Chapter II

The Assamese Drama Prior to Western Influence:
A Thumb-nail Sketch

The history of regular Assamese drama began as early as the first half of the sixteenth century when Sāṅkaradeva, the pioneer saint-dramatist of Assam, wrote and produced his plays.¹ Sāṅkaradeva wrote six plays and was followed by his chief apostle, Mādhavadeva, who composed and produced plays on the line shown by his great master. They were successively followed by numerous other playwrights, including Gopāladeva, who wrote successfully, while many others merely imitated them.² The tradition of writing and producing plays on the model of Sāṅkaradeva and his contemporaries continued late into the nineteenth century, although old Assamese drama that had attained its high water-mark of excellence at the hands of these great pioneers gradually fell into the hands of immature imitators, who subsequently landed it into a state of decadence.³ Some writers also wrote a few plays in Sanskrit, interspersed with Assamese, during the seventeenth and the

¹ According to K. Medhi, Sāṅkaradeva wrote his first extant play, Kāliya-damana, in 1518 (Aṅkāwalī, I, Intro., p. lxvii). B.K. Barua also seems to hold the same view (Aṅkīyā Naṭ, Intro., p. xxxvi). But W. Neog considers Patni-prasāda as Sāṅkaradeva's first play (Sāṅkaradeva and His Times, p. 187). S. N. Sarma also holds this view and believes that this play was written by 1550 (A.N.S., p. 47). In any case, there is no doubt that regular Assamese drama was born during the first half of the sixteenth century.

² Assamese Literature, pp. 110-115

³ ibid., p. 110
eighteenth centuries, but these plays had no popular appeals as they were unintelligible to the masses, and so failed to leave any mark on the development of Assamese drama. And drama in the true sense of the term did not reappear in the Assamese literary scene until a new type of play came into being as a result of the Western impact which brought about tremendous changes here as in any other parts of India.

Characteristics of Old Assamese Drama

A thumb-nail sketch of the salient features of pre-British Assamese drama is necessary in order to see in what ways modern Assamese drama is largely a product of Western influence. The dramas of Sankaradeva and his followers are popularly known as the ankiya nāts. The dominant feature of these plays is the note of religion. These plays were avowedly of a didactic nature, the playwright's aim being not only to give enlightenment but also education of a religio-ethical type. The aim of the playwright was to teach the audience the tenets of Vaisnavism by staging before them the activities of Krishna and Rama. The stories are taken from the epics or the Puranas where the activities of Krishna and Rama are glorified and

4. A.N.S., p. 103

5. M. Neog and S.N. Sarma have ably discussed this subject. See Sankaradeva and His Times, pp. 246-275; and A.N.S., pp. 13-21. Also see the scholarly Introductions to the Aňkiya Nat by K. Medhi and B.K. Barua.
their superiority to all other gods and goddesses is asserted. "Plot, characterization and dialogue are all subordinated to the dramatist's main purpose of instilling into the hearts of the audience the message of 'bhakti' ... The dramatist's energy is directed towards evoking a devotional fervour in the audience ... The plot is so arranged as to glorify the hero, Krishna or Rama." 6

Another noteworthy characteristic of these plays is their lyrical nature. There is in these plays an abundance of songs and verses, which are sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments, and intended to bring to the audience the message inculcated in the plays. Many incidents and situations are suggested through descriptive verses instead of being represented through character and action. Lyrics preponderate so much in the drama that the story of a play could be followed even if the dialogue and stage-directions—the latter are mostly in prose—were taken away. 7 Even the prose is poetic, and it is sung rather than spoken like ordinary speech. A play also contains a number of Sanskrit slokas which themselves may be said to form the skeleton of the plot. 8 Sañkaradeva himself composed for his plays 179 Sanskrit verses out of a total of 180, the remaining one being taken from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa. 9

6. Sañkaradeva and His Times, p. 246
7. A.N.S., p. 15
8. Aṅkāwālī I, Intro., p. xviii
9. ibid., p. xvix
"In these plays," Birinchikumar Barua remarks, "the writer appears more as a poet and composer than a dramatist. Moreover, his play is not a drama in the real sense, but a lyrico-dramatic spectacle." 10

Another characteristic of this drama worthy of note is the preponderance of the Sūtradhāra. Although apparently influenced by the Sūtradhāra of the Sanskrit drama, the Sūtradhāra in an Assamese play is different in many respects from his Sanskrit counterpart. Unlike in a Sanskrit play, the Sūtradhāra in an Assamese drama remains on the stage all through the performance. He sings the 'bhatimā' or introductory verses, explains the subject-matter of the play, and announces the entrance and exit of the chief characters. He also gives stage-directions, suggests incidents and situations which cannot be shown on the stage, and sings the benedictory verses known as the 'mukti-mahgal bhatimā'. Thus, the Sūtradhāra is a central figure in an Assamese play. 11  He is singer, actor and stage-director all rolled into one. 12

The language used in these plays presents another striking feature. This is known as Brajāwali bhāsā, which is largely a mixture of Maithili and Assamese. Brajāwali or Brajabuli, as it is called in Bengal, was not a spoken language

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10. Ahkiyā Nāt, Intro., p. xii
11. R. Kakati, Purani Asamiyā Sāhitya, Gauhati, 1958, p. 114
12. A.N.S., p. 13
of any region; it was an artificial dialect created by the medieval Vaisnava poets in which the Krishna stories were written. "This artificial language was given the name of Brajabuli because it reminded one of Braja, the land sanctified by the presence of Radha and Krishna. The term, Brajabuli, however, should not be confused with the name of Brajabakha or Brajabhasā. The latter is the name of the actual spoken language, a form of Western Hindi of the district round about Muttra." The same can be said about Assamese Brajabuli also. Saṅkaradeva and his followers used this language because this would be intelligible not only to the common people of Assam but to those of the whole of Eastern India. It was well-suited to glorify the activities of Krishna before the common folk. While Sanskrit would be Greek to them if it were adopted, ordinary day-to-day Assamese would be too mundane for the purpose. It may be noted that although Assamese Brajabuli is a mixed language, the structural pattern is purely Assamese, as can be seen in this speech from one of Saṅkaradeva's plays: "he rāja-nandinī kichu cintā nahi karabi. eku tile krishnaka ōnaba, toho sukhe raha."
Nature of the Performance

The Assamese term for the representation of a play is 'bhāona', which is derived from 'bhāo' meaning a spectacle or imitation and apparently connected with a transitory state (vyabhicari-bhava) of pleasure and pain. Most of the preliminaries of Sanskrit drama as prescribed in the Nāṭyasāstra are observed in the performance of an Assamese drama with certain modifications. The Assamese term for the preliminaries is 'dhemāli' or 'dhaimāli' that includes dancing and singing by the chorus (gāyan-bāyan) with drums and cymbals, which continues through various stages for some time until the actual play begins. When the preliminaries are over, the Sūtradhāra makes his entrance which has to be attended with the lighting of fireworks, the holding of a fire-arc and a screen. The Sūtrādhāra then performs a dance after which he sings the 'nandi'; announces the subject-matter of the play exhorting the audience to see and hear it carefully, and again performs a short introduction announcing the main features of the plot. At the close of the introduction, he announces in Sanskrit verses the entrance of the hero, usually Krishna or Rama, and sings a song of entrance to proper musical accompaniment. The curtain is once again held in position, and as soon as the song of entrance begins, the

17. bhāo la = to take the rôle of; bhāo jor = to feign (Aṅkāwali, I, Intro., p. 11).
18. Nāṭyasāstra, V, 1–25
19. Aṅkāwali, I, Intro., p. 1
curtain is taken off and the hero appears, dances over the stage, and at the end takes his place in a corner as the stage-direction, 'eka pāsa huyā rahala', suggests. Then the heroine and other major dramatis personae enter the stage to the accompaniment of proper music. The privilege of a 'pravesa-gīta' (entrance-song) belongs only to the chief characters; others simply dance to a simple concert of drums and cymbals or enter the stage with some major characters. Once on the stage, the characters do not generally go out; they take their seats on the stage in appropriate groups; and such of them as have the occasion to speak or act, rise from their seats from time to time. The performance concludes with the singing of the 'mukti-māngal bhatimā' extolling the supremacy of Krishna or Rama.

The Stage

The 'nāmghar' or prayer-hall that exists in every village in Assam is used as stage and auditorium for the performance of a play. Sometimes temporary pandals are erected around a temple with movable walls in order to extend the space. An enclosure is made in the middle of the prayer-hall or the pandal, as the case may be, to be used as the stage around which raised seats are placed for the actors. Sometimes a large

20. ibid., pp. 110, III et seq
21. Saṅkaradeva and His Times, p. 262
decorated canopy (chandratāpa) is hung over the stage. No raised platform is used for the stage. The space all around the stage is the auditorium with a small space left at one end as a passage to the 'manikut' (part of the prayer-hall where the altar is kept), and at the further end another for the entrance and exit of musicians and actors. The seats near the 'manikut' are usually reserved for the pontiff and other dignitaries. Other members of the audience, including women, sit in the available space, usually on mats.

Originally, a part of the hall where a play was performed was kept apart with a screen for keeping the dramatic accessories or 'cho', as they are called in Assamese; but in present-day practice there is a separate green-room, called 'cho-ghar' (nepathya gṛha), where the actors are dressed and painted and all the dramatic accessories including masks are kept.

Aṅkiyā Nāṭ and Sanskrit Drama

The term 'aṅkiyā' is derived from 'ahka', which in Assamese corresponds to a 'nāṭaka', the principal type of Sanskrit drama, and which comprises all the sentiments (rasas) with the only difference that, unlike the Sanskrit 'nāṭaka'

22. ibid., p. 267
23. ibid., p. 268
which contains five to ten acts, the Assamese akhiyā nāṭ has only one.²⁴ Although the akhiyā nāṭ was developed largely out of indigenous materials, Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy also influenced the playwright to a great extent.²⁵ Much in the same way as English drama in its early stages was influenced by the dramas of Greece and Rome. This influence is seen particularly in the introduction of the role of the Sūtradhāra, the use of Sanskrit verses and the 'nandi', the observance of the preliminaries (purva-rānga), and the recitation of a concluding benediction which is similar to Bharat Vākya in the Sanskrit drama.²⁶ Like the Sanskrit dramatist, the aim of the Assamese playwright is also to arouse various sentiments, although the emphasis is always on 'bhakti' or devotion to Krishna.

But the differences between a Sanskrit drama and an Assamese drama are more striking than the resemblances. The Sūtradhāra in an Assamese play, unlike his counterpart in a Sanskrit drama, does not depart after the invocation, but remains all along on the stage giving necessary directions. He is an integral part of the play, and can very well be called the pivot on which the whole performance revolves.²⁷ Again, such incidents as battle, slaying, marriage, amorous dalliance, bathing, anointing the body, eating and the like, which are

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²⁴ Ankawāli, I, Intro., pp. xv-xvi
²⁵ Akhiyā Nāṭ, Intro., p. x
²⁶ Akhiyā Nāṭ, Intro., p. xi; Ankawāli, I, Intro., pp. xv-xxiii
²⁷ B. Kakati, Purani Asamiyā Sāhitya, Gauhati, 1958, pp. 114-115
prohibited in Sanskrit dramaturgy, are freely shown on the stage in an Assamese play. Further, an Assamese play, unlike the Sanskrit, is not divided into acts or scenes; changes of scenes are either announced by the Sūtradhāra or indicated through orchestral singing. The Assamese drama is also conspicuous by the absence in it of the Jester or Vidūsaka, who is so prominent a character in the Sanskrit drama.

Aṇkiyā Nāṭ and Other Medieval Dramatic Institutions of India

In medieval India, various dramatic institutions were practised in different regions of the country, of which mention may be made of Yaksagana of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Terrukuttu and Bhagavata-mela Nataka of Tamilnadu, Bhavai of Gujrat, Lalita of Maharastra, Rasa-Lila and Ram-lila of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and Yatra of Bengal. It is true that there are some resemblances between the aṇkiyā nāṭ of Assam and these dramatic shows, particularly those of the South, but mere resemblances cannot be ground enough to assert that the former was influenced by the latter. In fact, physical distance alone between Assam and the South made it unlikely in

28. Nāṭyasāstra, XVIII, 16 ff.; S.D., p. 300
29. Aṅkāwalī, I, p. xxxiii
30. A.N.S., pp. 31-32; Aṅkāwalī, I, Intro., pp. xxxiv-xxxvi
31. Tirthanath Sarma in an article published in Chintākosh, Calcutta, pointed out the similarities between the aṇkiyā nāṭs and Yaksagana.
those days that Saṅkaradeva and his fellow playwrights were influenced by the Southern dramatic institutions. Scholars, therefore, maintain that the similarities are not due to influence but to other factors like their common indebtedness to Sanskrit drama, identical spirit of the times and aims of the writers. The spirit of the times was fervently religious, and these dramatic institutions were given rise to largely by the growth of Vaisnavism which moulded them as well as was moulded by them. It was, therefore, but natural that there would be likenesses as writers all over the country in those days thought alike.

The Maithili dramas of Umāpati and Vidyāpati seem to have some influence on Saṅkaradeva, who might have come across them during his pilgrimage. "It cannot be denied that there was some influence of Vidyāpati on Mahāpurusa Saṅkaradeva. This is borne out by the use of the Maithili dialect mixed with Assamese in his dramas and devotional songs (bargīts)." On the other hand, K. Medhi, who is not inclined to admit any Northern or Southern Indian influences on the growth of the Saṅkiyā nāṭ, holds that "it was almost entirely a native growth, and although its framework was borrowed from the classical Sanskrit drama, its integral parts were made up

32. A.N.S., pp. 31-32. See also M. Neog's article, 'Medieval Assamese drama and contemporary dance dramas of other parts of India', Journal of the University of Gauhati, Vol. VI, 1955

33. A.N.S., p. 34
entirely of indigenous materials. "34 For all that has been said and written on this aspect of the subject, it cannot be completely ruled out that Saṅkaradeva was influenced, directly or indirectly, by dramatic institutions of other parts of India. It was likely that the first Assamese dramatist was familiar with some of these dramatic shows as he was a much travelled man by the time he took to writing plays.35 It is, of course, true that Assamese drama got its sap primarily from native sources, the chief of which was the Ojā-Pāli or village choruses consisting of a band of singers of four or five. In this respect, Birinchikumar Barua's observation is worth quoting. "The pre-Vaisnavite Ojā-Pāli dance-recital", Dr Barua writes, "might have given to Saṅkaradeva the basic idea for the production of Ankiyā plays. It may, therefore, be reasonably presumed that the recital of Kāvyas, Ojā-Pāli choral singing, and spectacular shows of other parts of India, might have jointly contributed to the rise of the fully developed drama in Assamese."36

√Ankiyā Nāṭ and Medieval European Drama

Referring to the growth of British drama, Allardyce Nicoll observes that "The indigenous dramatic activity took its

34. Aṅkāwālī, I, Intro., p. xiv
35. This is admitted by both W. Neog and S.N. Sarma (see Dr Neog's article just referred to, and Dr Sarma's A.N.S., p. 34). Even K. Medhi admits of "some indirect influences on minor points" (Aṅkāwālī, I, Intro., p. xiv).
36. H.A.L., p. 33
rise, as did the dramas of the Greeks, from the religion of the time. Whatever it borrowed from other sources, it was in origin, and remained for long, distinctly a creation of the Church.* This is true of the dramas of all Western countries, which evolved "out of the Liturgy."* It has already been seen that Assamese drama also had its origin in the religion of the time. The 'nām-ghar' or prayer-hall played—and still plays—almost the same rôle as that of the church in medieval Europe. The medieval 'mystery', 'miracle' and 'morality' plays were performed in and around churches; Much in the same way, performances of the ankiyā plays took place in a prayer-hall or in temporary pandals built around it.

The Church, as is well known, was everything for the Middle Ages in Europe. In the same way it can be said that religion was everything for the Assam of Saṅkaradeva's time, the dominating faith being Vaisnavism, the cult of Krishna worship. Because of this identity of spirit—the spirit of religion—it is but natural that the ankiyā plays of Assam and the medieval plays of the West reveal some identical features despite the immense difference of space. This is supported by the fact that the writers of both the plays had the same purpose before them.

As the aim of the medieval British playwright was to "show to an uneducated folk the Scriptural story in visible wise, thus counteracting the lack of vernacular versions of the Holy

37. British Drama, p. 20
38. World Drama, p. 142
so also the aim of the ankiya plays was to teach the unlettered people the tenets of Vaisnavism by glorifying the activities of Krishna and Rama, as told in the epics and the Puranas, in visual forms.

The 'miracles' were plays dealing with the lives of saints, while the 'mysteries' dealt with themes taken from the Bible, although in England the two titles were practically synonymous. The four great surviving cycles of English mystery plays, York, 'Coventry', Wakefield (or Towneley), and Chester "have a kernal of common matter which corresponds very closely with just the dramatic stuff which was handled in the liturgical and the earliest vernacular drama." These plays, usually performed by the great guilds, must have been acted without scenery, or with scenery of a most crude kind; but much importance was given to costuming even though it might be of a grotesque and primitive sort. The ankiya plays were also performed by the different 'khels' or guilds, which laid great

39. British Drama, p. 20
40. ibid., p. 25 (foot-note)

"In England there are hardly any traces of what the French call 'miracles', that is, plays concerned especially with the Virgin and the saints, as distinguished from the 'mysteries' which were found on Holy Writ" (Emile Leguay and Louis Cazamian, A Hist. of Eng. Lit., London, 1961, p. 183).

And yet the "medieval word 'miracle' is preferred to 'mystery', which was first applied to English religious drama in 1744" (A.C. Cawley, Intro. to Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays, 1970, p. vii, foot-note).

41. The Medieval Stage, Vol. II, p. 125
42. British Drama, p. 26
43. "Each khel was like a guild to which lands were allotted for cultivation by the constituent members free of rent in
emphasis on elaborate costuming and make-up. The actors in the mystery plays "were all amateurs — members of the various companies who for a time put aside their labour to perform in the sacred mysteries."\(^{44}\) In the same way, Assamese acting was also the "work of amateurs"\(^{45}\) — actors drawn from the villagers usually during the recess after harvesting. The ankiya plays may also be said to have some resemblance with the 'morality' play in which "the characters are no longer scriptural or legendary persons, but wholly or almost wholly abstractions."\(^{46}\) They were, as the name implies, all moral plays showing the victory of good and defeat of evil. "The cardinal feature of nearly all the moralities", says Nicoll, "was the pursuit of Everyman (Humanum Genus or Mankind) by evil forces and his rescue by Conscience or Wisdom."\(^{47}\) In the ankiya plays, Krishna or Rama, on the one hand, and characters like Sisupala and the asuras or demons, on the other hand, may very well be considered as symbolic of good and evil respectively, the latter being routed by the former.

Ankiya Nāṭ and Modern Drama

Our intention here is not to make a comparative study of the ankiya nāṭ and medieval European play; such an attempt,

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\(^{44}\) British Drama, p. 27

\(^{45}\) H.A.L., p. 38

\(^{46}\) The Medieval Stage, Vol. II, p. 151

\(^{47}\) British Drama, p. 42
if made, is bound to be far-fetched. We have only tried to show how medieval Assamese drama developed on almost similar lines as those of European drama of the Middle Ages. It has thus been seen that the ankiyā plays of Assam were a distinctly popular institution, meant for the people, performed by the people, and enjoyed by the people. In spite of the features that characterize a medieval play, the Assamese ankiyā nāt reveals certain characteristics that would make a modern drama.

In the first place, we may consider the question of conflict, which is said to be the "cardinal part of drama". "All drama", says Nicoll, "ultimately arises out of conflict. In tragedy, there is ever a clash between forces physical or mental or both, in comedy there is ever a conflict between personalities, between the sexes, or between an individual and society."\(^{48}\)

This conflict may be either outer or inner, the latter being chiefly a characteristic of modern drama. "Inwardness is a characteristic of modern drama as contrasted with the ancient drama, and the inwardness is nowhere better seen than in the field of tragic struggle."\(^{49}\) The ankiyā plays are comedies as the stories of all of them have a happy ending. Much of the conflict in these plays is of the outer type, yet we find inner conflict in plays like Rukmini-harana where the conflict in the heroine's mind is subtly brought out. Krishna in this play is very much a human being pining for the heroine as much as she

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48. The Theory of Drama, p. 92

49. ibid., p. 93
pines for him. In fact, "this drama is noted for its intense moments and clash of personalities and aims." Secondly, the characterization in some of the plays may be said to be almost in advance of the times as some of the characters are so distinctly drawn that they very much look like characters of a good modern play. In Rukmini-harana and Rāma-vijaya, for example, the characters stand out in bold relief, so that despite their mythical origin they look like real human beings. In the plays of Madhavadeva, the pranks of Child Krishna are dexterously portrayed, and almost all his plays come very near to modern one-act plays. Yet it has to be noted that even major figures in many of the plays hardly come out as distinctly individualized characters, since they are overshadowed by the all-powerful figure of Krishna or Rāma. And suspense, which is an important element of modern drama, is almost absent in an ankiya play as nearly everything is explained by the Sūtradhāra beforehand.

One cannot expect social criticisms or criticisms of men and manners in an ankiya play. This was outside its scope as the playwright's aim was different. His aim was not to 'hold the mirror up to nature' nor to reform society by holding its follies and foibles to ridicule. He, on the other hand, aimed at enlightening the uneducated folk in the teaching of the Vaisnava faith through "the medium of drama, which could be

50. Assamese Literature, p. 101
51. Manchalekha, p. 279
profitably used to amuse and to teach at the same time. Social reform was aimed at—and, in fact, brought about—not through satire but by showing the greatness of God before whose eyes all men were equal. Yet Sāṅkaradeva at times hints, directly or indirectly, at social evils like polygamy, as can be seen in Pārijāta-haraṇa, where Krishna has to try hard to appease the jealous Satyabhāmā, one of his wives, by fetching a pārijāta flower from the garden of Indra.

The emancipation of Assamese drama from its exclusive religious purpose had begun at a later stage. The secularization actually started at the hands of the Āhom rulers, who had the plays taken out from the 'nām-ghars' to be played at the palace for courtly enjoyment, although the tradition of popular performance of plays in the village prayer-halls continued all along till the present times. But the religious spirit of the plays persisted, and except an increasing use of prose by succeeding writers, no attempt was made to shift the focus of attention. It is true that like the 'mysteries' which "gave to the people of England a taste for theatrical shows", the aṅkiyā plays also infused into the people of Assam a love for drama; but unlike the mysteriās, which "prepared the ground for the Elizabethan drama of later date", the aṅkiyā nat could hardly do it for modern Assamese drama based on social and human themes, as their spirit was purely religious. In this respect,

52. Aṅkiyā Nāṭ, Intro., pp. xxviii, xxix
53. British Drama, p. 40
Birinobikumar Barua observes, "The incentive for modern drama - the realistic, psycho-analytic and problem plays - came, however, from the West." But the aḥkiyā nāṭs are not all dead yet; they are still performed in the villages with gusto, although their popularity is gradually losing ground. And although the incentive for modern drama came from the West, the taste for theatrical shows, which this popular dramatic institution gave to the people of Assam, is also responsible for the growth of the new drama.

54. H.A.L., p. 147