

Chihna-Yatra: The First Drama of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam

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Abstract- Srimanta Sankaradeva was a versatile personality of Assamese society and he is regarded as 'Mahapurusha' (Great Saint) by the Assamese society. The Neo-Vaishnava movement, started by Sankaradeva, created a socio-cultural renaissance in Assam in the second half of the 15th century. He tried to change the society through cultural activity like music, dance, drama, etc. His first drama Chihna Yatra was an opera of one act, and the famous play was written and staged in the early part of his life. It was the first drama in Assamese society and the main feature of this drama was use of the local elements for performing the drama. The distinctive feature of Sankaradeva's drama was to make people understand the religious teachings through the performance of drama.

Keywords- Sankaradeva, Mahapurusha, Neo-Vaishnava, Ankia Nat

I. INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth century AD witnessed the birth of new ideas leading to rise of new religions, founded on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti (Choudhury, 1978). It was an era of great spiritual upsurge throughout India. The Vaishnava Bhakti movement also grew in other parts of the country, but it was Sankaradeva alone, who gave it a distinct shape and character of its own. Before the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva, there was a practice of various forms of folk art with dramatic elements which are still prevalent in some parts of Assam. The most distinctive and ancient form of folk drama is *Ojapali*. Another type of folk drama is *Kushan Gan* seen in Goalpara area of Assam and it is practiced in open theaters; themes are drawn from Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The folk dramatic styles of Assam are practiced even today in a few places of Assam. The most prominent drama style of Assam is considered *Ankia Nat or Bhaona*, which was presented by the great saint of Assam, Srimanta Sankaradeva. The basis of *Ankia Nat* is not an amalgamation of the format of a puppet, *Ojapali* and other folk traditional dance drama routines.

To perform a drama a stage is necessary, but there was no permanent platform at the time of Sankaradeva, Plays were performed in an open area and Namghars have been used for the purpose of the platform. Temporary stage was prepared on the ground with bamboo, ropes and decorated cloths. The ground is divided into two parts from one direction. There is a setting in front of the platform where the holy God is kept in mind. The other end is sitting with the orchestra party. There is a curtain behind them which is called the *yavanaika* of Sanskrit plays. Around the main platform, special guests are given the honours, public sit outside the stage. Bhonda, which was mainly staged at night, continued till the morning. Lanterns were used to keep the stage lighting. Some people were engaged to keep the lanterns working. These were the unique activities of the people of that period.

In this paper attempt is made to discuss the origin and performances of the drama which is the most important literary work of Sankaradeva. The objective of the study is to find out, how different aspects have been reflected in *Chihna-Yatra*, its impact on society, the elements which are used. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II states methodology, section III presents discussion and the last section concludes the paper with implication on society.

II. METHODOLOGY

The analytical and descriptive method is used in the study which is based on secondary data. The sources of secondary data are books, journals, webpages, and articles with the concerned subject. The hagiographies of Sankaradeva, Madhabdeva and other Viasnavite saints of Assam may be considered as the authentic source materials for the study of socio-cultural history of Assam.

III. DISCUSSION

In the year of 1468AD Sankaradeva, when he was only nineteen years old, staged a drama named '*Chihna-Yatra*' (Borkakati, 2000). Though he was too young, but his profound knowledge and maturity had already drawn the attention of the learned section of the society. Even the village elders looked towards him for guidance both for social and spiritual matters. When his ideas were accepted by the people, Sankaradeva staged the drama '*Chihna-Yatra*' to elaborate his religious philosophy. *Chihna-Yatra* was the story of lord Krishna. Sankaradeva had decided to stage this drama following the request of his followers and relatives. They had requested him to elaborate his philosophy of devotion to the one and only god, Vishnu or lord Krishna (Borkakati, 1995).

All the settings used in his drama were made by Sankaradeva himself. He also designed the costumes and masks worn by the actors. Through his weeklong theatre, Sankaradeva proved that he was one of the greatest ever performing artist (Borkakati, 1995). The entire music of the drama was composed by him. He also directed the dances. The audiences were surprised to see that during the course of the drama Sankaradeva performed so many things which were not possible for a single person. He was all in all in organizing the drama, sometimes he joined with the singers, sometimes he joined the dancers and sometimes he infused the drummers with enthusiasm by playing the drums himself. Sankaradeva was a master drummer, capable of playing as many as nine drums at a time (Borkakati, 1995). People were astonished by seeing his multi-faceted talent. Through this epic festival he tried to introduce life and teachings of lord Krishna among the common people. According to *katha-Guru-charit*, Sankaradeva himself acted in the role of the lord.

People were surprised to see Sankaradeva's multifaceted caliber and talent. Because it was not possible for a single person to master all aspects of art and culture like he did. By seeing his activities, people believed that Sankaradeva was the incarnation of god. With this belief many people became his disciple within a very short period. Mahendra Kandali who was the teacher of Sankaradeva also accepted him as his Guru after this epic festival. With this a new era began in Sankaradeva's life. About ten thousand people from different places of the entire middle Assam gathered at Bordowa to enjoy this great drama '*Chihna-Yatra*' (Borkakati, 2000). This was an unbelievable large crowd in those days. The people who were present there seem that they have unanimously accepted Sankaradeva as their Guru. Taking drama as a medium for preaching of religion among the masses may be considered as a great innovation of Sankaradeva. Most probably he was the first person in the world who used drama for preaching of religion. He introduced for the first time the use of drop scene in the '*Chihna-Yatra*', and it is believed that this was used in Assam before it came to be used in Europe. He was compared with Shakespeare due to his dramatic talent. To perform a drama some musical instruments are required, like Khol (a kind of Drum) and Tal (cymbal), which were also prepared under the supervision of Sankaradeva. Another important feature of the drama was scroll painting which was a great contribution towards the Assamese culture. The main theme of the drama was depicted through painting and Sankaradeva himself prepared the seven Vaikunthas (seven heavens) on painting. The artistic and musical component of the drama was mask and Dhemali. Guru himself played the role of Sutradhara and from the sources it is known that the show was divided into seven parts, people enjoyed to see him at all the seven places simultaneously. It was very unique in its way, only because of Sankaradeva's active participation and involvement.

Presentation Mode

The mode of presentation in *Chihna-Yatra* was different from later plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The innovative use of scroll painting was an important characteristic (Mahanta, 2007). This technique was followed by his successors in their drama in later period. The subject matter of the play was depicted on the scroll in this tradition which was started by Sankaradeva. It is mentioned that all the elements which were essential for a drama

like music, dance, mask were the creation of Sankaradeva. *Chihna-Yatra* which was a combination of two words *Chihna* and *Yatra* where '*Chihna*' means symbol and '*Yatra*' means acting. So, *Chihna-Yatra* means acting with symbols. However, this drama is not just a display of symbols, the play has been presented in two different ways to people. One way was through depictions of symbols in scroll; these are like different scenarios of God and Goddesses and another way was presentation of different characters that enacted the activities of characters of the play (Mahanta, 2007).

The four modes of acting were seen in *Chihna-Yatra*, namely, Angika, Bachika, Sattvika, and Arhaya (Mahanta, 2007). Other elements such as dance, music, dialogues, hymn, etc., are also incorporated with this drama. Thus, we have seen all the cateria in *Chihna-Yatra* for fulfilling a complete theatre. This was possible for Sankaradeva because of his multifaceted talent and personality.

Elements Used

Sankaradeva used the existing local traditions in his drama Introduction of Gayan-Bayan was a most important part of this drama which was adapted from local traditional element known as Ojapali. Gayan-Bayan was used as Purba-ranga in the *Chihna- Yatra* which was different from the Purba-ranga used in Sanskrit plays. Gayan – Bayan was a unique creation of Sankaradeva and they wear special costumes, and before beginning of the drama this musical group enters stage by dancing and playing with the Khol and cymbals.

IV. CONCLUSION

The impact of the drama *Chihna-Yatra* was tremendous on Assamese society in spirituality as well as culturally. Acting, dance and music became an integral part of Assamese culture which helped in evolving a distinct cultural identity of Assamese society. The Ragas presented in the drama uplifted Assamese music into a new era. It is known from the hagiographers that Sankaradeva himself sang *BayumandaliRaga* while Lakshman Bayan and Balai Gayan presented *Timir Raga*. Apart from being a medium of religious preaching and spirituality, the various dramas written by Sankaradeva and his followers became an integral part of day to day life of Assamese people and also a source of relaxation and entertainment. Even today these dramas, popularly known as Ankia Nat, are staged across Assam and draw large audiences. Important feature of these dramas are that these are generally presented through community participation and actors are drawn from common people and people volunteer as amateur. Even today, no commercial interest involve in staging and presentation of these dramas.

The *Chihna Yatra* may be considered as the preamble to the first regular Assamese drama, stage and music and a great cultural event in the cultural history of Assam. His *Chihna Yatra* is regarded as one of the first open-air theatrical performances in the world.

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