

THE IMPACT OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA'S PILGRIMAGE ON HIS PERFORMING ARTS LEGACY: IN THE CONTEXT OF BORGEET, ANKIYA NAAT AND SATTRIYA DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 AD–1568 AD), a 15th-century saint, social reformer, poet, dancer, actor, musician, playwright and polymath from Assam, was a prominent figure in the religious and cultural life of the state. Sankardeva's pioneering work in establishing the Neo- Vaishnavite movement not only reconfigured the spiritual life of Assamese society but also provided the foundation for a glorious cultural renaissance. One of the peak points of Sankardeva's life was his 12-year-long pilgrimage across the Indian subcontinent. It was a spiritual and intellectual journey that had formative influence on moulding his philosophical vision and artistic output. This paper shows how Sankardeva's exposure to various devotional traditions, musical traditions, temple cultures and regional performance practices during his pilgrimage had an influence on the development of three performing arts: Borgeet, Ankiya Naat and Sattriya dance. Through a close examination of his travel experiences ranging from observing the splendor of Bhakti centered rituals at Puri, Vrindavan, Mathura etc., to interactions with saints and scholars of various places, his study examines how Sankardeva integrated pan-Indian devotional and performative aesthetics with Assamese cultural sensibilities. His artistic experiments were not passive copies of what he saw but were reflective translations that retained the essential emotional and philosophical aspect of Bhakti and conveyed it in vernacular, accessible formats that appealed to the lay Assamese masses.

Keywords: Srimanta Sankardeva, Borgeet, Ankiya Naat, Sattriya, Ekasharan dharma, Pilgrimage.

Introduction

Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati Bhārata,
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛijāmy aham.

This grand lesson of the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 4, Verse 7 spoken by lord krishna, sets forth the cyclical nature of divine intervention. Wherever righteousness declines and *unrighteousness grows, the divine takes form to restore equilibrium and guide humankind. When society's moral standards had declined, spiritual disciplines were marred by ritualism and caste discrimination, Sankardeva came forth as a guiding light. Through his religious- cultural reform movement 'The Ekasarana Dharma' he brought about a renaissance in Assamese society using art, music and drama to transmit philosophical and devotional knowledge.*

Srimanta Sankardeva: The Light of the 15th Century

Born in 1449 in Bordowa, Nagaon, Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva was a guiding light of Assam. His work revolutionized Assamese culture and spirituality, adopting the values of Bhakti (devotion) into daily life. He initiated a renaissance of devotion, knowledge and arts, which led to a common Assamese identity.

Srimanta Sankardeva undertook a 12-year pilgrimage across India along with 17 dedicated Companion such as Ramram, Narottam, Sarbajay, Balram, Hrishikesh, Parmanand, Damodar, Shri Ram and Mahendra Kandali in 1481 when he was 29 years old. The pilgrimage was not just a physical travel; it was deeply spiritual and had a deep influence on Sankardeva's religious thinking and mission. As scholar Dimbeshwar Neog formulates, "Sankardeva's pilgrimage was not merely physical travel, it was a spiritual revolution. It reflected his sense of religious truth, his dismissal of blind ritualism and his aim to bring loving devotion to the masses available." Along this long journey, Sankardeva visited many sacred places that are of utmost importance in the Hindu tradition. Among the main tirthas (pilgrimage sites) listed in

Katha-Charita are The Ganga, Purushottam Kshetra (Puri), Gaya, Kashi (Varanasi), Prayag, Pushkar, Sitakunda, Varahakunda, Ayodhya, Mathura, Gokul, Dwarka and Rameshwaram. These sacred places played an important role in the formulation of his vision of Assam as a spiritually aware and culturally integrated nation. To the artistic mind of Sankardeva, the pilgrimage was far more than a holy pilgrimage – it was a canvas upon which he painted the premise of a cultural renaissance.

Besides his preachings, he also shared his spiritual teachings that affected saints and devotees from sacred locations such as Vrindavan, Mathura, Gokul, Braj, Pushkar and embraced him as a guru.

According to Sri Madhabdev (prominent disciple of Sankardeva), Dimbeshwar Neog and also explained in 'Guru Gunamala' by Purushottam Thakur, his devotees were:

Śānātana and Vṛndāvandāsa of Vraja Rādhadāsa of Gokula, a saint

Trjātā, a sannyāsini of Vraja Gopīnātha, the saint of Puṣkara

Rāmākānta, the Kṣatriya of Upadvārakā

Their presence made sure that the experiences and knowledge gained during the pilgrimage were shared across the Assamese plains. This group of followers played an important role in the spread of the 'Ekasharana Dharma' and its integration into the Assamese socio-religious culture.

Historical records propose possible encounters of Sankardeva with some other Bhakti saints including Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramananda, Kabir Das, Rupa Goswami. Even though scholars' perspectives differ regarding how real such meetings were in light of the unavailability of recorded history.

Even if there is no direct evidence of contact, certain Bhakti leaders and saints before Sankardeva may have indirectly influenced him through common devotional and social principles. Kabir (1440–1518), Ravidas (1450–1520) of Varanasi opposed ritualism and casteism, worshiped to formless God and believed in social equality. Namdev's (1270–1350) devotional hymns; Ramananda (1400-1457) emphasized devotion to Rama and the realization of God within self and not on ritualistic deeds. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), Vallabhacharya (1479-1530) among Vaishnavite leaders believed in emotional devotion and service to Krishna, principles which are common to Sankardeva's philosophy. Sankardeva may have been exposed to these teachings while he went on pilgrimage, which must have made an impression on his own devotional and inclusive reform movement. The paper proceeds with a discussion on:

- How did Srimanta Sankardeva's journey influence the style and genre of Borgeet, Ankiya Naat and Sattriya?
- What did Sankardeva learn from the varying places and people he met while traveling and how did that affect his art and tales?
- How important was his pilgrimage in changing and influencing his ideas on music, drama and dance?

Research Methodology

This study has been compiled through references from various books, research papers, websites and discussions on the biography of Sankardeva, mainly focusing on his contributions to the Performing arts of Assam in relation to his 12-year pilgrimage across India.

Literature Review

Scholars have deeply analyzed Srimanta Sankardeva's work in the Assamese tradition, specifically Borgeet, Ankiya Naat and Sattriya. Maheswar Neog and Birinchi Kumar Barua have opined that Borgeet mirrored classical ragas and Bhakti principles most probably influenced by his pilgrimage to cities such as Vrindavan and Puri. Ankiya Naat combines devotion and drama and might have been influenced by his exposure to theatre tradition in Mathura and Odisha. Likewise, Sattriya initially performed in monasteries might have drawn from dance traditions that he has experienced in places he has travelled to. However, minimal work relates his pilgrimage activities to the formation of these art forms. This study fills this gap by observing how Sankardeva's travels influenced his artistic and spiritual legacy.

Borgeet

Borgeet is a Sankari devotional music of Assam, composed by Sankardeva in the 15th century. Borgeet was a creation of individual devotion, cross-cultural interaction and musical innovation. Like other bhakti music such as Bhajan, Haveli sangeet, Jaydev's Gita Govinda, Kirtan, Abhangas constituting the center of the bhakti movement. Pilgrimage history of Sankardeva is inextricably connected with history of Borgeet. He composed his first Borgeet in 1488 at Badrikashram, a place of profound spiritual significance. His first Borgeet was

"Mana Meri Rama Charanahi Lagu"

[My heart belongs to the lotus feet of Lord Rama.]

Saints like Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, Vallabhacharya who were predecessors of Sankardeva had already paved the way with spiritually charged compositions.

Kirtan Gosha of Shankardeva also states that:

ওবেষা বাৰাণসী ঠাৰে ঠাৰে। কৰিব গীত শিষ্টসৰে গাৰে।

Oreṣā Bārāṇasī ṭhāve ṭhāve, Kabira gīta śiṣṭasave gāve.

This is how saint kabir's bhakti songs were greatly respected and sung everywhere in spiritual hubs such as Orissa (Puri) and Benares (Varanasi) and had a tremendous influence on Sankardeva.

As a traveller and quester, Sankardeva had come across various musical traditions existing in various places. One of the key influences on Borgeet was Dhrupad (the oldest surviving Hindustani tradition of classical music). The Dhrupad tradition traces back to Braj (Mathura) saints - Swami Haridas, Surdas, Govind Swami, Asht Sakha of Haveli Sangeet and disseminated by Tansen and Baiju Bawara. Scholars typically find similarities between Borgeet and Dhrupad. Both emphasize devotion, spirituality and ignore light or romantic themes. Both are raga-based songs with fixed lyrics and spiritual themes. Most of the saint composers belonging to the bhakti movement of medieval India used raga music for their song composition (Baruah, 2017). Borgeet are usually sung in two ways, i.e. with tala and without tala, which conforms to the ancient style of Prabandha geet in two ways - Atala and Sahatala. (Baruah, 2017). Prabandha geet during bhakti movement, primarily spoke about the Leela of Radha and Krishna and their social life at Gokul and Vrindavan.

In Assamese Vaishnavite music, especially in communal Naam Kirtan and when singing Borgeet, the songs are always rendered with rhythmic patterns much like the Tewara hymns of South India (7th to 9th century), the tradition in Assam assigns specific tala to specific ragas, (Neog, 1969).

He absorbed all of these musical experiences and wove them into his own creative vision. After returning to Assam, he composed about 240 borgeets but a devastating fire destroyed them. However, 34 compositions could be retrieved and preserved.

The language he used for his composition is Brajawali, combination of Maithili (language used in Magadh region) and Assamese (language of Assam). Like many saints at that time, he also believed that using vernacular made spiritual teachings more accessible and meaningful to the masses.

Ankiya Naat

Ankiya Naat, also called Ankiya Bhaona, is a one-act traditional Assamese drama that uses drama, dance, music and narration to convey spiritual and philosophical concepts. He has written 7 Ankiya dramas. But there are only six of those to be found – **Patni Prasad,**

Rukmini Haran, Keli Gopal, Parijat Haran, Ram Vijay. The one that no longer exists was ‘**Chihna Yatra**’, the very first play written and also performed by Sankardeva in 1468 AD. These plays were based on Bhagavata Purana and the Ramayana with a purpose to instill devotion in the masses through performance.



Figure no. 1: A performance of Ankiya Naat in Assam

Ankiya Naat was composed by Sankardeva during the peak of the Neo Vaishnavite movement. He is believed to have witnessed dramatic expressions like Raslila, Ramleela, Kathak, Yatra, Yakshagana, Bhavai and Bhagavat Mela, which were flourishing in different regions of India (Kalita, 2018).

In his travels to Vrindavan and Mathura, Sankardeva would surely have seen Raslila – dramatic enactments of Krishna's life, syntheses of music, dance, drama. While Raslila in Vrindavan was a Bhakti Rasa and focused on madhura bhāva (the romantic, sweet mood), Sankardeva reinterpreted and recontextualized the form in a neo-Vaishnavite framework. Rather than emphasizing romantic love, dāsya bhāva (devotional feeling through servitude) was emphasized in Ankiya Naat, where Bhakti was depicted in the form of submission to God's will.

Raslila influences in Ankiya naat are observed in:

- Applications of stylized dialogues and sung lines similar to Raslila.
- Merging of music and dance to enhance the intensity of feelings.
- Portrayal of Krishna's divine play, although recontextualized to highlight moral and spiritual values.
- Ankiya Naat Sutradhar is a type of action and transition explanation narrative structure also seen in Raslila, in which a lead gives an account of action and transition.



Figure no. 2: Radha, Krishna along with Gopies, a scene from Ramlila

In Ayodhya, Ramnagar, Kashi, Satna and Madhubani he would have seen Ramlila, the staged form of the Ramayana. It is a religious and moral drama meant to inculcate dharma, devotion, and righteous behavior by staging the life of Rama. Ankiya Naat, similar to Ramlila is not merely a performance but an act of moral and spiritual teaching. Both aim to teach and elevate society by reasserting the ideals of dharma, bhakti and righteous living through dramatic presentation.



Figure no.3: Battle of Lord Rama and Ravana, a scene from Ramlila

His visit to Puri acquainted him with the great rituals and musical processions of the Jagannath Temple that helped shape his ideas on the synthesis of devotion and arts. Kanchipuram and Rameswaram introduced him with South Indian temple performance traditions such as Bhagavata Mela.

Ankiya Naat and Bhagavata mela nataka are male-oriented, temple-based devotional theatres rooted in Vaishnavism, performed at religious festivals based on mythological narratives of the Bhagavata Purana, using classical dance, music and a Sutradhar for narration in an effort to convey spiritual messages.



Figure no.4: A scene from Bhagavata Mela Natakam

These rich traditions assisted him in defining his vision to create a new dramatic form based on Assamese culture but motivated by pan-Indian devotional aesthetic.

It has been observed by researchers that it shows striking resemblance to Sanskrit dramaturgical practice e.g. stylized tone usage, bodily postures (mudras), Sanskrit couplets, didactic tone, formal prologue (Purvaranga).

As in other Sanskrit dramas, Ankiya Naat also employs a Purvaranga. In Ankiya Naat it is a Gayan-Bayan, a religious song and dance. The Gayan-Bayan performs with khol (a music instrument created by Sankardeva), dance to Saru Dhemali and Bor Dhemali rhythms and thus create a devotional atmosphere. The 'Sutradhar' then enters.



Figure no. 5: Sutradhar in Ankiya Naat



Figure no.6: Performance of Gyan Bayan in Ankiya Naat

Sankardeva introduced the figure of the Sutradhar in his initial dramatic work, the Chihna Yatra, which he himself performed. The Sutradhar, or narrator, plays an important role in maintaining the devotional tone, guiding both the performers and the audience through the spiritual journey depicted in the play. The Sutradhar of ankiya naat would sing nandi geet, dance, introduce the characters to the audience and also announce the entry and exit of the characters.

In contrast to Sanskrit counterpart who does not come on stage after the invocation, the Sutradhar of Ankiya Naat comes on stage all along the play like the 'Bhagavata' of Yakshagana but they are of different nature and presentation.

Sattriya Dance

Sattriya, the eighth of the Indian classical dances, is a product of the dance-drama tradition of Ankiya Naat established by Srimanta Sankardeva. Ingrained in Vaishnavite philosophy, this dance-drama tradition is a combination of nritta (pure dance), nritya (dramatic dance) and natya (dramatic performance) originally performed by celibate monks (Bhokots) in monasteries (Sattras). The Mati Akharas are codified system of 64 floor-level body exercises that train the dancer in strength, posture, elegance and rhythm is a fundamental requirement of Sattriya.

Pilgrimage throughout India played an important role in Sattriya. While on his tour, particularly when he visited Puri, he might have seen Bandha Nritya (an acrobatic style of Dance) at temple. Srimanta Sankardeva created Mati Akhara, a series of systematic simple physical exercises as Sattriya's fundamental training system. These exercises are the foundation of the dance system. These consist of acrobatic poses and controlled body movement, most of which are akin to the poses of Bandha Nritya, a yogic posture dance form of complex nature. Where phenomenal balance is required, movements such as Kachai pani khowa (turtle drinking water) and Morai panikhowa (peacock drinking water) are a few instances of Mati Akharas which only a few can perform. In rare exceptional instances one sees female

dancers (who now do male dances too) executing these movements. Mallika also points out postures and movements which resemble Odisha's Bandha Nritya (Venkataraman, 2023).

There are similar postures in both Bandha Nritya and Mati Akhara, but they have different names. Example:

Bandha nritya	Mati Akhara
Nahunia	Thiyolon
Surya Nahunia	Sitkhor
Khai	Kamitona
Hamsa	Teltupi
Nauka	Mourai Panikhuwa
Chakri Padmasana	Tomal Musura Kasoi Panikhuwa



Figure no. 7: Nahuniya in Bandha Nritya



Figure no. 8: Thiyolon in Sattriya Dance



Figure no. 9: Padmasana in Bandha Nritya



Figure no. 10: Kasoi Panikhuwa in Sattriya Dance



Figure no. 11: Nauka in Bandha Nritya



Figure no. 12: Mourai Panikhuwa in Sattriya Dance

With his exposure to Northern India, Sankardeva came in contact with Kathak dance during the Bhakti period. This form imbued dance with profound devotional content of Krishna by employing gesture, postures, narration and rhythm movement to narrate religious stories.

Such would have shaped Sattriya's narrative and expressive content e.g. Krishna Vandana, Gopi Pravesh and Raas Nritya.

Even in southern India, where temple art was flourishing in the form of Dasiattam. Sankardeva may have adopted ideas of systematic pedagogy such as adavus (units of movement) similar to Mati Akhara of Sattriya. And codified movements, the religious objective of dance as religious sadhana.

Similar to other classical dances, Sattriya too takes inspiration from Bharata Muni's classical treatise Nāṭyaśāstra, which gives the theoretical basis of Indian performing arts. It presents fundamental notions of Nritya (pure dance), Nritya (dramatic dance) and Natya (dramatic performance) and also Rasa theory, bodily gestures (angas and upangas) and codified hand gestures (mudras).

Conclusion

Srimanta Sankardeva's extensive pilgrimage journey throughout the Indian subcontinent was not merely a bodily one, but a deeply transformative spiritual and cultural pilgrimage that had profound influence on his philosophical inclinations, religious reform and artistic innovation. Through holy sites like Puri, Vrindavan, Mathura, Kashi, Rameshwaram and a few more; Sankardeva was exposed to a wide range of religious thinking, Bhakti schools, temple culture, devotional music and performing arts. These encounters widened his vision and enabled him to see how devotion was accorded varying shapes over linguistic, cultural and regional horizons but remained same in its emotional and spiritual content. With these enriching exposures, Sankardeva formed an inclusive and accessible spiritual ideology that would form the foundation for the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam. His vision was to care for bhakti devotion not as some priestly, abstract ritual but as deeply emotional and individualized response accessible to all without regard to caste, class, or sex. Guided by the mentorship of other Bhakti saints and communal devotional rituals which he had witnessed, Sankardeva brought in with him the vision to establish a homegrown spiritual culture available to all which could be understood, practiced and felt by the common people.

Following this was the development of the Borgeet, the Ankiya Naat and the Sattriya Dance. And through the Sattras (the monastery establishments) these forms of art and ethics became standardized, promoting the development of an affluent devotional culture spanning centuries.

Sankardeva's pilgrimage, thus, was one of assimilation, reinterpretation and creation. He borrowed not only from other traditions he also reinterpreted and recontextualized them, rooting them in the soil of Assamese culture. His spiritual gratitude for the pilgrimage is best encapsulated in his statement “ধন্য ধন্য কলিকাল, ধন্য নৰ তনু ভাল, ধন্য ধন্য ভাৰত বৰিষ.” Sankardeva's words of gratitude to the time he lived in (Kali Yuga), human body and holy India which created an environment for his mission.

Now, his pilgrimage's influence lingers on in the living traditions of Borgeet, Ankiya Naat and Sattriya dance, his vision of a path of worship on the premises of authentic devotion, equality and art.

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