In this study, an attempt has been made to understand the aspect of 'change' and 'continuity' in the traditional performance of Bhāonā in Assam with the emphasis on Mātrabhāṣar Bhāonā as its emerging form.

Change is invasive in every phenomenon of human life, be it individual or collective. A traditional culture is no exception. It also changes with the change of time and other varied factors. In fact, culture is like a flowing river, which changes its course in due phases of time. And, a river is living, when it is in its motion or flow, otherwise, it is a dead river. Likewise, the traditional culture, when not in practice, is regarded as frozen or dead. The cultural continuity is very essential to consolidate the past.

Today, the institution of Bhāonā does exist in a complicated situation with its several identities, often with the claim of holding the tradition in adaptation to the changing time and attitudes of its active and passive bearers. In addition to this
complicacy, this performance tradition seems to be in persistent instability which might be looked as one of the common characteristics of many traditional arts in today’s changing world. Thus, it is not easy to make a distinct assessment of the whole situation in such a transitional phase. While discussing the plurality of traditions in the Asia and their non-feasibility to be categorized in some definite genres, Kapila Vatsyayan says:

"The phenomenon of cultural growth can be never sketched in terms of a single rising line or curve of development; subsidiary curves, lines and graphs have to be drawn to contain to total picture. Repeatedly major exceptions, seeming contradictions and departures have to be stated the moment a formulation in general terms have been made. In the face of this multiplicity and absence of a monolithic structure, many have characterized the picture as conglomeration of many trends and historical periods and have been obliged to rest content with a narration of parallel growths. Also, many aspects of the past seem to overlap with the present,
not merely as vestiges and heritage but as a living reality."

In spite of the fact, the study tries to make an analysis of the present situation in the performance of Bhāonā along with the past—the continuity in adaptation to change.

Bhāonā has its origin during the 15th-16th century A.D., with the creation of Aṅkiyā Naṭs by Śaṅkaradeva, mainly in order to preach the principles of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. Before the evolution of Aṅkiyā Naṭs, there are evidences of existence of several indigenous dramatic and semi-dramatic modes in Assam, viz. Ojā pāli, Dhuliyā Bhāonā, Khuliyā Bhāonā, Bhari Gān, Kuśān Gān, Putalā Naṭc. Many scholars are of the opinion that these forms have its impact on Śaṅkaradeva while creating his dramatic spectacle. This is supported by the presence of many features of Aṅkiyā Naṭs similar to these forms. This has been discussed in the Chapter: 2.

Śaṅkaradeva, regarded as the father of Assamese drama and dramaturgy with the immense contribution towards the dramatic tradition of Assam through his
Aṅkīyā Nāṭs. A descriptive detail on the evolution of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ and its characteristics has been provided in the Chapter: 3.

Śaṅkaradeva was followed by Mādhavadeva and the later Vaiṣṇava leaders. In a way, the Satras played a significant role in maintaining and developing the dramatic tradition.

Gradually, Bhāonā gained its currency outside the Satras, which led the participation of the commoners. Aṅkīyā Bhāonā, devised by Śaṅkaradeva became the touchstone and criterion in its growth in the later period. Obvious changes make its entry into the traditional practice. This resulted in many new developments within the tradition. Different forms on the basis of Aṅkīyā Bhāonas evolved at different periods since its initiation made by Śaṅkaradeva. The changes in the tradition started within the Satras. Even, the plays of Mādhavadeva have a distinctive identity, which are extensively known as Jhumurās.

Later, with the recognition of certain distinct characteristics, these new developments within the tradition were classified into certain categories where the basic ideals of the tradition persists,
although, in many of the cases weakly maintained.

One such development is known as the Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā, which characterizes by the change of language from Brajabuli with many other discernable alterations. These transformations are more secular in character, rather than devotional influenced by the modern attitudes and tastes of the people. The other forms in the style of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā are: Dhurā Bhāonā, Phaujiyā Bhāonā, Juri Bhāonā, Cukragānar Bhāonā, Baresahariyā Bhāonā and Hezāri Bhāonā. Illustrations of these forms have been made in the Chapter: 4.

As pointed earlier, change is a universal issue and, is undeniable. Changes are sometimes favorable, while at other times unfavorable. A performing art continues in adaptations to contemporary changes.

In the process of adapting to the current changes, it is necessary to make the past relevant to the present; otherwise there is the fear of loosing the traditional identity. Therefore, a performing art survives only with its continuity, which is again depends on contemporary adaptations. In this regard Ashok D. Ranade rightly opined:

"Nothing strengthens the performing art more than their essential continuity. It
is this continuity which consolidates the past, validates the present and ensures a future for the performing arts. No amount of documentation, preservation or (a passive) dissemination of cultural values is likely to help unless accompanied by an active circulating presence of things and truths we believe in."

A performance-study is not parallel to other 'structuralized study'. Every performance is a new creation with every time it is performed, even though it attributes the same text within the same context. Therefore, comprehending of the 'traditional continuity' as well as the 'contemporary changes' or the 'emerging trends', can be considered as inevitable while analyzing a performing art. Moreover, a performance, like Bhāonā which is in transition has other dimensions responsible for its transformations, these are, 'communicative competence', 'creativity' or 'innovative nature' of man, and 'emergent quality of a performance'. A brief discussion on these issues has been made in the Chapter: 5, provided by an argument on the changes that crept into the
performance-tradition. As mentioned earlier, the changes are perceivable since its evolution. But, as the study laid its emphasis on *Māṭṛbhāṣaṛ Bhāonā*, this section is detailed in documenting the changes that have been observed in the various aspects of the performance, evaluating from the period of its development.

Intermixture of modern elements and sometimes elimination of existing elements led to the formation of *Māṭṛbhāṣaṛ Bhāonā*. Changes are perceivable in the various fields. The text, which stands for the written script of the play, have significant change of language and theme; change of objective of the performance, where the previous ritualistic significance of the tradition has been gradually inclined to be entertainment-oriented; change in the field of music and dance; sophistication and stylization entered into the field of mask and costume making, lighting arrangement, sound effects, and other cho-effigies and prop.

With the natural tendency of communicative competence and innovative or creative nature of man, several other factors are also responsible as the causes of transformations that have been operating...
within the variety of aspects of the performance during the recent period. This has been discussed in the Chapter: 6. Apart from the creative nature of the man, the changing expectations of the people also have great impact on the alterations in the traditional practice. In the evolution of Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā the people’s expectation and convenience instigated for certain changes as the change of language, importance of the comical character, shortening of the time period of performance etc.

The change of language is the distinctive criterion to signify Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā, and to make it clear, this change is not only as a result of the people’s choice or convenience, but also due to the lesser acquaintance of the language by the playwrights, which also include the Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the Satra besides the commoners. Further, another influential factor is the importance of entertainment in contrast to the devotional attainment has led to certain secular changes which are evident in the performances organized not for religious purpose but, either for the popularization of the tradition or simply for
entertainment that has been telecasted on television.

Today the tradition of Bhāona is surviving in a multilayered platform. The plurality within the tradition has no end, which is evident with the occurrence of diversification within Mātrabhāṣar Bhāona. In such a transitional phase when the transformations are very numerous, it is hard to classify or categorize this emergent form of Bhāona. Nevertheless, a simple classification has been made on the basis of language, time, place and playwrights etc. which is presented in the Chapter: 7. The variations of alterations within the tradition has led to the development of several identities of the genre, where some are rather loose and compromising, as far as, the total quality of the performance is concerned, and, some others have shown strict orthodoxy in sticking to the traditional norms.

Several people have their contributions in sustaining the institution of Bhāona, since its evolution to the recent period. They can be categorized as: Vaishnavites or the people of the Satras and non-Satra people and Active and Passive
Participants. This has been illustrated in the Chapter: 8

The involvement of the Vaiṣṇavites in the development of the performance-tradition is very commendable. Because, if they would not have retained the tradition initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, then today, the tradition would have been extinct. Their contributions in the continuation of the tradition have made possible to broaden the horizon of its practice. The movement towards change in the tradition or tendency to new developments was also started by the Vaiṣṇavites or the people of the Satras as shown in the alteration of language and style of the Nāts written by many Vaiṣṇavites. And, the change is often an expression of the individuality or creativity of the playwrights.

Later, the Vaiṣṇavites also imparted training to the commoners or the non-Satra people, whenever they show their interest on the performance.

With the high esteem towards the performance, which was also due to the impact exerted by the presentation of the performances of the Vaiṣṇavites, the non-Satra people were drawn to participate in the tradition. Later, with their participation the
preference of contemporaneity was more focused in the tradition of Bhāonā. Thus, Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā although identified within the Satras, has developed to the recent form in the hands of the non-Satra people outside the Satras. However, this led to the diversifications within the genre which indicates the lack of uniformity in the form and content of the tradition.

The innovative nature of man has no end. Although, people are aware of the structured system of the performance, it is observable in most of the time, they fail to maintain the regularity of the tradition which was influenced by many factors in this changing world as already discussed. This resulted in the variations within the genre which, actually bring about a chaotic movement in the performance-tradition. While some conscious people put their effort to hold the Śaṅkarite dramatic tradition in a conventional form accepting the contemporary adaptations in an agreeable manner. The role of these persons as playwrights, directors, performers or in other activities of a performance is additional to their effort to develop the performance-tradition by organizing the competitions
and festivals of Bhāona, for proper dissemination and popularization of the tradition, particularly in a basic form. In such a way, it is expected to accommodate the tradition to avoid variations and confusions.

From the analysis of the present situation of the performance of Bhāona, it is perceived that, the performance-tradition has experienced different layers of identifications at different period of time. Today, it is characterized by the presence of both traditional and contemporary spirits in a variety of levels. Sometimes, the performances are more inclined to traditionality and at other times, to contemporaneity. While enumerating the simultaneous existence of the both, it can be said that, in some places, as evident in the practices in the areas of Nagaon Bhāonās akin to Anikiyā, often employing the Brajabuli language, is more prevalent.

Since evolution, the tradition of Bhaona is continuing albeit in many emergent forms. Today, the tradition has been popularly existing in the form of Mātrbhāṣar Bhāona, even though, it has several manifestations.

There is always a fear of loosing a tradition either, completely adhering to it or breaking away
from it. A tradition is not mere clinging to the past. Today, the interrelationship of the past and the present is viable while defining a tradition. To be precise, the focus is on the dynamic relations between the socially given, i.e., 'traditional' and the creative individual i.e., 'emergent'. In a way, a tradition undergoes certain transformations in the present context. But, the tradition can be maintained in a proper blending of the past and the present. The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.
Notes

