Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic activity is one of the cultural universals of mankind. As such, the art of drama or theatre is as old as human civilization and, the written history of this art is the history of mankind\(^1\). It envelops an entire gamut of human activities. 'Lokasya Charitam'---human life in all its complexity---is considered to be the subject of drama\(^2\).

A 'drama', as a performing art, is an execution of actions with dialogues, representing a composition in verse or prose which intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions. It, irrespective of its form, sacred or secular, has never failed to make its powerful appeal to man. Every nation and every race have their own dramatic history, and, so has India.

India has a rich cultural legacy with multiplicity of traditions comprising a multitude of patterns of performing arts, which are instable in nature with the tendency of change over the period
of time. This vast spectrum of performance genres is a reflection of its linguistic, cultural and religious diversities. In spite of the fact, the number and complexities of the genres have been sustained by a remarkable historical continuity.

There are many layers of influences which shape the complex cultural profile of India. They are: the classical tradition which is ascribed to the Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra*; the rites and rituals as practices belonging to ancient belief systems; the folk cultures welded to village settings and finally; the modern or urban environment. Although, it is not easy to categorize the traditions of Indian dramatic performance in any absolute form, however, an attempt has been made to classify as the following, viz., the classical, the ritual, the devotional, the folk popular and the modern. But, these are not independent; any form of performance may combine features of other forms. For instance, a particular folk or classical genre may have devotional or ritual characteristics.

The study of a cultural event, as universal and as multifarious as the Indian dramatic art with its pervasive influences it exercises on a society, is always of great significance.
The present study is an attempt to investigate the dramatic performance of Assam, known as, \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāonā} ---its continuity and changes in the recent period. Special emphasis has been given to \textit{Mātrabhāṣar Bhāonā} as its significant emergent form of the recent period. In brief, this study deals with the historical background of the Assamese dramatic tradition with the evolution of \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāonā} followed by the development of \textit{Mātrabhāṣar Bhāonā}.

Assam has a distinctive place in the milieu of the traditional performing arts of India. The \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāonā} as a devotional performance was initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, the preceptor of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. He created this art form as a medium of propagating his faith. It is known as \textit{Aṅkīyā}, as it is a one-act play. The \textit{Aṅkīyā Nat} designates the script and the term, \textit{Bhāonā} refer to the 'representation of a drama'. Śaṅkaradeva proved his rare stroke of genius with the blending of religious with the artistic. Moreover, his genius skill is also revealed by the fact that, in his \textit{Aṅkīyā Nāts}, he could evolve a dramatic form that combined in itself the traditions of classical Sanskrit drama as well as indigenous dramatic and semi-dramatic modes.
This dramatic tradition has been maintained and developed by the Vaiṣṇavite leaders following Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the latter being the principal disciple of the former.

In the later periods, many transformations became apparent in this performance tradition. The consequence of the new developments within the tradition is the evolution of a variety of forms. And, Māṭṛbhāṣar Bhāonā is such an emergent form that developed as a result of gradual infiltration of secular elements and other changes along with the change of language in the traditional practice.

Today, the diversity in the dramatic tradition is innumerable and, is at present, existing in a multilayered situation. In a performance study, the concept of emergence is important to comprehend the exclusivity in the performance within the context as a generalized cultural system in a community. This ‘emergent quality’ is very well perceivable in the performance of Bhāonā.

This study, deals with the changes that crop up into the tradition of AnkIyā Bhāonā, since its evolution till the recent period and the factors that determine such changes and its implication. In
brief, the study is an endeavor to reflect the present scenario of the performance-tradition.

It is a comparative study, where changes and the diversifications within the traditional form have been identified with the analysis of the past and the present tradition as well as its prevalence in a varied platform.

The study is based mainly on first-hand field observations rather than secondary sources. A number of written Naṣṭs (scripts) has been collected and live performances of Bhāonā have been observed with audio and photographic documentations. The study also involved in-depth interviews and discussions with persons who are engaged to this tradition either actively or passively.

Bhāonā is more prevalent in the upper and central part of Assam. Therefore, the field of this study covers the places from the districts of Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar and Dibrugarh. Both rural and urban areas are taken into consideration while selecting the places, as, rural areas are supposed to be comparatively less influenced by any contemporary change than the urban areas which are more inclined to changes. Thus, to have an over-all estimate of
the changes in the tradition, a random selection of the places---both rural and urban has been made as the field of study.

The study of a performance and, that's too, in a transitional period, is actually a challenge. In fact, it is difficult to make a concrete interpretation of an issue which have both the traditional continuity and the contemporary changes.

In spite of the complexities that typify the performance-tradition of Bhāona, the study is an attempt to make a perception of the traditional continuity with the continuous transformations.
Notes

1 Siddheswar Chattopaddhyay, Theatre in Ancient India (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993) 81.


4 ibid, 37.