The understanding that every performance is essentially a communicative or interactive event entails a substantial role of people, and their participation, in it. In order to be a communicative event, it is essential for a performance to be communicated by its performers from one end and to be received by people at the other end. Quiet obviously, the expectations of people at the receiving end happen to be one of the determining forces in shaping a performance in its process of transition. Richard Bauman rightly defined 'performance' as:

"...a mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event. While the term may be employed in an aesthetically neutral sense to designate the actual conduct of communication (as opposed to the potential for communicative action), performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode
of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The analysis of performance—indeed, the very conduct of performance—highlights the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process."

Thus, a performance, according to the actual conception, is set to be displayed for an audience and, the performers’ competence is accountable to the audience. In this regard, Dell Hymes also have the opinion as:

"... Performance, as cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience, is a quite specific, quite special category."²

But, there are also cases that deviate from this conceptual model. Stuart Blackburn in his study of Kampan’s Ramayana discovered the ‘absent of audience’ in the performance of Shadow Puppet Show based on Kampan’s Ramayana. Later, he interprets the ‘absent audience’ as ‘ritual audience’ or ‘internalized audience’ who seems to be physically
absent. They are internalized audience who scrutinizes the quality of the audience, by hearing the epic from their homes. And, as a ritual performance, Goddess Bhāgavatī, the host of the temple at which it is performed, is the ‘ritual audience’³. Thus, the audience can never be denied as an imperative element of a performance.

In the performance-tradition of Bhāonā, the impact of people is very apparent in such a transitional period. In this study, it is ascertained that, at this point of time, the performance-tradition of Bhāonā is in the state of continuation of the tradition, but, in emergent forms. It is actually the consequence by way of the involvement or participation made by many people since it was initiated by Śaṅkaradeva till the recent period.

The ‘people’ who are engaged to this tradition can be classified as, Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the Satras and Non-Satriyas or the common people; Active and Passive participant in the role of playwrights, performers, audience, organizers, etc.

This dramatic art form is the outcome of the movement of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. Śaṅkaradeva, the
preceptor of this faith is also the initiator of this tradition with his creation of the Áñkiyā Nāṭ. Since its creation, the Satras became the centre of cultivating this dramatic art form, as the medium of propagating the Vaisnava faith and also as a source of pleasure and recreation⁴.

Therefore, the Vaiṣṇavites, or the people of the Satras had the contribution in the evolutionary development of this performance-tradition. It has been previously mentioned that, after the two Gurus the tradition of this dramatic art has been sustained by the Satrādikāras (heads) of the Satras. It was mainly maintained as a mandatory activity, by the Satrādikāras, as a part of their initiation rites. Consequently, the tradition of Bhāonā flourished and became a regular feature on all ceremonial occasions in the Satras. This is still in vogue in the Satra culture especially in the Satras of Central and Upper Assam.

The tradition persists at different periods in varying degrees within the Satras, following the basic principles of the form set off by the two Gurus.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the immediate descendants of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva
during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century have much influence of their principles compared to their succeeding playwrights. Their plays laid more stress on imitation and could not characterize by significant individual artistic creation in the basic form\textsuperscript{5}.

But, it is also to be mentioned that, some distinct developments have been noticed in the plays of the succeeding playwrights. Firstly, a new trend has been developed in the method of composition of such dramas, starting from the hands of Dvija Bhusan and some later writers\textsuperscript{6}.

It is already pointed out that, the change of language have been perceivable from the plays of Mādhavadeva. Gradually, the divergence in the traditional form became prominent within the Satra culture. [Diversification in the tradition of Bhāonā has already been discussed in the Chapter: 7]

With this, it can be verified that, even though, the Satras maintained an orthodox, dignified environment, it could not cling to one identity of the tradition of Bhāonā. Various Satras maintain their own distinctiveness along with the individuality of the playwrights by way of creation of the plays by several Vaiṣṇavite leaders at different periods.
The range of audience was widened with the stepping out of the performances of Bhāonā from the Satras to the Āhom Courts and to the villages and towns. As pointed out earlier, Bhāonās were performed by the Vaiṣṇava saints on the Āhom courts, esp. during the reign of Rajeshwar Singha, Kameleshwar Singha, Gaurinath Singha.

In the past, the manipulation of the form and content and the performance of Bhāonās had greatly been influenced by the tastes and preferences of the audiences and also due to the individual competence, mainly of the playwrights. As noted before that, the dramas of Mathura Das Ata of Barpeta Satra brought a drift to the traditional practice with the influence of Bengali.

Similarly Niranjandev, the founder Satrādikāra of Āunlaṭi Satra made a revolutionary movement with his Mahamoh Nat, an Assamese translation of the Sanskrit Prabodh Candradam based on the principles of Ankīya Nāṭ’.

Within the Satras, the entertainment dimension was started to be given importance along with the emphasis on religious attainment. This can be noted with the significance of the comical characters in
the dramas of the later period which was avoided earlier by the two Gurus. As for instance, due to the absence of the comical character, the Akruragaman Nat of Dihing Namati Satra could not receive the mass acceptance as mentioned in the Tungkhungiya Buranji. From this it is evident that, the Bhāonā performances written and performed by the Vaiṣṇavites are no exception to change in a secular direction. The departure from the tradition became more marked during the period of 18th-19th century. [This has been discussed in detail in the Chapter 4.]

In spite of these changes, the Vaiṣṇavites had been performing their role in upholding this performance-tradition till today. In regard to its implementation, the attitude and action of all the Satras are not the same towards this institution. In most of the Satras, the Bhāonās are performed only on the usual annual occasions such as on the death ceremonies of the Gurus, Kṛṣṇa Janmotsav, Rās Purnima etc. and on the initiation ceremonies, as a part of the Satra culture. A few of such Satras are: Bengana-ati, Kathpar, Jarabari of Sivasagar, Nikamul of Tezpur, Borduwa, Kaliabor of Nagaon.
It is also observed that, in some of the Satras, there is the tradition of performing an Aṅkiyā Nāṭ, maintaining the tradition to a large extent, especially on the death ceremonies of the two Gurus.

As noted before, mere retaining the tradition, imitating the plays in the form and structure as introduced earlier is not a convention for many Satras. Many significant modifications were made not only in the language but also in the structure and presentation of the drama of the traditional type. In a way, experimental changes have been made in the traditional form of the performance and therefore, as mentioned earlier, a number of new forms evolved within the Satras as, Dhurā Bhāonā, Phaujiya Bhāonā, Juri Bhāonā, Cukraganar Bhāonā and Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā. The Satras which were engaged in creating these new movements in the tradition are mainly: The Barpeta Satra, Kamalabari Satra and Auniati Satra. The detailed description has already been mentioned in the Chapter 4.

In the recent period, except the Barpeta Satra, Kamalābāri and the Āunīaṭi Satra are still actively involved in this dramatic tradition. In fact, the
Kamalábāri Satra is trying to develop a basic form, keeping the fundamental principles of the Aṇikīyā Nāts, in the movement of diversification within the tradition. The common people are of the view that, today the authenticity in the tradition is largely maintained by the Kamalábāri Satra, accepting the change of language to modern Assamese.

Some of the other Satras, who are keenly engaged in the tradition, are the Kāthpar satra of Sivasagar, Cāmaguri Satra of Majuli, in the continuation of the tradition of mask-making that enhances the development of the dramatic art in the recent period. In this aspect, infusions of many modern techniques in adjustment with the changes are perceivable in the tradition.

Next, to look upon the participation of the common people or the non-Satriyas, it can be enumerated that when the institution of Bhāonā gained its high regard within the Satras, then, mostly the religious-minded people started to perform themselves in the nāmghars of the villages, in imitation of the performances they usually observed in the Satras. In many villages, there is also the tradition of inviting the Vaiṣṇavite Gurus
of the Satras by enthusiastic villagers in order to provide them with the formal instructions required for a good performance of Bhāonā. At their request, the Vaiṣṇavites offer their guidance with the full training session of dance, music and action included in a Bhāonā performance. The written script used during the training period, is the production of the Satra itself. After the period is over, an intelligent person usually writes down the orally transmitted text of the script. Thus, the latter production, obviously have distinguished transformations.

In such a way, this dramatic art was diffused among the people especially in the Upper and Central part of Assam.

Gradually, a new trend came into the tradition of Bhāonā, as it was flourished outside the Satras, particularly when it came into the hands of commoners. Numerous playwrights evolved at different places and periods of time, started from the last part of 18th century (approx.) to till date. The change of language was started by the Vaiṣṇavites was later became more prominent outside the Satras. Although, identified as one form, and known as such,
as Māṭṭabhāṣār Bhāonā, the occurrence of variations within the genre became a regular feature.

Eventually, the playwrights have great manipulation in the formation and growth of this emergent form of the dramatic tradition. The Nāṭ (script) of the play is the indispensable part of the performance, and this has a qualitative effect on the performance. It has been observed that, the recognition as one identity has no concrete binding upon the playwrights, who often make their individual modifications in the plays with the infusion of some contemporary elements or elimination of the existing elements. [These changes have been illustrated in the Chapter 5.] Sometimes, these alteration or modifications are neither appealing to the audience nor imperative for the development of the tradition.

In many cases, it is noticeable that the language used does not suit the richness of the dignified tradition; in fact, it is very much akin to the dialogues of a modern drama, often expressed in the spoken temperament by the performers. Such dialogues are not lyrical in nature. Below provided an instance of such a kind:
Bhadrasen: Senāpati tomār Icchāt bādhā diyār
kāran nāy, gatike tumio olowā

Sursen: Dādā, āponi gale maio āpunār lagatei jām.

Bhadrasen: Bhāi Sursen, tumī jābo nālāge. Tumi
Gurudevar lagate rājyat thākā,
Senāpotio mor lagat jabo. Tumi gole
rājyat arājak hobo. Gotike tumī jabo
nālāge

[Sujañja Rajār Dharma Parikhyā, Kaloogaon,
Sivasagar]

The presentation of music in the performance of
Bhāonā also depends upon the playwrights not only
the lyrics; the scripts have also the mention of the
rāg and tāl of the songs. The change in this facet
of the drama has already been discussed in the
Chapter 5.

However, the changes made by the playwrights in
this aspect usually diminish the quality of the
performance to a large extent as observed in many of
the performances. It is observable that, sometimes
the songs provided in their scripts can not be
qualified as the production maintaining the required
basic principles that need to enhance the aesthetic
and the qualitative nature of a performance.
This is quite obvious in the creation of Nāt by unintelligible person or persons with less acquaintance with the tradition. In the traditional practice the rāg and tāl used in the songs are situation-based and often fixed. But, in the recent developments, deviation in this aspect is perceivable. As for example: The Dhararājyoti tāl is to be used in a scene which predominates with the sentiment of Karupa (pathetic), while today many playwrights make use of this tāl in scenes describing the fights. As a consequence, the playwrights in such a transitional period have an influential role to play either in developing the tradition, as well as preserving it in an agreeable manner or in the worst way of affecting the quality of the tradition with his creation.

Similarly, performance of Bhāonā can also be manipulated by the performers themselves. With the performer’s presentation, the quality of a performance can be defined. Their significance in the performance is well perceivable in the individual competence of the performers. It is found that, while performing sometimes a good performer
can make instant alteration in the performance with his skill of presentation thereby, making the otherwise dull performance lively. It is evident that a single character can produce a strong effect on the performance. In the observation of Bhāonā in a village at Sivasagar, once it is found that the play was carried on by the character of Śakuni. [The maternal uncle of Kauravas in the Mahabharata] His performance made the audience spell-bound. Besides, abiding to the principles of the tradition he shows his competence of performance in a pleasant manner of blending tinges of modernity. It could be very well substantiated from his actions that he is persuaded by the contemporary tastes of performance esp. the performance of the Śakuni character as shown in the popular television serial, Mahabharata. Therefore, many changes of Bhāonā in the presentation level are established as the outcome of the performers’ skill.

It is noted that some performers are profusely involved to this dramatic tradition. This is evident mostly in the rural areas of Sivasagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur and Tezpur. These performers are not involved simply as performers of a single performance, in fact, they seems to be attached to
the development of the whole institution of this art form. It is found that, some performers have all-around responsibilities in the performance, no doubt as performers but, also as playwrights, organizers, sometime also as an instructor. Moreover, apart from performing as an artist, they take part in the performance with a religious bend of mind. I met some persons who are so religiously inclined to the performance that, he really makes his performance an offering to God, but, if he incidentally could not perform he believe it to cause him misfortune. Such performers, who are so actively associated with the institution, are the real contributors of the tradition. Simultaneously, passive performers are also observable in the practice, who have minimum input for the performance as well as the tradition.

Next, the development of a performance as well as the tradition depends on the audience, in other words the audience constitutes an indispensable part of the performance. (In the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, an argument on the importance of audience has been made.

In the recent development of Bhāona, the 'audience expectation' often seems to initiate the newness in the tradition. As informed by the
respondents, their expectations from the performance instigate the playwrights, performers and other related people of the performance-tradition, to make certain modifications that correspond with the change of time and tastes of the people. These modifications have both good and adverse effects on the tradition.

Today, with the exposure to latest developments of entertainment along with the advanced technology, people’s expectations are more fascinated by the stylization and sophistication, as evident in the costume-making, which are more elegant and colourful, often less concern of the colour ethics that is necessary to signify the characters, mask-making, lighting arrangement, etc. The scripts are mostly influenced by the audience’s choice and preference. It has been observed that in many cases, the scripts of this period maintain a very thin line of demarcation with the modern secular dramas by providing a weak theme, mostly imaginary than from the epics or Purāṇas where, the sentiments predominates are: Vīra, Śṛngāra, Adbhuta, Hāsyā. These were mostly avoided in the dramas of the early period.
The religiosity that engulfed the performance earlier is diminishing in the recent period. This is evident in the simplification and in many instances, elimination of the ritualistic significance and the devotional attitudes towards the performance. People prefer entertainment rather than any religious teachings from such an artistic medium. Further, they favor everything in precise and easily communicable. As informed by the respondents, this instigates the playwrights to shorten the play by eliminating many elements, to give importance of comical characters and to make a shift of language. Thus, such influencing factors led to make new developments in the performance-tradition. Discussions on these changes and the factors have been provided in the Chapter: 5. and Chapter: 6. respectively.

The impact of such a variety of factors in the different platforms steered on the development of a profuse diversification within the tradition. This created confusion in the performance-tradition with the variations within the single entity identified as Mātrbhāṣār Bhāonā. Many people became aware of the fact, and, took steps like organizing Competitions and Festivals of Bhāonā, where it is tried to
maintain some kind of uniformity by accepting the contemporaneity as well as holding the tradition in a set form, thus, trying to check further decadence in the performance. As informed by the respondents engaged in organizing the competitions of Bhāonā, that besides popularizing a definite form of Māṭṛbhāṣār Bhāonā this will help to disseminate the actual ideals of the tradition, although presented in a different platform, instead of the Satras and Nāmghars. In the festivals of Bhāonā, organised at Nagaon (Dated 26th-29th December’2000) and Guwahati (Dated 26th-28th September’2003), it has been observed that presenting a Bhāonā in the Brajabuli language was preferred. Besides the festival held at Guwahati known as Setubandha, is an exception of giving a platform to the different communities of Assam such as tea-garden labourers, Bodo, Sonowal Kachari, Nepali, Mishing for a performance of Bhāonā. Infact, they were also provided with an expert training session during the rehearsal period by the organizers. It was an effort of uniting the varied communities as well as popularizing the ideals of this rich art heritage.

Another significant participation of people with the performing art can be noted as patrons.
Bhāonā, which evolved as a socio-religious event, actually do not have traditional patrons. Usually, the society or the individual connected to a particular performance extended their contribution with a devotional temperament, regarding the performance as 'an act of piety'. So, when it has a ritualistic significance even the performers or other people related to the performance need no remuneration. Later, with the increasing secular attitudes other than religious, towards the performance patronization from the Royal Courts started. Chilaray, alias Šukladhvaja of Koch-Behar, patronized the first representation of Sankaradeva’s Rukmini Haran Nat. As mentioned earlier, performances of Bhaona are also organized under the aegis of Ahom kings to entertain their guest, Abhiṣek or in the victory of wars. These performances are designed to cater their needs as evident by the unpopularity of the Akrugaman Nat (See in the preceding paragraphs in this chapter) performed by Dihing Namati Satra for not infusing the character of Bahuwa (clown). Later, the government (both State and Central) also called for the performances of Bhāonā on several occasions. As discussed earlier in this section, recently, the performance-tradition
with its extensive diversified status led to aware many groups and organizations. Thus, the performances of Bhāonās organized by them as a part of the festivals and competitions are also directed by them in the endeavor to value the heritage. Moreover, the sponsorship of the media as an art show has also significant impact to the tradition. Although, patronization is not a requisite part in the performance of Bhāonā, it has an indisputable relation since its evolution.

Besides the unfavorable developments that crept into the performance-tradition, there are also developments favourable to the tradition, as observed to be contributed by most of the contemporary playwrights, directors, performers; individuals and groups engaged in this performance-tradition with an enthusiastic attitude for an innovative presentation, acceptable to new generations of audiences, in the contemporary options available merging into the fundamental base, while propagating the principles of the religion as well as the performance-tradition.
Notes


4 Satyendra Nath Sarma, Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam (Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1966) 172.


8 ibid 75.

9 Manik Neog, personal interview, 27 Jun 2002
