This chapter is an attempt to specify the factors that led to the transformation of the traditional form of the performance into the formation of Matybhāṣār Bhāona, the recent genre.

A number of causes are found to be responsible for the formation of the Matybhāṣār Bhāona. The term 'Matybhāṣār', as mentioned earlier, indicates the mother language, where Mātr denotes 'mother' and Bhāsa means 'language'. Along with the change of language, the intermixture of secular elements and other manifestations seems to result in the creation of this new genre.

A traditional culture always needs adjustment with the changing time, tastes and attitudes of the people for its survival. The contemporary view of tradition does not mean mere clinging to the past; it is the dynamic relation between the tradition and the creative individual. It is the synthesis of the past and the present.
The modern academic discourse on tradition argues that, a tradition is not 'cultural given' but 'cultural construct'. It is neither 'genuine' nor 'spurious' as it is not handed down from the past as a thing or collection of things, but it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present.¹

As a dynamic process, tradition flows from and shapes individual lives, while shaping and resonating with larger patterns of worldview and culture. Dell Hymes understands tradition equally as a fluid and emergent. He says, "The traditional begins with the personal. Its distribution in history, in a community, is important, but secondary, not defining. Something partakes of the nature of the traditional already when the effort to traditionalize has brought it into being. . . . In fact tradition is not so much a matter of preservation, as it is a matter of re-creation, by successive persons and generations, and in individual performances."²

Mary Ellen Brown describes tradition as a constant process across time and in time, linking past with present, thus ensuring continuity. It is
also dynamic and ever-changing as culture and societal needs alter.

Mary Magoulick rightly says, "...we must understand tradition as a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. In other words, tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past. ... Tradition is always defined in the present. ... [and] never exist apart from our interpretations of them." 4

The above discussion makes it clear that, a tradition is a 'process' which is interpreted and reinterpreted by the succeeding generations and is always an emergent. The evolution of Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā, on the basis of the performance-tradition known as Aṅkiyā Bhāonā, can therefore be looked upon as a natural phenomenon of reinterpretation of the tradition in the present environ. In a way, today the tradition of Aṅkiyā Bhāonā has its manifestation in the present-day Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā.
Secondly, an individual 'competence' and 'creativity' or the 'innovative nature' of man may lead to the formation of a new identity of a tradition, especially in the case of a performance-tradition. This has been already discussed in the previous chapter that due to this 'individual competence', no two performances are ever alike. The individuality of one performer, no matter, performing the same text within a similar context, always differs with another. In the words of Richard Bauman:

"The ethnographic construction of the structured, conventionalized performance system standardizes and homogenizes description, but all performance are not the same, and one wants to be able to appreciate the individuality of each, as well as the community-wide patterning of the overall domain."\textsuperscript{5}

Next, the creative man always wants to initiate some kind of newness to a tradition. His innovative additions create deviations to the type outline or the tradition. And, these innovations, in the case of a performance-tradition, are related to the
function of entertainment which is a natural impulse for man. In the traditional practice of Bhāonā some of the innovations in the recent period, are for instance, significance of the comical characters, the Bahuwa and Dut in a more secular role than related to the actual devotional theme of the performance; infusion of modern elements in the arrangement of lighting of the performance and many others. Such changes on the Bhāonā tradition have been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. While inquiring on such innovations, it is found that, the changing tastes of the people has greatly influenced for such development in this performance-tradition.

In understanding the changes in the traditional practice of Bhāonā, it can also be taken as contemporary adaptations. Adaptation is a natural tendency to changes.

However, it is also true that, along with the emerging nature of the performance, a performer can never be totally detached from the tradition which is related to the performance. He is always responsible to it and is at all time, evaluated as a bearer of the tradition. This makes the performer
conscious of the defined rules of the tradition. It
is observed that, in the performance of Bhāonā,
often a performer seems to give impetus to the
traditional principles besides his individualistic
approach to it. In fact, they are much devoted to
the role they are directed to perform. The
performer, himself is unaware by the ‘individual
competence’ he possesses. His skill is naturally
expressed in his performance, which is more or less,
judged by the viewers only. Sometimes, the quality
of performance of a performer can not fulfill the
actual requirement of the total performance in
neither keeping the traditional values nor through
his individual skill. At other times, the
performer’s expertise in the performance is highly
estimated while the total performance is not
agreeable to be that satisfactory. It is a fact,
that the total quality of a dramatic performance
cannot be evaluated only with the role of the
performer or performers. It depends on the
coordinated role of every elements of the
performance such as, music, dance, dress, costume,
make-up, cho-effigies, lighting etc.
As perceived in the recent development of Bhāonā, many factors seem to be responsible for the transformations since its evolution till date. In addition to the notions discussed above, the following have been cited in brief as the other observable causes:

- The unintelligibility of the Brajabuli language or less acquaintance with the language
- The rigidity of the principles of Satra culture
- Lack of time to devote in a lengthy performance
- To avoid the break of suspension, the role of Sūtradhāra has been simplified and sequential
- Importance of the aspect of entertainment rather than devotional which leads to the infusion of many secular elements
- Impact of Modern Technology, particularly, media
- Influence of modern education
- Impact of Socio-cultural and economic changes

The language is the most important feature of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ. Šaṅkardeva’s prose in his dramas was not Assamese proper, it was a form of artificial literary idiom which has a rhythmic quality, known
as Brajabuli-bhāṣa or Assamese Brajabuli. The lyrical nature of the prose dialogues makes his dramatic art a 'lyrico-dramatic spectacle'. He employed Brajabuli as the language of the dialogues, songs and stage directions (sutra). He also used Sanskrit for the ślokas that has been strewn all over the plays. In the traditional practice of Bhāona the minimization of the use of Brajabuli language has been apparent since the days of Madhavdeva. Madhavadeva, besides using Brajabuli, introduced the use of spoken Assamese language. In his dramas, Brajabuli is the language of the prose dialogues while spoken Assamese is used in the compositions of some of the songs and payāras (recitative verses). A few specimens are provided below from the dramas of Madhavadeva which have the influence of spoken Assamese language.

- Ohi prakāre Jaśoda kṛṣṇaka bicāri
  napai: Parama cintāye kandi
  kandi: Murucita huyā māṭi
  luṭi paḍala

[Cor Dharā, Madhavadeva]
Gradually, the later head and other abbots of the Satras also employed the spoken Assamese language mostly in the songs and verses. At the same time, the Brajabuli language was equally at vogue in their dramas. Gopaldev, Ramcharan Thakur and Dvijabhusan are a few playwrights who wrote dramas of such kind. The factor which is responsible for such a change in the use of language can firstly be pointed to the people’s choice, for whom the Assamese, as the colloquial language is much easier than the Brajabuli. It is obvious that, gradually Brajabuli became an unintelligible language for the common mass. And more recently, the extensive use of Assamese as the language in the Bhaonās is an obvious alteration. For easy communication of the message that constitutes the performance, the language should be comprehensible to the common masses therefore; people opted for the easy language. Another cause for the unpopularity of the

\[\text{Pimparā Gucuwā, Mādhavadeva}\]
Brajabuli language is that, the later playwrights have lesser acquaintance of the language. Despite of the fact, the Brajabuli language did not totally extinct, it was practiced by many other Vaishnavite saints of the 17th-18th centuries following Shaṅkardeva and Mādhavadeva. In their dramas the influence of Assamese was prevalent too, especially in the songs and verses as mentioned above.

The Satra institution established by Shaṅkardeva served towards the spread of intellectual and cultural activities of the people of Assam. Following Shaṅkardeva, the other Vaishnava saints have greatly put in their efforts for the development of these institutions that brought into a religious and cultural renaissance to Assam with its manifold activities as a centre of cultivation and dissemination of the religious ethics, general education and other ancient and traditional knowledge of art and craft. For the smooth and systematic functioning of these activities the Satras have to maintain certain authoritarian principles. This created a dignified strict aura for the commoners to easily access especially, the knowledge of art and culture which has been
accomplished and fostered within the Satra premises among the Satra people. The Satras act as the platform of propagating the wisdom of Vaishnavite culture. For the reason, the common people bring into the understanding of the dramatic art, Bhaona to their villages after the observation of the performance in a Satra. Thus, Bhaona came into the village-namghars with obvious transformations, explicitly the language. Later, with more awareness for a quality performance, in some villages, the vaishnavite bhakats (abbots) were invited to the villages to impart training for a performance of Bhaona. During the training period the bhakat use their written Nāṭ (sript). It was orally transmitted to the masses. Later, a script was written down by the trainees or other prominent learned person of the village. Thus, again apparent changes appear in the hands of the village people not only in the written script but, to the whole performance.

Further, Bhaona, in earlier times, performances continued the whole night starting from the evening till dawn. This tradition was also in continuation even in the post-Saṅkarite period. However, in the recent period, the Bhaona performances does not
exceed more than five hours. In fact, two to three hours performances are also arranged for secular purposes. For instance, a Bhāonā performed to be telecast on TV or a performance during a Bhāonā festival or Bhāonā competition.

Although, the intentions of contracting the time of performance in the Bhāonā tradition are different for different purposes, nevertheless, the most important cause is the lack of time to devote at a stretch for a person in today’s busy world. Again, a number of performances are to be presented within a stipulated period either in a Bhāonā competition or in a festival which compels to cut short the time of performance. This results in the elimination of many elements as bilāpas [mournful wailings], stūtis [prayers in verse] and bhaṭimās [laudatory ode or a benedictory verse in vernacular]. In most cases, they are usually replaced by prose pieces or dialogues.

Thirdly, the role of Sūtradhāra has been minimized in the later-days Bhāonās. Previously, the Sūtradhāra had the vital role to play in the Aṅkīyā Bhāonās as the director, dancer, singer who performs the short introduction of the play by singing the
Nāndī śloka and the Artha-Bhaṭimā punctuated by gestures (hasta, hat-diya or hasta karma). He announces the entry and exit of the performers and commences the beginning of every episodes thus, remains on the stage till the end of the performance. Today, his part is simplified and sequential. He does not stay on the stage throughout the whole performance as opposed to the actual tradition. After the recitation of Artha-Bhaṭimā and performance to the ritualistic task of introducing the play he exits from the stage and remain in the Dohār (Place adjacent to the performance arena where the musical troupe sits to accompany the performance) to direct the play, prompting the dialogues of the performers. But, in the written Nāṭs (scripts) of Mātrabhāṣār Bhāonā there are references of Sūtradhāra in the intervals which is actually observed to be taken for direction during rehearsing the play.

In this section, an argument has been made earlier that, the entertaining factor leads to innovations in a performance. And, tendency into the function of amusement makes a performance less ritualistic. In the words of Stuart Blackburn,
“Performances with greater fixity in content tend to be more ritualistic in function. Conversely, with greater innovation in content tend to be entertainment-oriented in function.”

It can be ascertained in the traditional practice of Bhaona, that, innovations are crept into it which are intended more for entertainment than for devotional purpose. Earlier existing ritualistic fervor of a performance of Bhāonā is now diminishes with the inclination towards the pursuit of pleasure.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Bhaona performances are organized completely with secular objectives rather than devotional as observed in the Āhom courts to the staging of performances in the modern period. This led to the infusion of many secular elements, esp. the comical characters. It has been found that the performances provide ‘comical relief’ along with the ethico-devotional codes to the audience. Such changes are due to the people who are much responsive to entertainment, in the sense as a ‘popular taste’.
The impact of modern technology is evident in the arrangement of lighting, providing sound effects, mask-making, dress, make-up as discussed in details in the previous chapter. The media has extensive influence to modulate the tastes of the people. Such manipulations of the media are seemingly observed even in those performances performed in the namghars. As for example, the exaggeration of the fighting scenes, comic scenes etc. and the deviation in the traditional ethics of the dress pattern of the actors, which is much akin to the elegant dresses shown in the screen, such as, in the television serial of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Therefore, the impact of media also seems to be a cause that develops the innovative nature of man which instigates to make certain changes to the tradition in order to suffice the present tastes of the people.

Impact of modern education which has been started with the coming of the British to Assam is very significant in the traditional practice of Bhāonā. During their rule, educational institutions were under the control of the Calcutta University. This causes the influence of Bengali culture on the
culture of Assam including the Bhāonā tradition. This is evident from the development of Dhurā Bhāonā and Phaujiyā Bhāonā as discussed in Chapter 4.

Besides, the introduction of English in the educational institutions during that period, also led to the development of new philosophies and tastes among the people.

Thus, with the change of time, the socio-cultural and economic milieu of Assam has also changes, which have obvious impact on the traditional practice of Bhaona. Since the introduction of Vaisnavism by Śaṅkaradeva, Assam has been experiencing several phases of socio-cultural modifications. The once rigidity in caste-system had been made flexible by the ethics of Vaisnavism, particularly in the days of the two principal Gurus. Later, the followers deviated from the religious conventions set by the two Gurus and was divided into groups known as Sanghatis. This has its impact on the culture of Vaisnavism as well as upon the whole Assam. Diversifications were perceivable in the performance-tradition from one Sanghati to the other. Later, outside the Satras, the performance-tradition was exposed to the flexible contemporary
values and attitudes of the people leading to certain alteration to the tradition in adaptations to the contemporaneity.

As already observed, the affluent societies which have the impact of modernization are more flexible to the contemporary transformations in the performance of Bhaona.
Notes


4 ibid


7 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 11.

8 Satyendra Nath Sarma, Asamiyā Nāṭya Sāhitya (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 70.


10 ibid, 335.


12 Manik Neog, personal interview, 17 Aug 2001

13 Manik Neog, personal interview, 27 Jun 2002

14 Stuart Blackburn, “Indian Performance Tradition: Introduction”, Indian Folklore-1, 18 Jun 2004
Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 62.