Change is an irrefutable phenomenon. And, it is more apparent while studying a performance. A performance study is always away from the usual theory of ‘idealism’ that inherent in many of the structuralized studies. An inquiry on performance essentially focuses on what is actually performed and the context in which it is performed. No matter performing the same the text, every performance is a new creation, unique from all its versions. No two performances can ever be alike, even if it uses the same text or follow a ‘traditional structured form’. In this regard, P. J. Claus and Frank J. Korom observe:

"A performance is a live presentation which is never repeated identically. It has a fleeting existence and is the product of a performer, an individual in the society. ... Performance studies make
little use of standard, idealized concept.”

Performance is a mode of communicative behaviour and a type of communicative event. It is an event for which the doer assumes responsibility to be evaluated as a bearer of tradition. In short, performance is an ‘act of expression’ which is communicated through physical movement in dance, drama and verbal presentation in song, recitation and other modes. Richard Bauman describes ‘performance’ in his words as “reflexive—signification about signification—indeed as it calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system (physical movement in dance, language and tone in song and so on), making one at least conscious of its devices.” Performance is presented to an audience and involves aesthetic sensibilities.

Performance studies emerged from sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking in the 1970’s.

The present study of the performance of Bhāonā, concerns with the changes that occur in the traditional practice, since its evolution. The
performance of Bhāonā is actually a socio-religious event that involves religiosity and mass participation. This ‘traditional’ affair initiated and structured by Śaṅkara deva in the 16th century [Discussed in Chapter: 3], is presently in the transitional stage with observable changes in every aspects of the performance. With the recognition of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā as the ‘tradition’, Mātrbhaṅgar Bhāonā is the ‘emerging trend’ in the tradition with its changing nature.

Both the phenomenon of continuity and change in the performance-tradition is simultaneously observable in Bhāonā. In the recent period, this performance-tradition is facing a complicated situation of varied identities due to the various transformations within the genre.

When a performance is the product or the creation of a performer, it is his communicative competence which is accountable to the audience. Thus, the ‘act of expression’ in the part of the performer is a matter to be evaluated by the audience as the relative skill and the effectiveness of the performer’s display of competence.7

Besides the skill of performance, a performer of a traditional performance is always responsible
to a tradition. As said earlier, a performance is a 'communicative event' for which the doer assumes responsibility to be evaluated as a bearer of tradition.

As a matter of the fact, while evaluating a performance, the text in the context in which it is performed, the performer’s competence along with the conventionalized structure or the tradition is the issues of concern. Claus & Korom have pointed to the fact as:

"Each performance in a performance tradition is a performance event. A term such as performance configuration may be used to refer to a description (like a score) of the assemblage of the performers and the acts they perform. Performance context may be used to refer to the physical, social and cultural setting of the event. A Performance tradition, to return to that definition, is then a concept like genre which identifies a given performance event as an instance of a particular kind." 8
A performance is expressive and emergent, it always creates an expression where creativity prevails in every aspect. Each performance has its own identity with the individual skill and tastes of the every person involved into it, within the varied contexts. Such creativity leads to the development of the 'emergent quality of performance', even though with a conventional form and content. In the words of Bauman, "The emergent quality of performance, resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of participants, within the context of particular situations."\(^\text{10}\)

In case of Bhāonā at present, innovative changes are perceivable in the whole tradition which includes the text or script of the play as well as in every other aspects of the performance. As mentioned earlier, Aṅkīyā Bhāonā even in its initial days of evolution, has experienced many transformations when the tradition was practiced by the Satra people within their religious environment. [Discussed in Chapter 4]

Eventually, when this performing art tradition stepped out of the Satras and Nāmghars, it became more secular in character than devotional. Since
then, the traditional practice of Bhāonā has been moulding itself with the change of time. This is to mean that, many modifications emerged into the tradition in adaptations to the change of time. The standard set by the Gurus are seem to be sparsely maintained. The Bhāonās of recent period, i.e., the Māṭrbhāṣār Bhāonā adds novelty through subscription to popular sentiments and tastes.

Thus, changes to this performance-tradition are visible in many aspects as, the language of the play, written text or script of the play, theme of the play, presentation of the performance, objectives of performance, audience’s participation and attitude, dance style, music, costume, make-up and other cho-effigies along with the place of performance.

**Text**

As mentioned earlier, the written text signifies the script of a bhāonā which is called as ‘nāţ’ and, its performance is actually ‘bhāonā’. Before, the writing of a play was confined to the abbots of the Satras following Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva but, later the laymen of villages and
towns started writing of plays. This change of playwrights brought obvious newness into the tradition, which includes the language, style of writing and themes of the play.

**Language of the play**

The dramas of the post-Śaṅkarite period compromises with the use of language and compositions. The sweet Brajabuli idiom used by Śaṅkaradeva and some of the succeeding Gurus in their dramas has been shifted to everyday Assamese speech as the language of the dialogues, especially when the writing of the plays came into the hands of the Non-Śaṅkaraśtras as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Specimens of language from a few contemporary scripts are provided below:

- **Bhadrasen:** Tomār īcchāt bādhā diyār kāran nai, gatike tumio olowā

- **Sursen:** Dādā, āpuni gole moiyō apunār logote jām

[Sūjajña Rajār Dharma Parikhyā, Kaloogaon, Sivasagar]

- **Rāni:** Tente tumio svāmīr lagate juddha Karibā Padum?

**Padum:** Moi baudeu prāpanathar birahat
tiltil koi mṛtyu baran karātkoi
juddhakhetrat svāmīr lagate prāṇ
bisarjan diyātuwei śreya. Etyā jāo
mok āpuni bidāi diyak.

[Amar Haribhakta, Charing, Sivasagar]

The language of the following specimen is lyrical in nature in presentation:

- Saramā: Kotā kotā mor prāṇar tarani

Bibhiṣān: Kon, Sarama? Cowā Saramā, mukti
pale putrai tumār. Šeṣ hol āji
tār rākhyas jibon

[Sitāharāṇ āru Taranisen Badh, Sivasagar]

Sometimes it is also seen that in the line of imitating Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in writing Sanskrit and Brajabuli, the new playwrights produce a strange jargon.

For instance:

- Kamalā: Āhe bāpu torā sabar bārটā śuni
   hr̥di kāti jai. He bāpu, tohār
   manobāṅcā pūraṇ howaba.
   Mohor āśīrbāde, tuhu pṛthibīt
And, although the recently formed ‘genre’ of Bhāonā, are trying to maintain the parallelism in reciting the ślokas, bhaṭimās, songs and verses, it is apparent that, the language used in them do not completely abide by the rules of either Sanskrit or Brajabuli as in the Aṅkīyā Nāṭs. No doubt that, these are quoted in the style of Aṅkīyā Nāṭs, but are not as observed in some cases. even in purely colloquial language, for instance:

_Sloka: Gītrāg Sindhurā Ektāl _

Åve jagat guru kariyu prabeś |
Layalāse cali jai dekhite suves | 
Saṅge cale sarasvatī ānandita beś |
Lakhmisaha nārāyaṇa kario prabeś |
Ehi mate paila goyā sabhāra bhitar |
Hari hari bola sava sabhāsada nara | 

[Suṣajña Rajār Dharma Parīkhyā, Kaloogaon, Sivasagar]
Theme of the play

Today, the stories or the themes of the plays are much preferable from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Purāṇas than Bhāgavata as featured in the Aṅkīyā Nāts. In most of the cases, the line of story is imaginary; it is neither from the epics and other Purāṇas, nor from the Bhāgavata. As for example, Sujājña Rajār Dharma Parikhyā, Kaloogaon of Sivasagar and Dharmadhvajar Putra Tyāg - Ballaketu Badh, of Tezpur]

Moreover, tales telling of fights (yuddha), killings (badha), abduction (harāna) or themes of conjugal love (ṣyngāra rāsa) predominate as the subject matters of the dramas of post-Śaṅkarite period. This is rightly indicated by the following titles: Sita Harāna, Syamanta Harāṇa, Kaṃsa Badha, Mahirāvāṇa Badha and so on and so forth. Dr. Maheshwar Neog described this phenomenon as:

“There is a good deal of blood and thunder in the bhaona plays particularly in those written after the two great Masters. Even the titles of the latter-day plays with the end part as vadha
(killing of demons and evil ones) and harana (rape or carrying away of godly and noble women) are a pointer in that direction. This predominance of blood and thunder is there in the same measures in plays of other parts of medieval India, whether it is Kathakali or Bhagavatamela. The characters sometimes look grotesque and instill in the heart of the audience awe and terror with a little violence, alternated by moments of tenderness and grace and touches of lyricism and pathos.”

**Nature and Presentation of the Play**

The nature of the play constitutes the basic components of the whole performance tradition. As one of the fundamental nature of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭ*, it consists of one act or *aṅka*. But, the later-day plays mostly have more than one act. Usually, the changes of scenes are identified with songs. An *Aṅkīyā Bhāonā* is performed at a stretch. The change of scenes are indicated with the verse by *Sūtradhāra* as ‘Prastuta Kathā Śūnaha’ or ‘E Kathā rahuka’.
respectively, for instance, as found in Rukmini Haraga and Keli Gopala of Śaṅkaradeva.

The dominance of the role played by Sūtradhāra is another important feature of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā. He plays the intermediary role between the audience and the dramatis personae. In brief, he has a many-faced role as a dancer, singer, director and interpreter, who conducts the whole show with dances, songs and explanatory commentary. He is present an the stage from the beginning of the play till end. This vital role of Sūtradhāra is contrasted by the minimum importance of the role in the dramas of the Post-Śaṅkarite period, esp., Māṭṛbhāṣār Nāṭ. Today his role is in fact, sequential. He does not remain on the stage throughout the whole performance as in Aṅkīyā Nāṭs. After the recitation of Artha Bhaṭimā and performance in the ritualistic task of introducing the play, he exi:ts from the stage and sits in the dohār (place where the musicians sits to accompany the performance from where he took up direction by prompting the text to the performers. It is found that, in the nāṭ or written text of these later-day dramas there are references of Sūtradhāra in the intervals. This is only taken for direction
during rehearsing the play. In some cases it is found that, the Sūtradhāra retires from his role of performance but remains on the stage or performance area with the written text in hand prompting very prominently.

The entry of the female performers in the performances of Bhāonā can also be noted (especially on the secular occasions), as a divergence from the convention. Earlier, male performers performed the female roles. Entry of female members in the performances was a restriction, which is followed even today in the performances on religious occasions.

From the early part of the nineteenth century till date, it is found that, melodramatic and other secular elements have made its entry into the tradition. Bhaonās were started to be performed on secular occasions besides religious. In this regard, Bhattacharyya says-

"Along with the progress of time and varying circumstances, the Bhāvanā began to undergo some changes in the nature of their performances; the long standing religious fervour gradually declines; naturally, in course of time Bhāvanā became secularized, too on some occasions. In this connection it may be pointed out that of the different aims and objects of the Assamese Language Improvement Society
(1890), one was to improve old and modern dramas by arranging theatrical performances after the English manner and reforming the Bhāvanā. Obviously, "reforming the Bhāvanā" indicates an attempt at some changes in the nature of its performance, conditions, equipments and the like - a tendency of secularization and modernization gradually follows, though partially.\textsuperscript{12}

Further, Dr Bhattacharyya adds instances of performances of Bhāona performed in association to secular events in the early part of 19\textsuperscript{th} century. These are, staging of the performance Rāja Sūya Yajñā at Sibsagar and Jarasandha Badh at Nagaon in connection to the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887; Abhimanyu Badh at Nagaon in 1886 and at Dibrugarh in 1888 on the occasion of Durga Puja.\textsuperscript{13}

Some other instances of performances of secular occasions in the contemporary period can be enumerated as, a performance telecasts in the television, a performance in a festival or competition performed often in a simulated platform.
Simultaneously, religiosity in the performance-tradition also persists which is evident in the performances observed in a religious platform i.e., in a Satra or nāmghar both in rural or urban areas. Such performances often have the ritualistic significance with its objective as an ‘offering to earn piety’ which is sometimes made by a single person and at other times, by the common public for the well-being of the whole society. Incidentally, such performances are also not free from the entertaining factor besides having the ritualistic significance.

In this period, comical relief to the audience makes significant appearance in the tradition of Bhāonā. This leads to the infusion of the lighter roles like Bahuwā (Clown) and Dūt (Messenger) which do not have any connection to the text of the performance. Sometimes, some dialogues are completely out of context. It seems that this minimizes the nature of religiosity that predominates in the tradition of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā. The factor responsible for such change will be discussed in the next chapter.
It is also a fact that, a comical relief is also provided in an AdikIyā Bhāonā but, not infusing a character unrelated to the actual text. A character, related to the actual drama has an amusing part to play.

Apart from other features that characterized this recently formed Bhāonā, the projection of emotional temperament by the characters are given much consideration instead of relishing the Bhakti rasa. These plays laid stress on bīra, sṛngāra and adbhuta rasa. As such, (as mentioned earlier), preference of tales that gives the pleasure of war, fights or love scenes are more observable.

Today, a bhāonā is also performed on the stages and open arenas as an ‘art show’ besides performing as a ‘religious event’ in the Satras and Namghars of villages and towns. The television is also used as the platform for its popularization. A performance of Bhaonā shown on Television is exclusively an artistic presentation rather than a religio-cultural performance. There are also Bhaonās performed in a Namghar but, with an extended arena, where sometimes sitting arrangement for the audience are made even on chairs. Earlier, people sit on the floor inside the Namghar, on the both sides of the
performance area. Besides, adjacent to the Namghar or sometimes elsewhere, another temporary arena is constructed akin to the architecture of the actual Namghar, where exists even a Maṇīkuṭ.¹⁴ Bhaonās are also performed on raised platform or stage often on secular occasions often as an art show which constitutes a part of a festival or other event. Performances of Bhaonās are not confined to Assam. There are several instances of presentations of Bhaonā performances on secular platforms at different places of India and abroad. Once a troupe of Kamalabari Satra was send by the president of India to Indonesia in order to perform a Bhaonā. Among the Assamese residents abroad, the practice of Bhaonā performances are also prevalent.¹⁵ But, these performances are performed in a condensed form of two-three hour show of course, with several modifications.

To minimize the time factor the plays of today are not presented in the lengthy form that characterizes an Arkīyā Nāṭ. They are shortened to only two-three hours, especially when they are presented on the stage or television or on occasions other than religious. Even the performances inside a
Namghar with religious significance are not that long as an AñkIyã Naṭ.

Moreover, in the dramas of earlier times, the fixity in text is compulsion for the performers during the performances while uttering the dialogues. Today, the flexibility is marked in the presentation of the dialogues, specifically in the character of Bahuwā, who often say dialogues, often, unrelated to the actual context of performance, created instantaneously by the performer during the performance.

This divergence from the text of the recent-day performances pointed to the importance on entertainment-oriented innovations and less ritualistic significance upon the performances. In this regard, Dr. Blackburn says:

"Performances with greater fixity in content tend to be more ritualistic in function. Conversely those with greater innovations in content tend to be entertainment-oriented in function." 16
Objectives of the play

Saṅkaradeva created this dramatic art tradition with the aim of propagating his Ekṣaraṇa Vaishnavite faith. Later, the performance of Bhāona became a prerequisite activity of the Satras. It also formed an obligatory part to the gurus of the Satras to write and present plays in his initiation rites. In such a way, the tradition by associating itself with the Vaisnava religion, continued and developed within the Satra. Gradually, this performing art appeal the people to a large extent and came out from the Satras amidst the common people and to the royal courts. It provided amusement in the royal courts as mentioned earlier the Chapter: 4. Besides, it gained its popularity in villages and towns which encourages the commoners to practice it extensively.

Eventually, this tradition in spite of its ritualistic significance, serves as a medium of popular entertainment shunning its previous spiritual and devotional temperament.

Events centered on religious displays or other cultural performances, contribute a great deal to the maintenance of a sense of ethnic identity. This traditional art form also seems to act as a strong identity marker of the Assamese culture. A Bhāona is
projected today to enhance the richness of the Assamese traditional culture. This leads to popularize the tradition not only within the country but also abroad. In order to identify themselves as an Assamese, people of this region living abroad are trying to make practices of every rituals, customs, festivals and events in the foreign land including the Bhāonā performances, as mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Moreover, many groups and organizations valuing it as a rich heritage and unifying force of the divided Assam put their efforts in popularizing as well as disseminating the tradition other than projecting the religious motive. This is discussed in details in the Chapter: 8. Again, performances presented on television are specifically designed to entertain rather than attaining spiritual bliss.

Music and Dance

The songs are imitations of the two Masters if not completely borrowed from them. Unable to understand the intricacies of the raga music, the recent-day dramatists sometime move their songs syllable to syllable in the frame of the lyrics of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, so that once familiar
tunes could be kept alive. It is observable that, but the songs are imitations of the two Gurus or the ragas are put into sequence as Ankiyā Nāfs, but in practice, the tunes have the influences of either modern-day songs or folk songs as Kamrupi Lokagīt, Deh Bicārar Git etc.

Sometimes payāra verses replaced the rāgā-based songs and even the dialogues. Plaintive verses are put in longish metre, muktāvālī. There are many variations in the changes in this aspect of the Bhaona tradition. Bhaonās of Sonitpur region is mostly found to be using such padabhāṣā, i.e., dialogues in verses. In some places, the Bilāpas (wailings) are sung in Madhyavālī, a new tune. Another instance of change and deviation is observed in the use of Dharanjyoti taal (rhythm), in pathetic scenes are common in earlier times which is now used mostly in the scenes of fights. In some areas, such as Sivasagar, it is still used in the scenes which are predominated with the Karuṇa Rasa mostly in the Bilapas (wailings).

The Dhemālis (purvarāṅga) played by the Gāyan Bāyan not only varies in numbers from place to place but also varies in the style of presentation. As for
instance, within the district of Jorhat at
Dicoinagar the Dhemālis usually used are: Bahā
cāhini, Uthā cāhini, Dhumāhi, Na-dhemāli, Bar-
dhemāli, Sur dhemāli, Ghoṣa-dhemāli and Guru-ghāt,
and at Dhekiaguli, the Dhemālis prevalent are:
Jurani Cāpar, Cāli Bājanā, Cuk dhemāli, Saru
dhemāli, Bar dhemāli, Ghoṣā-dhemāli, and Guru-ghāt.
The common practice in Satra and village
performances are Saru, Bar and Ghoṣā-dhemāli,
sometime followed by Guru ghat.

Changes are observed in the use of instruments
in the performances. One significant deviation is
the use of Mṛdanga (a kind of percussion instrument)
instead of Khol as found in the Kahmara Satra of
Namti of Sivasagar and also in Latabua Gaon, Nagaon.

Similarly, changes are also perceivable in the
dance style of the Bhāona performances as found in
the hastas of Sūtradhāra and Gāyan-Bāyan or the
performers’ gaits.

People’s Participation and Attitude

Today, the expectation of the people is much
considered while performing a bhāona. Change in the
taste and philosophy of the people is a significant
factor in directing the changes in the tradition of Bhāonā. It is noticeable that, people still participate in this traditional performance otherwise; it would have been extinct from the Assamese cultural heritage. Or, whether the tradition with so much of transformations, is in the verge of extinction? What are the attitudes in the people’s participation? [This will be discussed in detail in the eighth chapter]

*Dress, Make-up, Mask-making, Light Arrangement etc.*

Emergence of newness in every sphere of the Bhāonā tradition is common in this period. Infusion of modern elements in the style of dress, make-up, mask, lighting of the set of performance etc. is observable.

Previously, light is provided in by large chandeliers (*gachā*), torches of burning cloth soaked in oil (*ārīyā*), and other lamps known as *mahatā*, *matā* or *mahalā*. Today, such indigenous lighting arrangement has been replaced by gas lights, petromax lamps and electric lights.

In make-up instead of using the raw ingredients as, *hāitāl* (yellow arsenic), lamp-black, *dhalmātī*
(chalk), modern elements which are easily available in the markets are used today.

Similarly, in mask-making, the previous methods have been shunned out by accepting modern methods to produce a better product. Now, masks are light and lively contrasted to the heavy mask of the earlier period made of clay.

Many changes have taken place in the style of dress. For instance, the Sūtradhāra usually wears Muglāi-pāg as the head gear in performing an Aṅkīyā Bhāona. But, now it is also noticeable of using Maṭhurā-pāg. Sometimes a garland on neck or gārā is a significant deviation in the dress of Sūtradhāra, as observed in the performances in the Bhāona Competition held at Duliajan. Significant variation in the dress-pattern of Gāyan-Bāyan has also been noticed in different places. (See pp. 171-172)

Thus, it is well perceived that the tradition of Bhāona has undergone with many transformations since its evolution. The emergence of newness in every aspects of the tradition has led to the formation of new identity to this performance tradition.
Notes

1 Peter J Clause & Frank J Korom, Folkloristics and Indian Folklore (Udupi: Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, 1991) 159.


9 In his Verbal Art as Performance, Richard Bauman gave the information that the concept of emergence is developed in Peter McHugh, Defining the Situation (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968). The emergent quality of performance is emphasized in Hymes, Dell: ‘Breakthrough into Performance’ in Den Ben Amos & K. Goldstein, eds., Folklore: Performance and Communication (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 11-75.


12 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 63-64.

13 ibid, 64-65.

14 A Nāmghar consists of two parts, Kirtanghār which is the prayer hall where the congregational prayers
and Bhāonās are performed and the Maṇikuṭ, the place where the holy scripture (Bhāgaṇata) is kept.


