Chapter 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DRAMATIC TRADITION OF ASSAM

In the dramatic history of Assam, the \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāona}, created by Śaṅkaradeva, the preceptor of Neo-Vaiśnavism, has great significance. He has greatly contributed to the growth of Assamese art and literature. \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāona}, the dramatic compositions and the religious spectacle was one of his unique creations and the greatest hallmark at the level of his artistic creativity. It is conceived as a form of social art and as a medium of propagation of the Bhakti movement initiated by him. This highly stylized art form, combining music, dance and drama, plays a pivotal role in the history of the dramatic art as well as in the socio-cultural sphere of Assam. There have been no specific specimens of full-fledged drama, prior to the advent of Śaṅkaradeva, although, it is said that the tradition of performing art might have been there from the very old time. The drama proper has started with the evolution of \textit{Aṅkīyā Nāṭ}, as such, he is
regarded as the father of the Assamese drama and dramaturgy\(^1\). Besides propagating the faith among the masses, \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāonā}, stands as the touchstone for the tradition of drama in Assam.

Assam had a glorious heritage of performing art which is nurtured and maintained till today. Before the evolution of \textit{Aṅkīyā Bhāonā}, the people of Assam were not entirely deprived of the entertainment of performing art. There are evidences of the existence of various indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic art forms prevailed in earlier Assam. Such forms are the \textit{Ojā-pāli}, \textit{Kuśān Gān}, \textit{Bhāri Gān}, \textit{Dhulīyā Bhāonā}, \textit{Khulīyā Bhāonā}, \textit{Putalā-nāc} (Puppetry), \textit{Deodhani} performance and \textit{Naṭ-naṭī nāc}. Many scholars are of the view that, Śaṅkaradeva drew inspiration from many of these indigenous forms, which can be traced back to much earlier times. In this connection, Dr. Kesavananda Deva Goswami says:

“Śaṅkaradeva seemed to have made a synthetic texture from those elements in shaping his dramatic representations. A fine binding of those existing forms with his own imagination made this institution quite novel and most attractive.”\(^2\)
Kaliram Medhi in the 'Introduction' of _Aŋkāvalī_, has laid stress on the influence of these indigenous performances particularly, the _Ojā-pāli_ upon the evolution of _Aṅkiyā Bhāonā_. Many other scholars are also of the view that the influence of _Ojā-pāli_ upon the _Aṅkiyā Bhāonā_ is greater than that of other forms.

_Ojā-pāli_ is a performance of choral singing of a party of not less than five members consisting of an _Ojā_, one _dainā pāli_ as the chief assistant and the other _pālis_. The _Ojā_ recites verses from the scriptures with gestures and body movements, while the _pālis_ repeat the verses of the _Ojā_ with a regular rhythm of cymbals and the feet. The _dainā pāli_ adds humour and make witty retorts to the performance. The _Ojā-pāli_ has been broadly classified into two varieties --- the _Biyāh gowā Ojā-pāli_ and the _Śuknānī Ojā-pāli_. The former is related to _Vaiṣṇavism_ and the latter to the _Manasā_ cult or Snake worship. There are certain facts which indicate that Šaṅkaradeva might have been influenced by the institution of _Ojā-pāli_. The role of _Sūtradhār_ of _Aṅkiyā Bhāonā_ can be said as a prototype of the _Bāyan_ of _Patalā-nac, Ojā_ of _Ojā-
pāli and Mūl or Giddāl of Kuśan-gān performance. He introduces the play and the characters and conducts it through songs, dances and commentaries by remaining in the performance from the beginning till end. His functions are more akin to the Ojā of Ojā-pāli as a singer, a dancer and a director all combined in one. The dress of a Sūtradhār also resembles to that of an Ojā which consists of a white turban, a long sleeved jāmā or shirt and a ghūrī or skirt tied to the waist with a waist strip. Likeness can also be drawn out with the absence of raised platform on both the performances. Besides, both the performances are lyrical and are based on music (vocal and instrumental) which is a continuous element in them. Kathā Guru Carit also gives the evidence of the prevalence of Ojā-pāli in the pre-Śaṅkarite period, i.e. before 15th century A.D.

The reference of the term Pāṇcālikā Vihāra in the 89th chapter of the Kālikā Purāṇ (10th -11th Century A.D.) points to the existence of Putalā nāc in the ancient Assam. It is likely, because, pāṇcālikā is an equivalent word for putalā (puppet). Most probably, the tradition of ojā-pāli developed later than that of putalā nāc. The ojā and the
dainā-pāli resemble the bāyan and dainā-pāli of putalā nāc and most probably, the term pāncāli (text that provides storyline to the performance of ojā-pāli) is related to the term pāncālikā which is also an signal of the preponderance of Puppetry over ojā-pāli. Similar musical preludes as dhemālis of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā constitute a part of the performances of putalā nāc and Kuśān Gān. Kuśān Gān is another form of folk performance of the Goalpara region with dramatic element has an ancient tradition in Assam. Song, dance dialogues are also predominant feature in this institution, where themes of Ramayana are enacted. The troupe of this performance consists of fourteen to fifteen members leaded by múl or giddāl. And the other members are called as duwarī, pāil mostly resembles the dainā-pāli and the pālis of ojā-pāli. The musical accompaniment is given by the members known as bāin similar to bāyan, and sengrā is the dancer of the group. The element of humor to the performance is provided by songs called as, payār and chātkā.

Bhari-gān is another folk performance of pre-Śaṅkarite period, prevalent in the south Goalpara region of Assam.
Aṅkiyā Bhāonā has also likeness with Dhuliyā-Bhāonā. The dhemālis of Aṅkiyā Bhāonā resemble the performance of dancing and singing in chorus in accompaniment with the playing of drums of the Dhuliyā-Bhāonā. It is a characteristic feature of both the performances. Moreover, the use of mask is also a common feature. Both the performances have comical relief provided by bahuwā of Aṅkiyā Bhāonā and the clown of Dhuliyā-Bhāonā.

Śaṅkaradeva blended into the religious sentiments with the artistic in his creation of Aṅkiyā Nāts, which is the medium of propagation of his faith. The religious perception of these plays is borne by the story of genesis of ancient theatre, preserved in the Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra which suggests the origin of Indian dance, drama and music, and is mostly associated with religion. Religion plays a pivotal role in the ancient drama-tradition of India, which has been conferred by the sacred status of the Veda (Nāṭyaveda). Even the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the most celebrated work of the Bhakti tradition, extols abhinaya or playing of the deeds of Lord Kṛṣṇa as one of the principle paths of devotion to the Lord. With such a background in
view, it can be taken into consideration that Śaṅkaradeva was inspired by the Indian classical tradition of drama associated with religion. Thus, in the line of Classical Indian tradition, Śaṅkaradeva preserved the sacredness and religiosity in his dramatic compositions. It can not also be denied that Sanskrit was widely studied and cultivated in the ancient Assam. This can be substantiated with the presence of Sanskrit drama and poetry in the curricula of the educational institutions known as ṭol or pāṭhśālā. The *Mahanāṭaka*, popularly known as the *Hanumān Nāṭaka* was a part of the study. There are also evidences of performance of this drama to entertain the honourable guests.

Scholars like Harichandra Bhattacharyya, referring to Carit (biography)s of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva by the biographers like Dāityāri Thākur, Rāmcharan Thākur etc, maintains that, “one Jagadis Misra who came to Assam from the western part of India was entertained by Śaṅkaradeva with the performance of a Sanskrit drama called Mahānāṭakam of Madhusudan Misra (also known as Hanumān Nāṭak)”. Dr. Bhattacharya has also pointed to the reference
of this drama in the Sanskrit Grammar, *Prayogaratnamala Vyakaranap* by Puruṣottamā.

Dr. Maheswar Neog, while indicating the influences of local institutions of dramatic nature, such as, *Putala nāc*, *Ojā-pāli* etc. on *Āṇkiya Nāṭ*, also laid stress upon the influences of Sanskrit dramas like *Mahānāṭaka* or *Hanumān Nāṭaka* and *Prabodhacandrodaya* of Krisna Mishra. The following features are analogous in both the performances of *Mahānāṭakam* and *Āṇkiyā Nāṭ* as shown by Dr. Harischandra Bhattacharyya:

i) absence of acts and scenes  
ii) abundance of verses  
iii) absence of the character viduṣaka  
iv) sporadic use of prose

Furthermore, there is no *Prastāvanā* (Introduction) and the regular *Nāndī Śloka* is replaced by a *Maṅgalā śloka* in *Vipra-patnī-prasāda* (the first *Āṇkiyā Nāṭ* of Śaṅkardeva), which resembles the nature of *Mahānāṭakam*.

Besides, evidences are also found about the practice of the arts of music and dance in the copper plate grants, writing of the traveler, Hieun Tsang to this part of the region and the Sanskrit
works of the early period. Hieun Tsang was entertained with songs and dances when he stayed in Kamrupa as an honoured guest of the king Bhāskarvarman (7th Century A.D.).

The copper plate inscriptions of King Vanamāla (8th-9th Century A.D.) refer to temple dances. In the Kālikā Purāṇa, references are found about the prevalence of dance and music in ancient Assam. In the writings of Mādhava Kandali and Haribar Vipra, references of Naṭ and Bhāṭ are found. That the temple performances were made by the Naṭ and the Naṭīs in the Mādhava temple of Hājo, Pari-haresvar temple of Dubi and Biśvanāth Śiva temple is found in history. Following is the comment on Naṭ and Naṭīs by Harishchandra Bhattacharyya:

“The Naṭ and Naṭīs (male dancers and female dancers) occupied a dignified position in Assam since days of yore. King Siva Singha (1714-1744) married Phulesvari who was just a Naṭī of some Siva temple. She was raised to the status of the chief queen. Even now the Naṭs of Hajo (Kamrup) are enjoying temple-land rent-free, in lieu of which they are to worship the temple-deity
by dancing, specially on the occasions of some particular ceremonies, e.g., Bihu, Phakua, etc. They are confined not to the Hajo temple only; in the past they used to depute artists from among them to some other places also to show their performances of their histrionic art. Thus, there was formed a separate community with them, some of which are still met with at Dergaon (Sibsagar District) and Dubi (Kamrup). Of course, the practice of dancing is no longer in vogue. The community is known as Naṭ Kalitā."

Although, such performance-tradition existed in ancient Assam, there are no evidences of its influences on the creation of Aṭkīyā Bhāona. 

*Prabodhacandrodaya* (of Krishna Misra, 11th century), another Sanskrit drama of allegorical in nature, consists of six acts was also popular in Assam in the pre-Śaṅkarite period. As mentioned in the *Kathā Guru Carit*, Saṅkaradeva studied ‘Prabodha Candra’ in his early age. Although such dramas did not have any perceptible influence upon the Aṭkīyā
Nāts, yet, the avoidance of the scenes of marriage, death bathing, fighting etc. seems to have been encouraged from these dramas.

In the words of Bhattacharya, "Gīta Govinda of Jaydeva, though not a drama, also seems to lend materials in some respects to the Aṅkīyā Nāts; traces of the same are noticed especially in some songs and Bhatimsās." ¹⁰

An earlier play in ‘Sanskṛt-Prākṛt-Maithili’ is the Pārijāṭ Haran by Umapati Upadhaya of Mithila is also said to have influence on Aṅkīyā Nāts. Kaliram Medhi makes mention of this one-act play in his preface to Aṅkāvalī. According to him, Śaṅkaradeva might have got the idea of producing his one-act plays from Umapati’s Pārijāṭ Haran. Dr. Krishnanarayan Prasad Magadh also advocates the probability of the Umapati’s influence on Śaṅkaradeva¹¹. But, the exact time of Umapati is a matter of controversy. According to Dr. J.C. Misra, Umapati flourished during the reign of Maharaja Raghavsinha (1704-1740)¹². If this fact is taken into account, the probability of Śaṅkaradeva being influenced by Umapati can be nullified.
In tracing the direct influence of the Sanskrit drama on the Aṅkīyā Nāṭs, the following elements can be taken into account:

(a) Singing of the Nāndī verse in Sanskrit by the Śūtradhāra
(b) Dominance of the role played by Śūtradhāra
(c) Recitation of Prarocanā Śloka
(d) Performance of the ritualistic task of introducing the play (prastāvanā) by the Śūtradhāra
(e) Recitation of the Muktimaṅgala Bhāṭīmā (benedictory ode) towards the end of the play
(f) Diffusion of Sanskrit slokas with a plaintive motif

Besides, the dhemālis of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ resemble the purvarāṅga, the preliminaries, mentioned in the Nāṭyaśāstra, and, similar to the Sanskrit plays it does not form a part of the drama proper. The typical passages intermixed with prose passages, greater attention to recitation in the dramatic performance, singing, accompanying music, dance movement and pantomime was known to Sanskrit drama from the 5th - 8th centuries. The seeds of a fuller use
of music were never the less present in Sanskrit drama even in the early period, as is borne out of the fact that Caturbhanî of the 5th century A.D. clearly refers to a form of theatre called the Saṅgītaka in his Udbhayabhisāṅka. Dr. Jagadis Chandra Mathur provides reference of Saṅgītaka as the influential cause of Ankiyā Nāṭḍa. Again, Dr. Krishna Prasad Magadha in his ‘Saṅkaradev: Sāhityakār Aur Bicārak’, mentioned five traditions, of which Saṅgītaka is the probable tradition which is regarded to be one of the inspiring source for Saṅkaradeva to develop Ankiyā Nāṭḍa.

Apart from the Sanskritic and indigenous influences, Saṅkaradeva’s plays seem to have been effected by the dramatic arts of Medieval India. Although, there is no direct similarity between Ankiyā Nāṭḍa and other dramatic forms of India, the evolution of Jananāṭyas out of the decadent Sanskrit dramas combined with elements of local cultures came to possess a few similar characteristics. Among them a few have been noted as follows:

(a) predominance of dances and songs
(b) simplicity of the introduction of the play and its subject matter
(c) minimum use of dialogues
(d) dominance of the role played by the Sūtradhāra
(e) use of masks
(f) the entrance and exit of the characters with dancing movements accompanied by music
(g) use of Nāndī Śloka and Muktimaṅgala Bhaṭimā at the beginning and at the end of the play
(h) dominance of mythological themes and religious motifs etc.

Śaṅkaradeva during his pilgrimage visited many places of the northern and central India. It is supposed that he might have experienced a number of theatre forms prevalent in those regions, which had its impact later, on his compositions. It has close affinities with Yakṣagāna of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Bhāgavata Melā and Terrukkuṭṭu of Tamil Nadu, Bhāvāi of Gujarat, Lalit of Maharashtra, Rāslīlā and Rāmlīlā of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and Yātrās of West Bengal.
Ankiya Nats with the association of religion has much that fall in the line of the above mentioned dramas of the other parts of India. The use of Brajabuli, has given it a large Indian character. Its vaiṣṇavite base particularly linked with the Rāmlīlā and the Rāslīlā forms. On the other-hand, its dramatic structure and mode of presentation are close parallels of the Bhāgavata Melā, forms of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and to an extent even of the Yātrā of Bengal and Orissa. Moreover, its dance styles and some aspects of costuming have affinities with Manipur, for instance, the typical and elegant dress of Sūtradhāra has much likeness with the dress of Māība and Māibi (priest and priestess) of Manipur. The contents and techniques of music are close to the Dhrupada singing of Northern India. Besides, as the affinity of dance technique, the cālis of Assam are akin to Manipur. The cālis or the natuwā nāc is one of the richest dance styles in the Bhāonā performance which is also evident in the other classical dance styles of India.

As mentioned earlier, the Ankiya Nats has its resemblance with the performance of Ojā Pāli and also to that of the dramatic arts of Medieval India.
S. N. Sharma has rightly pointed to the similarities between the performances of *Kuṭṭu*, later came to be known as *Kutiyāttam* of Kerala and *Dhop-Kirtan* of Bengal with *Ojā Pāli*. He further said that, as the institution of *Kuṭṭu* developed to the form of *Kutiyāttam*, where all the characters concerned appear on the stage with proper make-up costume and recite and act, following the rules of dramaturgy instead of the role of *Chākiyar of Kuṭṭu* who impersonates all the characters of the story through recitation of verses and actions showing the *bhāva* in accordance with the rules of *Abhinaya* laid down in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Śaṅkaradeva also might have made changes and developed the institution of *Ojā Pāli* according to the norms of Sanskritic dramatic tradition to make his *Aṅkiyā Naṭ*.

The evolution of *Aṅkiyā Naṭ* and its origin is still a matter of controversy. Śaṅkaradeva's first play *Cihna Yātrā*, [A detailed description is provided in the next chapter] is said to have been written at the age of nineteen, before he went abroad on pilgrimage. This is quite irrelevant and not convincing to the view, that he had been
inspired by other dramatic traditions of India, while he was traveling.

Śaṅkaradeva’s creation of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ is actually a mark in the dramatic history of Assam. With his sole motto to infuse the devotional temperament among the masses, to enlighten with the teachings of Bhāgavata Purāṇa, he created Aṅkīyā Nāṭs, definitely stimulated by the then prevalent semi-dramatic indigenous institutions and Sanskritic dramatic tradition, to which he was well acquainted with from his childhood. In this regard Bhattacharyya opines “that as regards the language (Brajabuli) only, the Aṅkīyā Nāṭs owe their origin to some Maithili works of Vidyapati or other early poets, while in other respect they are genuine Assamese productions based partly on Sanskrit plays and partly on the Assamese semi-dramas already in vogue in Assam since early days.”16

It can be concluded with the words of Kapila Vatsyayan, stated on the uniqueness of Bhāona performance, that,

“A single Bhaona performance thus combines harmoniously diverse elements of culture, which is why it is difficult to apply to
it readymade classifications like Margi or Desi, or Natyadharma or Lokadharma. As we have repeatedly stated, it is typical of the Indian cultural phenomenon that a dramatic form identified with a particular region has often interesting links not only with genres and styles within the region, but also with those which have flourished outside that region. ... And yet, it is by no means a mixture of all these: it has a distinct personality of its own, which is unquestionably Assamese, coherent and unique."17
Notes

1 Satyendra Nath Sarma, Asamiya Naṭya Sāhitya (Guwahati: Samar Prakash, 1996) 1.


3 Biographies, in Assamese verse and prose, of the Vaisnava saints with the accounts on the history of Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam


5 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and Stage (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1964) 4.


8 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 32.


10 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 6.


12 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 6.


14 ibid, 97.


16 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 8.