



The Cultural Significance of Assamese Bhaona :A Study

Dr. Ashique Elahi

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Economics

Batadraba Sri Sri Sankardev College

Dr. Pranjali Mahanta

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Assamese

Batadraba Sri Sri Sankardev College

Abstract:

Bhaona, a creation of Sankaradeva, captures the spirit of Assamese culture and reflects its essence. Bhaona is a type of folk performing art that combines musical instruments, acting, and music. The modern Matribhashar Bhaona is an evolution of the original Ankiya Nat Bhaona. Numerous tournaments have been created in an attempt to spread awareness about Bhaona worldwide, however caution must be exercised in order to avoid oversimplifying the situation. A well-run Bhaona tournament can preserve the authenticity of this age-old art form and promote healthy cultural growth.

Keywords: Culture, Folk performing art, Bhaona, Matribhashar Bhaona, Society.

Introduction: Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva, a towering figure in Assamese cultural and religious history, made profound contributions that continue to shape the cultural landscape of Assam. Two of his most significant contributions are Ankiya Nat and Bhaona, forms of folk performing arts that not only entertain but also serve as vehicles for spiritual devotion and moral teachings within Assamese society. Srimanta Sankaradeva lived in the 15th and 16th centuries and is revered as a saint, scholar, poet, playwright, and social reformer. His influence extended far beyond religious circles, encompassing literature, music, dance, and theater, all of which he used to propagate Neo-Vaishnavism, a Bhakti movement focused on devotion to Lord Krishna. Ankiya Nat is the term used to describe the plays composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. These plays, collectively known as Bhaona, are unique to Assam and represent a synthesis of religious teachings, folk traditions, and theatrical artistry. The term "Bhaona" originally referred to the theatrical performances derived from Ankiya Nat, which combined elements of dance, music, dialogue, and philosophical discourse. Srimanta Sankaradeva drew inspiration from various folk theaters such as Kathakali, Rasleela, and Ramleela, adapting these influences to create a distinct form of devotional drama suited to the cultural ethos of Assam. The Ankiya Nat performances were

initially simple and performed with minimal props, relying on the power of storytelling, music, and symbolic gestures to convey spiritual messages. The debut of Sankaradeva's first play, "Chihna Yatra" (The Journey of Chihna), marked the beginning of a new era in Assamese performing arts. This play was unique for its time, employing puppets and blending narrative with visual imagery to engage and educate the audience. Ankiya Nats authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva covered a wide range of themes rooted in Hindu mythology, particularly episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the lives of saints like Krishna and the exploits of Lord Krishna. These plays were vehicles for moral teachings, emphasizing virtues such as devotion, righteousness, and the triumph of good over evil.

Some of the well-known Ankiya Nats composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva include:

- **Patni Prasad**: The story of Ahalya's redemption by Lord Krishna.
- **Parijat Haran**: The tale of Lord Krishna's quest for the Parijat flower.
- **Kaliya Daman**: The episode where Lord Krishna subdues the serpent Kaliya.
- **Keli Gopal**: A play depicting the childhood pastimes of Lord Krishna.
- **Rukmini Haran**: The abduction of Rukmini by Lord Krishna.
- **Rama Vijay**: The victory of Lord Rama over Ravana in the Ramayana.

These plays were written in Brajavali, a medieval literary dialect that combined Assamese with elements of Braj Bhasha, a language associated with Krishna devotion in North India. The use of Brajavali added a poetic and devotional flavor to the performances, enhancing their appeal to both learned scholars and the common folk.

The impact of Ankiya Nat and Bhaona on Assamese culture cannot be overstated. These performances provided not only entertainment but also served as a medium for religious instruction and spiritual upliftment. They played a crucial role in popularizing Neo-Vaishnavism among the masses, offering a direct and accessible way to engage with religious teachings through dramatic storytelling and music. Over the centuries, Bhaona has evolved and adapted to changing cultural and social contexts while retaining its core elements. The tradition of Bhaona was passed down through generations within designated Satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) and Namghars (prayer halls), where performances were held as part of religious festivals and celebrations. The preservation of Bhaona owes much to the dedicated efforts of Vaishnavite monks, known as Bhagavats, who meticulously preserved the scripts, music compositions, and choreography associated with the plays. These Bhagavats not only performed Bhaona but also trained disciples in the art form, ensuring its continuity and authenticity. Bhaona plays a significant role in shaping Assamese cultural identity and fostering community cohesion. The performances bring together people from diverse backgrounds, transcending linguistic, ethnic, and social barriers. They serve as occasions for

communal bonding, collective worship, and the celebration of shared cultural heritage. In addition to its religious and cultural significance, Bhaona has educational value, particularly in imparting moral and ethical lessons to the audience. The stories and characters portrayed in Bhaona serve as moral exemplars, teaching virtues such as compassion, loyalty, courage, and humility through dramatic narratives that resonate with universal human experiences. Despite its rich legacy and cultural importance, Bhaona faces several challenges in contemporary times. Economic pressures, changing audience preferences, and the influence of modern entertainment media pose threats to the traditional art form. Limited institutional support and resources further hinder efforts to sustain and promote Bhaona as a vibrant cultural practice. However, the relevance of Bhaona persists, albeit in evolving forms. Efforts are underway to revitalize Bhaona through adaptations that appeal to younger audiences while preserving its core traditions. Initiatives such as workshops, training programs, and collaborations with educational institutions aim to introduce Bhaona to new generations and cultivate a renewed appreciation for its artistic and spiritual value.

Objectives:

- a. To explore the cultural importance and standing of Bhaona within Assamese society.
- b. To evaluate the transformations in Bhaona performances over time.
- c. To investigate the impact of Bhaona competitions in preserving the traditional essence of the performance.

Significance of the Study: The continued existence of Assamese Bhaona within the Assamese cultural milieu is not merely a matter of preservation but also a testament to the resilience and richness of Assamese cultural heritage. Bhaona, a traditional form of religious theater, has deep roots in Assam's cultural tapestry, blending mythology, spirituality, and community engagement into a vibrant artistic expression.

Bhaona performances typically revolve around the episodes from the Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the lives of saints like Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, who are central figures in the Bhakti movement of Assam. These performances are characterized by elaborate costumes, traditional music, dance, and a narrative style that combines storytelling with moral teachings. The art form has not only entertained audiences for centuries but also served as a means of transmitting cultural values and spiritual teachings across generations. In contemporary times, the relevance and survival of Assamese Bhaona face various challenges. Modernization, changing audience preferences, and the availability of alternative forms of entertainment pose threats to the traditional art form. Economic pressures and limited institutional support further complicate efforts to sustain Bhaona performances and nurture the next generation of practitioners. Research plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges and ensuring the continuity of Assamese Bhaona. Through scholarly inquiry, researchers delve into the historical, cultural,

and spiritual dimensions of Bhaona, documenting its evolution, significance, and impact on Assamese society. Such research not only preserves the essence of Bhaona but also sheds light on its adaptive strategies over time, revealing how it has adapted to socio-cultural changes while retaining its core elements.

Moreover, research serves as a bridge between the past, present, and future of Assamese culture. By uncovering the intricacies of Bhaona's performances, the symbolism of its costumes, the nuances of its music, and the philosophical underpinnings of its narratives, researchers enrich public understanding and appreciation of Assamese cultural history. This knowledge fosters a sense of pride and identity among Assamese citizens, reinforcing their role as custodians of a unique cultural heritage. Furthermore, research informs cultural policies and educational initiatives aimed at promoting and safeguarding Assamese Bhaona. It provides insights into effective strategies for revitalizing and promoting traditional arts, including support for training programs, workshops, and collaborative projects that engage younger generations in learning and performing Bhaona. By integrating Bhaona into educational curricula and cultural festivals, researchers contribute to its continued relevance and adaptation in contemporary contexts. Beyond preservation, research into Assamese Bhaona contributes to broader scholarly dialogues on performance studies, religious practices, and cultural diversity. It positions Assam within the global discourse on intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the universal significance of local traditions in fostering social cohesion and spiritual enrichment.

Methods of Study: Textual analysis is the main methodology used in this study. The research employs a comparative methodology to evaluate the alterations that have transpired in Bhaona.

Result and Discussion: The 16th-century saint and cultural icon Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva is credited with creating the Assamese traditional theatrical performance known as Bhaona. From the Neo-Vaishnavism tradition, it tells mythical and spiritual stories using music, dance, acting, and musical instruments. Bhaona, which was first introduced by Srimanta Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century, has shaped religious customs, creative pursuits, and sense of collective identity in Assamese culture. One of the main factors influencing Bhaona's cultural relevance is its contribution to the dissemination of Neo-Vaishnavism's teachings, which place a strong emphasis on moral principles and devotion to God. Bhaona is a vehicle for disseminating religious and philosophical ideas to the general public via stories based on mythology and spiritual topics. This feature of Bhaona has contributed to the Assamese people's sense of spiritual unity and community harmony. Bhaona also acts as a storehouse for Assamese culture and values, conserving traditional dance, music, costumes, and storytelling. Through the incorporation of components from many regional traditions and classical forms, the performance itself reflects the rich cultural diversity and artistic prowess of Assam. Bhaona is essential to the formation of Assamese identity since it offers a forum for cultural expression and fosters ties within the community. Bhaona, being a social gathering, unites

individuals from various backgrounds and promotes a feeling of solidarity and inclusion within the community. It acts as a common cultural experience that breaks down social barriers and fortifies ties between people. From the Ankiya Bhaona in its early form to the modern Matribhashar Bhaona, Bhaona performances have experienced tremendous change. Cultural trends, audience choices, and social shifts have all impacted these alterations. The original version of Ankiya Bhaona was performed in Brajavali, a language that combines Assamese and Braj Bhasha. But Assamese is used in modern Matribhashar Bhaona performances, which makes it more approachable for audiences. Bhaona was originally done in hallowed places like monasteries and prayer rooms.

But as time went on, the shows shifted to built stages, drawing in more people from urban regions. Classical music and dance genres, such Satriya, performed in particular ragas and taalās, were part of traditional Bhaona. Nonetheless, folk music and dance have impacted contemporary Matribhashar Bhaona performances, resulting in a divergence from the traditional styles. Locally available materials for costumes and natural paints were used by entertainers in the past. Modern Bhaona reflects shifting aesthetics and commercial influences with styled clothing and fake cosmetics. At first, male performers played every role, including those of female characters. But in keeping with contemporary casting methods, women now fill female roles in Bhaona. There were long parts for Gayana-Bayana and Purvaranga in previous performances. Modern Bhaona performances, on the other hand, consist of shorter segments with an emphasis on drawing in the audience. The emphasis of Matribhashar Bhaona is shifted away from traditional components like music and dancing and towards stimulating talks. In order to appeal to modern audiences while maintaining essential principles and teachings, current Bhaona performances use stylized displays, modern ornamentation, and lighting. Bhaona performances are becoming more and more commercial, with the introduction of cash prizes for competitions and the selling of equipment required for performers. Notwithstanding the modifications, initiatives like Bhaona contests and festivals seek to emphasise and maintain the customs of Bhaona, guaranteeing its continuous significance and relevance within Assamese culture. These changes ensure that Bhaona will always be relevant and alive in Assamese culture by striking a balance between respecting tradition and embracing modernity.

Bhaona helps Assamese society grow socioeconomically by giving entertainers, artists, and craftspeople a means of subsistence. Due to the success of the performance, numerous cultural institutions, educational institutions, and organisations devoted to the promotion and preservation of Bhaona have been founded. Assamese society reveres Bhaona, who represents the people's religious convictions, creative traditions, and cultural legacy. Its lasting significance emphasises how crucial it is to protect and promote this priceless cultural asset for coming generations. The vocabulary, makeup, costumes, and performance spaces have all changed along this evolution. Ankiya Bhaona once spoke Brajavali, a language that was a combination of Assamese and Braj Bhasha, as well as traditional dance and music. To appeal to modern audiences, Matribhashar Bhaona now employs artificial makeup, modern clothing, and the Assamese language. Bhaona contests have become more popular in recent years, providing a stage for artists to display their skills and uphold the ancient spirit of Bhaona. The preservation of cultural history can be aided by

these events, which highlight traditional components including dance, music, costumes, and storytelling. But contests can have drawbacks, like time limits and an emphasis on winning, which could undermine Bhaona's authenticity and depth. Bhaona's spiritual ambiance was enhanced by the fact that it was traditionally performed at hallowed places. Performances in competitions frequently happen on made-out stages, which might not have the reverent atmosphere of traditional locations. Furthermore, audiences could not retain the same degree of reverence as in sacred contexts, and novice judges might find it difficult to evaluate performances fairly. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Bhaona contests can be a useful tool for developing talent and spreading knowledge about Bhaona. Authenticity and conformity to historic norms must be given top priority by competition organisers, judges, and participants in order to guarantee the preservation of traditional components. The development of Bhaona from Ankiya Bhaona to Matribhashar Bhaona illustrates how tradition and modernity may coexist. Assam's beloved cultural legacy, Bhaona, can live on by accepting modifications while preserving the original aspects. Bhaona competitions have the potential to significantly aid in the preservation of Assam's rich cultural heritage by means of meticulous assessment and deliberate adaptation.

Conclusion: Assamese culture has adapted and changed over time, with bhaona emerging as a vital cultural asset. Even though Matribhashar Bhaona is very popular, a lot of people, especially younger people, don't know about its traditional origins. As a result, conscious and committed efforts should be undertaken to maintain this custom. Bhaona was initially composed by Sankaradeva as a tool for promoting Neo-Vaisnavism. It now appears as the more popular folk form in Assam known as Matribhashar Bhaona, as opposed to Ankiya Bhaona. Still, Ankiya Bhaona is occasionally performed in Assamese rural regions. Over the years, Bhaona has had a number of structural modifications that have had an impact on elements such performance locations, timing, abilities, costumes, and music. These changes have given Matribhashar Bhaona a new lease on life. Younger generations have benefited much from the promotion and practice of Bhaona through tournaments. Even though these competitions could have unfavourable effects, the Assamese people's awareness can assist lessen them. However, the popularity of Matribhashar Bhaona competitions is expanding, which highlights the relevance and significance of this traditional performance style in Assamese society.

References:

Baruah, P. K., editor. Bhaona Samikhya. Bhaona Satobarshiki Udjapan Samiti, 1990.

Neog, Maheswar. Asomar Sanskritik Oitijya Nritya-Geet-Abhinay. Kaustubh Prakashan, 2009.

Chatterji, S. K. "The Eka-sarana Dharma of Sankaradeva: The Greatest Expression of Assamese Spiritual Outlook." Sankaradeva: Studies in Culture, edited by B. P. Chaliha, 2nd ed., Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 1998.

Goswami, N. C., editor. Ankia Natakavali. Kaustubh Prakashan, 2010.

Hazarika, P., and I. Saikia Bora, editors. Mahapurush Sankardev- Madhavdevar Ankia Nat Aru Jhumura. Srimanta Sankardev Sangha, 2013.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. "The Development of Modes of Moral Thinking and Choice in the Years Ten to Sixteen." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. "Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization." Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research, edited by D. A. Goslin, Rand McNally, 1969, pp. 347-480.

Piaget, Jean. The Moral Judgment of the Child. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932.

Quinn, R. A., et al. "Naturalistic Conceptions of Morality: A Question-Answering Approach." *Journal of Personality*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1994, pp. 239-262.

