PART-I
INTRODUCTION
The Ahkiya-nāṭas, a dramatic form innovated by Śaṅkaradeva, occupy a unique place in the history of Assam with their indelible impact on the socio-cultural life of the state. These plays, devised primarily as effective instruments for the propagation of his Neo-Vaiṣṇavite ideals, are the earliest examples of dramas in Assamese and Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, is rightly regarded as the father of Assamese dramatic literature. In fact, until he wrote his nāṭas there was no dramatic literature in any of the modern Indo-Aryan languages except Maitheli. Even in Maitheli plays written prior to Śaṅkaradeva only the songs are in that language. But Śaṅkaradeva’s nāṭas are plays proper with Sūtradhāras acting as commentators of the action of the nāṭas. The songs and the dialogues of the characters as well as the bhaṭimās, padas or payāras recited by the Sūtradhāra are all in Brajabuli, a literary language developed and nourished by Śaṅkaradeva and other Vaiṣṇava poets. On this count alone Śaṅkaradeva’s nāṭas deserve a special place in the history of growth and development of Assamese drama. But what is more important is that these plays became powerful agents of socio-cultural change of the state.

Perhaps all the plays written by Śaṅkaradeva have not reached us. The evidence of Carita-puthi points out that Śaṅkaradeva had written and performed at least two more plays — one called Cihna-yātrā before his first pilgrimage and another called Janma-yātrā
after his return from the second pilgrimage. But neither of these two plays is extant now. Of the six plays that are now extant Rukmini-harana and Pārijata-harana are the best both at the critical and popular estimation. Even Śaṅkaradeva himself called his Pārijata-harana to be 'anupāma' (matchless). These two plays are noted for their size, artistic excellence and stageworthiness. Harana (which means both abduction and stealing) constitutes the central theme of both the plays, with their stories based on the well known episodes of the Srimadbhāgavata-purāṇa, though some influence of Harivaṃśa and Viṣṇu-purāṇa cannot be altogether denied. In spite of the stories being based on classical myths both the plays bear the stamp of the contemporary society of Śaṅkaradeva's time. In fact, from several points of view these plays are seminal in character and spirit and they provoke every critical mind for further study on the area.

In his Presidential Address to the 17th Session of Asam Sāhitya-Sabhā held in December 1937, Professor K. K. Handiqui stressed on the importance of the text-critical study of Assamese version of Madhava Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa for constituting the text of original Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Dr. Maheswar Neog also laid stress on the need of textual criticism as a whole and particularly in the context of historical study of old Assamese literature. Dr. Ramcharan Thakuria, one of the pioneers in the text-critical studies in Assam, examines in detail the importance of textual criticism in his book

1. Ph(Pārijata-harana Nāta of the Constituted Text), p. 182
'Paṭh-Samīkṣā Prasāṅgat'. These observations which apply to all old Assamese literature are equally pertinent to the study of Rukmini-haraṇa and Pārijāta-haraṇa Nāṭas.

The credit of bringing out Ankiya-nāṭas in print for the first time goes to Ambikanath Bora. He edited and published Rukmini-haraṇa Nāṭa in 1933. In the Preface to that edition he wrote: "In preparing this preface as well as in comparing the text with the manuscripts I have been greatly helped by the reverend younger Gosāī Ātā of Dihing Sattra, Pandit Kripanath Bhagawati of Sundaridivyā Sattra and Sāhityarathi Laksminath Bezbaruah. Without their help it would not have been possible on part to take the responsibility of editing the book from a distant land." But there is no mention anywhere in the preface as to which manuscripts were used for preparing the text of the book. In his preface to Ankiya Nāṭa published in 1940 the editor Birinchi Kumar Barua says: "I offer my respectful gratitude to their Holiness the Sattrādhikār Goswamīs of Āuniāṭi, Kamalābārī and Dakṣinpāṭ Sattras who have very kindly lent me some manuscripts of Ankiya Nāṭas." But there is no mention of the actual manuscripts used in preparing the text. In 1950, Ankāwali, a collection of fifteen nāṭas by Mādhavadeva, Gopāl Ātā, Rāmcaran Ṭhākur and Daitīrī Ṭhākur and the six nāṭas including Rukmini-haraṇa and Pārijāta-haraṇa by Śaṅkaradeva, was edited and published by Kaliram Medhi. Commenting on the source of these manuscripts:

1. 1st edition, p. 19
2. Ambikanath Bora, Rukmini-haraṇa Nāṭa, 1936, p. 36
3. Birinchi Kumar Barua, Ankiya Nāṭa, 1940, 'Preface'
two nāṭas he writes: "Text (of Rukmiṇī-haraṇa) is taken from one sācipāta manuscript (date unknown) kept in Historical and Antiquarian Studies, another sācipāta manuscript (date unknown) obtained from the Sattrādhikār of Kaṁsapār and a copy of tulāpāt manuscript (1288, Bāṅglā Śana) preserved at Camariyā Sattra of Kāmrūpa. Orthography of Camariyā manuscript is maintained.... Orthography and complete text (of Pārijāta-haraṇa) without any change is kept as has been found in the manuscript (obtained at Rāmdiya), though some help is sought from another sācipāta manuscript (date unknown) also of Rāmdiya and from a copy each from Ulubārī Sattra of Nagaon and Barpetā Sattra. Variant readings are particular from the sācipāta manuscript of 1738 Śaka preserved in Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti;"\(^1\)


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\(^1\) Kaliram Medhi, Ḍāṅkāwālī, 1950, p. 169 and p. 226.
in none of these editions there has been any methodical and scientific attempt to ascertain the authenticated texts of the nāṭas.

In all these modern editions orthography of the text has been ruthlessly given modern form in utter disregard to the structure found in the old manuscript and without any attempt to ascertain what structure was germane to the period of Śaṅkaradeva's writing.