sattra*’ and an assembly held for spiritual discussions by the word ‘*Brahma Sattra*’ (Debajit Mahanta 2013, 237). “It is quite possible that the concept of *sattra* is derived from Buddhist monastic organization with a religious head surrounded by a host of devotees dwelling in series of cottages” (Dutta 2013, 79). But whatever may be the origin of the term *sattra*, it always has a much broader perspective in the Assam Vaishnavism context, where it denotes an assembly of devotees, a socio-cultural and religious institution.

The establishment of *Namghar* is yet another outstanding contribution of Sankaradeva to fulfil his dream of a perfect society that form an inseparable part of a *sattra*. They were the product of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and played an essential role in disseminating the Vaishnavite art, culture and the *bhakti* marg. These two institutions are religious and serve as socio-cultural activities of the community, such as a cultural centre providing both formal and informal education including knowledge on various scriptures, dance, music, drama, sculptures, mask, paintings etc., act as a moral governor where people’s cases are being solved by the village elders assembling in the *namghar*. Punishments impose on the misconduct person and help the poor by financially assisting them.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DANCE, DRAMA AND MUSIC IN DISSEMINATING THE VAISHNAVA FAITH

Ankiya naats were composed by Sankaradeva with the aim of propagating his faith to far and wide places. He believed in worshipping one god, i.e. Krishna, instead of paying obeisance to numerous deities. With this aim, he persuaded people to become Vaishnavite and give up all the ill practices in the name of religion and god. Sankaradeva inculcates the themes of Krishna in his plays that depict ‘the victory of truth over the evil’. Lord Krishna is the protagonist in all his plays except *Ramvijay naat*, where Lord Rama is the hero. To make the plays pleasing and captivating for the laypeople, he embellished them with dance, dialogue, music, masks etc. He firmly believed that simply uttering the religious discourses to the people would bring no positive outcome in that prevailing Sakti cult where people were already in a society of melange. So, Sankaradeva talked of universal love and brotherhood and made open the door of Vaishnavite religion to all the people irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender, and this is proved from his disciples belonging from different classes of the society like Chandsai, a Muslim; Govinda, a Garo; Rama, a Kachari; Narayana, a Miri etc. Biographies stated that he directed the entire weaving operation of the *Vrindavani bastra*. He composed various *naats* (termed as *ankiya naats* by later Vaishnava saints), *gits*, *kavya*, translations of classical books etc., to provide a fillip to the neo-vaishnavite movement. His major literary works comprise *Kirtan Ghosa*, *Bhakti Ratnakar*, *Bhakti Pradipa Gunamala*, *Anadi Patana* and *Bhakti tattva* books along with plays(*naats*). In all his works, *bhakti* is the pivotal element. He laid much emphasis on *Shravan* and *Kirtan* among the nine modes of *bhakti*.

Shravan Kirtan Smaran Vishnu

Archan Padasevan

Dasya Sakhitwa Bandan Vishnu

Karibo Deha arpan (Sankardev 2017, 88)

The *sutradhar* that he introduced in all his plays keeps on reminding the laypeople of the importance of *bhakti* as-

‘Ta dekhoho sunoho nironore hari bolo hari’

(thus, watch and listen to the play and keep chanting Lord Hari’s name)

The dances that are included in the *naats* by Sankaradeva later came to be known as the Sattriya dance. Besides this, Sankaradeva’s spiritual successor Madhavadeva also followed his gurus’ footprints and composed several plays called ‘*Jhumura*’. One peculiar feature of both the saint’s compositions is their language to attract a more significant number of people. The language is the *Brajawali*- it’s an admixture of Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, Uria, Assamese,

Newari and Brajabhasa. “According to the scholars, it was never the language of any people of any place and time. Instead it was an artificially designed idiom that has been known in the sattriya circles as Brajawali. The contemporary Vaishnava poets of Orissa and Bengal are also known to have used a similar artificial poetic idiom that has been later termed Brajabuli, chiefly by the scholars of Bengal. In fact, Vaishnava saints all over India adapted for their poetic compositions some special sorts of poetic compositions some special sorts of idiom of compound nature between the 13th and the 16th centuries A.D. Such idioms of various places exhibited certain common characteristics, and, as such, together they are often referred to as the *Sant Bhasa* (the language of the saints). In a broader sense the term *Sant Bhasa* may be allowed to incorporate within its connotation Brajavali or Brajabuli too” (Goswami 2001, 30). Another striking characteristic is the use of masks by Sankaradeva in his play. As most lay was unlettered during that period, Sankara thought of including masks (as and where required) to make them easily understandable. With all these inclusion, Sankaradeva’s plays gained a comprehensive audience coverage in almost Northern India. Sanjib K. Borkakoti says, “The *Kaliya Daman* had such an impact in Bengal that it led to an era known as *Kaliya Damana Yatra* era in the mid-nineteenth century there. The Yatra of Bengal was a derivative of the Sankari plays” (Borkakoti 2006, 30). The actors made their entry on stage after the removal of the curtain- *ar kapur* (white in colour) symbolizes the maya. As soon as it is removed, the illusionary world, i.e. maya gets, disappears, and one could see god. Sankara made the *agnigarh* at the entrance gate with nine wicks denoting the nine modes of bhakti. The two *arias* held by two persons at the *Gayan-bayan* performance represent the *Shravan* and *Kirtan* as the highest mode of bhakti.

Sankaradeva’s first play *Cihna Yatra* was a unique creation at the age of 19 years. He introduced the drop scene, which he himself painted in *Cihna Yatra* in 1468 A.D before it was used in European theatre. He also used the elevated stage for play which was used in the Swan Theatre of London after 128 years of staging the *Cihna Yatra* play at Tembuwani (Borkakoti 2006, 21). He made the instruments *khol* (drum) and *taal* (cymbals) from kapilimukh to play in the *Cihna Yatra*. Madhavadeva’s *jhumura* mainly depicts the stories of child Krishna, unlike Sankaradeva, where stories of Krishna at a young age are represented. *Vatsalya bhava* is profoundly inherent in Madhavdeva’s play.

SATTRIYA DANCE

Sattriya dance encompasses the dance numbers that are included in the theatrical representation and outside the theatrical wing. The former includes Gayan Bayan, Sutradhari nac, Gosai Pravesar nac, Kharman nac, Rasar nac, etc. The latter group comprises Chali, Rojaghoriya chali, Bor Pravesar nac, Sattriya Ojapali etc. Both the saints introduced dances in their plays to enhance the aesthetic approach. Sattriya dance was recognised as one of the major dance forms of India in the year 2000, 15th November, by the Sangeet Natak Akademi under the chairmanship of Dr Bhupen Hazarika.

MUSIC

The music employed in Sattriya dance is known as *borgeet*, while the *geets* in the plays are known as *ankiya geets*. Borgeets are the devotional songs composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The geets written by later Vaishnava saints are not referred to as borgeet, they are simply termed as geet. Various scholars opined the term borgeet in different ways-

- ‘Borgeet are crown pearls of Music’ by Kirtinath Sarma Bordoloi
- ‘Great songs’ or ‘Songs Celestial’ by Kaliram Medhi
- ‘Noble numbers’ by Banikanta Kakati
- ‘Holy songs’ by Debendranath Bezbaruah

Sankaradeva composed 240 songs (extant 34), and Madhavadeva composed 191 songs (extant 157), out of which a total of 191 geets are vogue today of both the saints. Various ragas such as Asowari, Nat Mallar, Suhai, Basanta etc and talas such as ektal, Chutkala, Chuta, Domani, Kharman etc. A tala in Sattriya music consists of three parts-

- Gaman (main bol)
- Ghat (end or change of the bol)
- Cok (played in druta laya, meaning quick, fast)

Sattriya is a living dance tradition in Assam that has always been a part of ritual services in the sattria precinct and simultaneously performed on the proscenium stage as a performing art form. One noteworthy feature came out in regard to the abhinaya aspect. When performed in the sattras as a medium of worship, no abhinaya is conveyed in the sung line except keeping rhythm with their feet, but while performing on stage, abhinaya is expressed richly and hold a firm grip in the field. Moreover no women participation is allowed in the ritual services only boy monks (*bhakat*) perform both as male and in female attire. However, more girls participation is vividly witnessed when this dance form is performed on stage. Changes in *aharya* are also observed when came out from the four walls of sattria to the theatre halls. Whatever the changes may be, it should always be rooted in *bhakti* and every performance finally merged in bhakti.

These performing art forms (dance, drama and music) were used by Sankaradeva and his later apostolates as a medium for preaching his bhakti ‘*Ek Sarana Nama Dharma*’, only with the aim of binding people of society with the universal love of brotherhood. Sanjib K. Borkakoti penned, “In this respect, he was a pioneer in the entire world. Nobody had used this medium for proselytizing or propagational work before him. He was thus a path-finder for even Bertolt Breckht, who used this medium for propagating his socialist message in the twentieth century” (Borkakoti 2006, 21).

CONCLUSION

This paper can be concluded with the words that Sankaradeva implemented dance, drama and music in his plays and composed several literary works only to bring the laypeople together and to infuse the greatness of the supreme being, Krishna, in their minds, instead of the ill-practices that were prevalent in the society during that time. Hence, this means of popularising the faith proved successful and beneficial to the Assamese society and culture, which are still being nurtured and cultured in the sattras in their pristine form.

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