CHAPTER 2

EVOLUTION OF ASSAMESE DRAMA

2.1: INTRODUCTION

2.2: ORIGIN OF DRAMA IN ASSAM

2.3: SANKARDEVA AND HIS BHAONA

2.4: THE LATTER PERIOD UP TO MODERN DRAMA

2.5: AGE OF MODERN DRAMA
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2.1: Introduction

The great philosopher Aristotle defined drama as, “Intimation of action in the form of Action.” According to Sissero, “Drama is a copy of life, a mirror of custom, a reflection of truth.” Niccole in his book *Theory of Drama* writes that, “Drama is that art of expressing idea about life in such a manner as to render that expression capable of interpretation by actors and likely to interest an audience assembled to hear the words and witness the attention”.

Drama or action has been a part of the social activity of every community whether civilized or considerably primitive. Either a formalized or written down play or some traditional ballet or mimetic dance and rituals has been there to engage the attention and interest of people from time to time. Some of the rituals seen in various societies are nothing but incipient of drama. These rituals merely act out a theme and thus may be said to be dramatic in spirit. For example, Mother Rice (*Lakhimi*) symbolized by a few sheaves of corn is welcomed by the Assamese when the autumnal harvesting starts. The sheaves are carried in on the head, womenfolk welcome the paddy with the *uruli* sound made in the mouth, and the mistress of the house sprinkles water on it and fans it, while the man who brings it in puts his charge by a light on the granary floor. This ritual is done in a dramatic sense.

Formalized drama grows out of such rituals. Probably in most parts of the world drama has had a religious origin. It was so in Greece as in England; it has been so in India;
and the Assamese drama, as seen in the Ankiya Naat type of plays, has been pre-
eminently religious in origin.  

2.2: Origin of Drama in Assam

The history of Assamese drama is very long and old indeed older than the drama of any Indian modern language and older than even than the regular English drama. In Assam, Ankiya Naat, the staging of which is known as Bhaona grew out of the indigenous choric dance named Ojha-Pali, current in the land since before the Vaisnavite renaissance initiated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva in the fifteen century. In this regard it is very important to mention here that Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah in his book History of Assamese Literature wrote, “This pre-Vaisnavite Ojha-Pali dance recital might have given to Sankardeva the basic idea for the production of Ankiya plays. It may, therefore, be reasonably presumed that the recital of Kavyas, Ojha-Pali choral singing, and spectacular shows of other parts of India, might have jointly contributed to the rise of the fully developed drama in Assamese”. The Ojha-Pali had the myths associated with the snake goddess Manasa as staple before the advent of the Vaisnavite reformation. It is still popular among the people of different parts of Assam especially in the district of Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup.

Another type folk drama of Assam is seen in the activities of Dhuliyas or Drummers. This is basically classified into three types; (1) Bordhuliya (2) Joy Dhuliya; and (3) Dhepa Dhuliya. Usually drummers, with a piper in the troupe, are called in when there is a marriage or death ceremony. They are also seen in various spring time semi religious fairs known as Sori or Sobha. On these festive occasions they exhibit acrobatic feats and give performances of crude theatricals.
Bahua or Buffon, another form of folk drama was very much popular among the Assamese people before the birth of Ankiya Naat. The Bahua is a popular satirist. The Bahua is more dramatic in that he is more comical and more emphatic in his portrayal of situations. Here a differences has been seen that just as the Bahua deals with modern theme, the Ojha-Pali is based on various theme related with ritual fairs and festivals. Like other parts of India, Puppet Theatre is another type of folk drama which was very much popular among the people of Assam in very early days. Although it is very difficult to say how and when this was started but this form of folk drama was started in Assam during 10th century and it is properly written in Kalika Pooran. Thus it may be said that Puppetry is much older than Ojha-Pali in Assam. Again the German scholar Richard Pichel opined that, “Sanskrit Theatre was started on the basis of Puppet Theatre”.

Besides this there are some other folk performing arts generally known as ‘Quasi-Dramatic Performing Art’ were very much popular among the people of Assam before the birth of Ankiya Naat. These folk performing arts of Assam can be classified into three broad categories namely; (1) Dance-drama based (2) Quasi Dramatic; and (3) Jatra. Some examples of these are Pochati, Gayan-Bayan, Kushan Gaan, Bhari Gaan, Dotara Gaan, Aai Naam, Biya Naam, Naokhelor Geet, Mohoho, Deodhani dance etc. Of course, these types of folk dramas were usually not given as much notice as they deserve. Some of these are decaying for want of patronage and seem to need revitalization. Although these folk performances are not much seen in now a days, but the origin of drama in Assam was seen on all these ‘Quasi-Dramatic Performing Arts’ of Assam and Mahapurush Shrimanta Sankardeva wrote Ankiya Naat type of plays by taking the source from this type of folk drama of Assam.
2.3: Sankardeva and his Bhaona

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, the great saint of Vaisnavite movement in Assam, gave the birth of formalized drama in Assam in the middle of 15th century. Before this, there is no any written evidence is found regarding the birth of drama in Assam. The recorded history of Assamese drama begins with *Chihna-Jatra* (literally a play with painted scene) and the first theatre is the performance of it. Through his unless effort, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) wrote *Chihna-Jatra* in 1468 at the age of his nineteenth and it may surely be call as the birth year of Assamese drama movement. After *Chihna-Jatra*, Sankardeva wrote another five dramas which are popularly known as *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona* for the people of Assam to spread the Neo-Vaisnavite movement among Assamese people from time to time. These are *Patniprasad, Kaliadaman, Keligopal, Parijat Haran, Rukmini Haran* and *Ram-Vijay*.

Although the chief goal of Srimanta Sankardeva was to spread Neo-Vaisnavite movement among the people of Assam through his plays, but at the same time he also gave importance to make his plays a medium of amusement among Assamese people. Henceforth he used all the elements of entertainment like song, dance, musical instruments and comic scene in his plays which surely act as an important medium of entertainment among Assamese people at that time.

After Sankardeva, his chief disciple Mahapurush Sri Sri Madhabdeva played a very important role for enrichment of Assamese drama movement. By following his Guru’s path, Madhabdeva wrote a number of plays to spread the religious sentiment among the people of Assam which were very popular source of entertainment among Assamese people during that time. All the plays written by Madhabdeva are often termed as *Jhumura*. They are lighter than Sankardeva’s plays and more musical in content.
wrote Chordhara, Pimparaguchoa, Bhojan Bihar, Arjun-Bhanjan and Bhumilotowa. Although there is some confusion regarding the number of plays written by Madhabdeva but it is clearly mentioned in Asomiya Natya Sahitya: Parampora Aru Paribartan that Madhabdeva wrote five numbers of plays for the people of Assam.\(^1\)

Thus Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurush Sri Sri Madhavdeva played an important role for the growth and development of drama movement in Assam at the very early period during the 15\(^{th}\) and 16\(^{th}\) century. Their restless effort ultimately gave the birth of drama movement in Assam which played a very important role as a medium of entertainment at that time. The character of Bedanidhi in Rukmini Haran, Biswamitra in Ram Bijoy and Narad in Parijat Haran was introduced by Sankardaeva to entertain the audiences.\(^1\)

After the death Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, Gopal Ata or Gopaldev wrote three plays namely Janmajantra, Nandotsab and Uddhabjan, Daityari Thakur wrote Nrisingha Jatra and Shayamanta Haran, Ramcharan Thakur wrote Kanshg-Badh Dwijabhushan wrote Ajamil Upakhyan, Bor Ata the disciple of Gopal Ata wrote Folgujatra, Dharmadev Goswami wrote Dharmoday, Dwijamahindra wrote Bodhoday etc.\(^2\)

In this way in the contemporary period of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and immediate after their death, a number of plays were written by different persons on various religious themes and continued the drama movement from different parts of our state which act as a very important source of entertainment among the people of Assam during that time.

The heyday of the Ankiya Naat was the sixteenth century and Sankardeva and Madhabdeva were followed by different play writers of Assam from time to time. The
tradition of writing plays of this type seems to have continued right into the nineteenth century.

2.4: The later period upto Modern Drama

During the time of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva Ankiya Naat was performed only in Satras and Namghar. But in 17th and 18th centuries Ankiya Naat was used as an important medium of entertainment in different religious fairs and festivals of Assam like Janmastami (Sri Krishna’s birthday), Doljatra, Bihu, Durga Puja and other cultural festivals of the state. During that time various Satras from different parts of ancient Assam also played a significant role for the upliftment of drama movement in the state. Drama performed by various satras of Assam during that time were, Mohamoh, Sitaharan, Kalanka Bhanjan, Udyogparba (Aaoniati Satra), Ramleela, Provas Jogya, Sokhi Sangbad, Bamon Bhikshya (Dakshinpat Satra), Balicharan, Prahlad Charitra, (Garmurh Satra), Janmajatra, Gobardhan Jatra (Bardowa Satra) etc.

In the latter part of 17th century as well as in the beginning of 18th century various persons wrote a number of plays in different parts of Assam. Some well known plays of this period were Pandav Bijoy, Sindur Jatra, Ravan Badh, Pralamba Badh, Sita Haran, Sita Barjan, Balichalan, Jarasandha Badh, Patalikanda, Durbasha Bhojan, Putana Badh, Babrubahan, Lanka dahan, Harichandra Upakhyan, Sindhu Jatra, Tripurasur Badh, Gajendra Mokhyan, Amrit Manthan, Sambarasur Badh etc. which helped a lot in enriching the cultural scenario of Assam. It is important to mention here that all the plays written during the last part of eighteenth century as well as in the first part of the nineteenth century was melodramatic in nature where as Ankiya Naat was written mainly on religious nature with the goal of spreading Neo-Vaisnavite movement in
A new character known as Bahua was also introduced which was not present in Ankiya Naat type of plays. The theme of the plays of this period was mainly based on the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Giving entertainment to the audiences was the primary goal of the playwriters through different religious story from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. To bring this medium more nearer to the people of Assam, the playwrights of that period use Assamese languages in their plays in place of brojoboli language used by Mahapurush Shrimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurush Madhavdeva in their Ankiya Naat type of plays. Hence with the passes of time variety of changes came in different aspect of a play in relation to the plays written by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.

In 1826 the East India Company took over the charge of Assam through the signing of ‘Yandaboo Pact’ and as a result of this British rule was started in Assam. This brought a revolutionary change in every aspects of human life whether it is economical, political, cultural or social among the people of Assam. With the start of British rule, a meltdown came in the cultural field of Assam. The growth and development of drama movement became very slow for some years. A few disciples of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva as well as some others performed a few number of plays in Satras and Namghar only to continue the culture of Assam. As the time goes peoples from other parts of India came to Assam for different work. As a result of this cultures of other parts of the country became familiar among the people of Assam and it influences the Assamese people.

In this way with the beginning of British rule affected the cultural scenario of Assam for a long time and cultures of different parts of India and the world started in Assam. Jatra is one of the most well known examples of this.
2.5: Age of Modern Drama

It is well known that with the Burmese depredations in the second decade of the nineteenth century the social and cultural life of the Assamese met with the irreparable setback. The state was later taken over by the East India Company and the company came with the imposition of the Bengali language in the courts and schools of the land (1836-1873). Assam had been experiencing civil dissensions right from the middle of the eighteen century, and the loss of independence along with the entry of foreign power, the shifting of the local language, the disillusion consequent on the recent loss of freedom, widespread addiction to opium; all these told heavily on the cultural life of the land. Till 1857 the Assamese were still dreaming of recovering of their lost glory, the dreams evaporating with the hanging of Maniram Dewan and Piyali Baruah in 1858. As the decades wore out, the more alert of the younger section realized that they were required to adjust themselves to the changing circumstances. The new thought currents were rallied around the monthly *Arunodoi* published by the American Baptist Mission from Sibsagar (1846-1882). With the starting of British Rule and introduction of English language in this land, a new era was begun in the dramatic culture of Assam.

Some prominent people of Assam of that time like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Phani Sarma, Bishnu Rabha etc. went to Calcutta for higher studies and they were very much influenced by the writing of European author. When they returned back, they tried to apply the European concept in the land of Assam. As the time passes, during the middle of nineteenth century, European style of drama as well as Bengali culture became popular among the people of Assam. Acceptance of European
style in the place of traditional folk drama may be termed as the beginning of modern age in the drama movement of Assam.

It is true that plays of the Ankiya type were kept alive in the Vaisnavite monasteries, but Gunabhiram Barua’s Ram Navami (1857) and Hemchandra Barua’s Kaniya Kirtan (1861) laid the foundation of what we call drama in modern sense. Ram Navami was written around the theme of widow remarriage, where as Kaniya Kirtan was completely a social drama dealt with the moral degeneration brought about by opium addiction.

After this, till the last part of nineteenth century Assamese drama movement was developed in a very slow place due to some reasons like a very less number of highly educated people and lack of stages in Assam for performing such kind of plays. Again during the period of 1870-1880 entry of Jatra, a very popular folk art of Bengal in Assam also stands as an obstacle in the path of growth and development of modern Assamese drama in Assam. Of course in later period the popularity of Bengali Jatra helped the Assamese people to form Jatra party in Assam. In this regard the role of Brajanth Sarma was very prominent. During that period a very few numbers of plays were written by different persons from time to time in various parts of Assam. Some of these are Bangal-Bangalini (1872) by Rudraram Bardoloi of Nagaon, Abhimanyu Badh and Sitaharan by Ramakanta Choudhary of Nalbari etc.

In the meantime the concept of proscenium stage was started in Assam with the influence of colonial British rule although the age of modern drama was already started with Gunabhiram Barua’s Ram Navami in 1857. As a result of this in the last part of nineteenth century as well as in the beginning of twentieth century a number of permanent stages was made in different parts of Assam. Some of these are Guwahati (1875), Golaghat (1895), Tezpur (1897), Sibsagar and Jorhat (1899), Nagaon (1902),
Mangaldai (1904), Ban Theatre of Tezpur (1905), Pathsala (1912), Nalbari (1927), Nazira (1928), Biswanath Chariali (1934) etc. With the formation of permanent stages a number of Theatre party was also formed in various parts of the state which helped a lot for growth and development of drama movement in this land.

A move for public stage in the town of Gauhati was made as early as 1875 and some of the plays put on board were Savitri-Satyaban, Parikshitar Brahmasap, Nal-Damayanti, based on mythology and, Bhrama-ranga, an adoption of Shakespear’s Comedy of Errors. The plays were in the modern style, in prose, with song in Assamese, Bengali and Hindi.29

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a fair number of plays on social mythology themes. The Jonaki for Aghon Saka (1896) records that a few enthusiastic gentlemen of Jorhat organized on Assamese theatre and staged with success such plays as Ramani-gabharu and Pandav-parichay, the first written by Buddhindranath Dilihiyal Bhattacharya and on episode from the history of Assam. Ramakanta Choudhury’s Sitaharan seems to have been the first play to show any positive Bengali influence, it being an attempt in blank verse after the example set by Michel Madhusudan Dutta.30 As a play written in blank verse and treating of a serious theme the work is sufficiently dignified. Two other mythological plays of the period Haradhanu Bhanga and Harichandra (1893) by Purnakanta Sarma have been said to be able to retain their popularity in the countryside of Upper Assam. What is more significant is that the stream of plays based on social observation, like Gunabhiram Barua’s Ram Navami, around widow remarriage, and Rudraram Bardoloi’s Bangal-Bangalini, the later a farce, flowed right from the beginning of the modern period of
Assamese drama. One of the most important of the early light plays was Lakshminath Bezbarua’s *Litiikai* (Servant), first published in the Jonaki in 1889.

Bezbarua proves himself to be a dramatist of more serious cast of mind in his historical plays. *Chakradhawaja Singha* (1915) deals with the Assam-Mughal struggles of the middle of the seventeenth century and the final defeat of Mughal general Raja Ram Singha at the naval battle of Saraighat near Gauhati. Of course Bezbaruah became more popular with *Jaymati* (1915); dealing with the life of seventeenth century princes was tortured to death by reigning king as she would not let out news of her missing husband Gadadhar.

Padmanath Gohain Barua also dealt with the patriotic theme of Mughal defeat in *Lachit Barphukan* (1915). Gohain Barua wrote two other historical plays namely *Teton Tamuli* (1909) and *Bhut ne Bhram* (1924), and few lighter ones. *Gaonburah*, published as early as 1897 seems to be one of the best comedies in language.

Another early playwright was Durgaprasad Dutta Majjindar Barua. His farce *Mahari* published in 1896 and *Guru Dakshina* (1901) based on social theme helped a lot in enriching the drama movement in Assam.

Benudhar Rajkhowa’s light plays of social criticism, *Kuri Satikar Sabhyata* and *Tini Ghaini* are also well known and very much popular among the people of Assam at that time.

In the meantime ‘Asomiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha’ (ABUSS) was formed by some prominent personalities of Assam in Calcutta on August 25, 1888. It is a ‘red-letter’ day for Assam because ABUSS make Assamese language more powerful and created an atmosphere to compete Assamese drama with drama from other Indian languages, especially Bengali language. In here it is important to mention that
Bhramaranga, a translational work of *Comedy of Errors* written by William Shakespeare was performed in different places of Assam at that time to make Assamese drama popular among the people of Assam.\(^{32}\)

In the same way in 1923-24, ‘Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir’ was formed in Gauhati and it had played a significant role for enrichment of drama movement in Assam. The formation of ‘Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir’ was the result of regionalism sentiment among Assamese people. The creation of ‘Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir’ in Gauhati and ‘Ban-Mancha’ in Tezpur gave more enthusiasm to write Assamese drama by Assamese people. During that time Joytiprasad Agarwal, Natasurya Phani Sharma, Lakshyadhar Choudhary, Nakul Chandra Bhuya, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Prasanalal Chaudhary etc. wrote a number of Assamese drama on various social, historical as well as mythological themes. In here, it is important to mention that Nilambar of Prasanalal Choudhary, Sonit Kuwari of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Beula of Atul Chandra Hazarika and Alibaba as well as Rakshakumar of Lakshyadhar Choudhary were performed in Ban-Mancha of Tezpur which gain much popularity among the people of Assam during that time. Besides this Lakshyadhar Choudhary also wrote Ekalavya, Nimila Anka, Omola Ghar, Pathar, Thikana etc. during his life which helped a lot in enriching drama scenario of Assam. In here we can also mention the name of Prabin Phukan, Prabhat Chandra Sharma, Late Ganesh Gogoi, and Ananda Chndra Baruah for their outstanding works for development of drama movement in Assam.

The role of Brajanath Sarma in the field of drama movement was very important. In September 1921, he formed ‘Silakalika Opera Party’ and this opera party performed two dramas namely Bajhirao and Rana Pratap.\(^{33}\) After this he formed ‘Kohinoor Opera Party’ in Pathsala and this party performed drama in different parts of Assam which
decreases the popularity of Bengali Jatra in Assam.34 “Jatra is a vibrant form of dramatic activities characterized by its performance in open stage with the huge number of audiences occupying all four sides of the stage. The special feature of Jatra in respect of characterization was that the female characters were played by males. This fact could be attributed to the conservativeness of the feudal society. This conservativeness was given a big blow by the great Brajanth Sarma in 1933, when he introduced co-acting on the stage in Doomdooma of Sibsagar district in Assam in the play Moran Jeeori, giving thereby the equal rights to women on stage”. (Sitanath Lahkar, Interview).

On August 15, 1947 India became independent from British colonial rule. After independence, a change came in every aspect of human life in our country whether it is economic, political, social or cultural. The impact of independence also felt in the cultural scenario of Assam. In 1957, a new concept was started in drama movement of Assam that is revolving stage. The first revolving stage of Assam was made in Sibsagar known as ‘Bhagawati Prasad Baruah Revolving Stage’.35 In the same way after independence Achyut Lahkar of Pathsala returned back from Calcutta by completing his higher studies and came with a new concept to give Assamese drama a new shape by influencing the popular folk art of Bengal Jatra. Here it is important to mention that before this, Jatra was already played as a very popular medium of entertainment among the people of Assam.

“In the dramatic field of Assam the stream of mobile drama is very well known which is mostly related with Mobile Theatre. At present Mobile Theatre is one of the most entertainment as well as enriching professional group in the cultural field of Assam and it become successful in introducing itself as a cultural industry in the economic field of
Assam. Although the growth and development of this medium was started during 1860-1870 but it was mostly evolved after the formation of ‘Asom Kohinoor Opera Party’ under the leadership of Brajanath Sarma in 1930. After twenty nine years of the formation of ‘Asom Kohinoor Opera Party’, Sada Lahkar of Pathsala formed ‘Nataraj Opera’ in 1959. In 1960 ‘Nataraj Opera’ completely transformed into as a mobile group by performing different plays at various parts of Assam until 1962. After this, Achyut Lahkar, the elder brother of Sada Lahkar gave a new look to this ‘Nataraj Opera’ by using some new techniques and finally formed Nataraj Theatre in 1963, the first full fledged modern Mobile Theatre party of Assam''.\textsuperscript{36} The chief goal of Achyut Lahkar to start Mobile Theatre was (i) to give financial security to all the artists involved with this as well as, (ii) to give a new dimension to the \textit{Jatra} which is already very popular in Assam.\textsuperscript{37} In here it is very important to mention that the term ‘mobile’ to this popular medium was first given by Radha Gobinda Baruah.

\textbf{Notes and References:}


2 Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity. She is the wife and shakti (energy) of Vishnu, a major god in Hinduism.

3 \textit{Urul}, Asomiya biya-naam, \textit{Assamese} wedding song.


5 Ibid. p 7.

6 Ibid. p 8.


15 Ibid. p 12.


22 Ibid. p 40.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. p 21.


30 Ibid. p 22.


32 Ibid. p 96.

33 Ibid. p 274.

34 Ibid. p 273.

