THE DRAMATIC MOVEMENT IN THE POST-ṢĀṆKARITE ERA: EVOLUTION OF MĀṬRĪBHĀṢĀR NĀṬ

It is a known fact that, every phenomenon changes with the change of time. A tradition invariably possesses a distinctive past, but in the course of time, changes occur inevitably into it. These changes are sometimes slow and imperceptible in degree, and at other times, it is phenomenal and speedy. Usually, changes take place either through metamorphosis or fusion. When a tradition gets metamorphosed, there is the possibility of losing the identity of the so-called tradition, but if fusion occurs then the identity is more or less preserved to a large extent. In the process of fusion, some secular elements may get infused in the older tradition.

In the post-Ṣāṅkarite period, the tradition of Bhāonā has undergone 'many changes. During 17th-18th century A.D., following the tenets of Ṣāṅkaradeva, Vaiṣṇavism was holding its firm ground at Assam. In the process, Satras and Nāmghars form an integral part of the Assamese culture. The history and
development and continuation of the Aṅkīyā Bhāonās is closely linked with the establishment of several Satras in different parts of Assam and the long line of lineage of each of these Satras. It became an almost obligatory activity of the Satrādhiṅkār (the head of the Satra) to write and present plays as a part of his Initiation rites. The tradition of writing Aṅkīyā Nāṁs and presentation of the Bhāonā thus, became a substantial part of the activities of the Satras. The Vaishnava leaders, following Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, composed a large number of plays based on the models set by the two Gurus. Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva laid the strong foundation of the tradition of Bhāonā performance which was created in order to propagate the ideals of Vaishnavism in Assam. The tradition is still in the process of continuation, although, with many changes.

Bhāonās are performed on several occasions, such as on the tīthis (death anniversary) of the two gurus or forefathers of the Adhikār of a Satra, on the Vaishnavite festivals e.g., ŚrīKṛṣṇa-Janmotsav (birth-day of ŚrīKṛṣṇa), Rās-yāṭrā, Dol-yāṭrā or Phākuwa (Holi festival), etc. A performance of
Bhāonā is also offered in the Namghars as a part of some individual and public religious occasions such as, 'Nam-gowā', 'Sabāh', 'Barsabāh' etc. As mentioned earlier, Bhāonās are regarded as a medium of 'earning piety' from the Almighty, so such performance is taken as an 'offering' to God and is a pious endeavor.

Even though, the subsequent plays were moulded in the framework of Ankīyā Nāṭs, they seem to lack the unique distinctiveness that marks the dramas of the two saint-poets. As mentioned earlier, the term anāka or ankīyā has several connotations and is of later application. In spite of its identity as Ankīyā, even the plays of Mādhavadeva deviated from many conventions found in the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva. In some of his plays there are no Nāndī verses, no Bhaṭīmās, no mention of the entrance of Sūtrakāra, no mention of the sound of the conch at the entrance of Kṛṣṇa. Songs abound in his plays. Although, Brajabuli used as the language of the plays, some verses and songs are in Assamese. His plays are more popularly known as Jhumurās.

During the 17th century these two gurus were followed by the other Mahantas in propagating the
cult, while cultivating the tradition of Bhāonā. Amongst a number of playwrights, a good number of plays have been authored by Gopāl Ātā, Dvīja Bhusan, Ramcaran Thākur, Daityārī Thākur, Jadumanidev. The significant plays of Gopāl Ātā are—Uddhava Yāna, Janma Yātrā; Ramcharan’s Kamśa Badh; Daityārī’s Nṛsimha Yātrā and Syamanta Harāṇa; Dvīja Bhusan’s Ajāmil Upākhyān; Jadumanidev’s Phālgu Yātrā. These authors imitated Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhava deva in their style, language and form to a large extent in their plays. There are also instances of borrowing some of the songs from them in verbatim. Although the plays of these Mahantas have much close affinities with the plays of the Gurus, it is to be noted that, a new trend has been developed in the composition of Aṇkīyā Nāfs by Dvīja Bhusan, Rāmcaran Thākur and Daityārī Thākur. In the Ajāmil Upākhyān of Dvīja Bhusan, although the language used is Brajabuli, the verses are mostly in old Assamese language. The payārs of Rāmcaran Thākur’s Kamśa Badh, Daityārī Thakur’s Syamanta Harāṇ and Nṛsimha Yātrā are also in old Assamese.

From the above examples it seems that, the standards of Aṇkīyā Bhāonā set by Śaṅkaradeva and
Mādhavadeva has been put to frequent variations in the hands of the later Gurus. Thus, the immediate followers, who either emulated or adhered to the basic ideals of the tradition, had also made slight but not negligible changes to their dramas.

In the later period, the performance of Bhāonā was not only confined to the four walls of Satras, but also made an entry into the courts of Ahom kings and to the Namghars outside the Satras. Gradually, it had its currency in every village and towns of Assam, esp. of Upper Assam. Although, the Vaisnava saints as Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Rāmcaraṇ, Daityārī Thākur etc. established the tradition of Ādikīyā Bhāonā at Kamrup, later, it actually could not developed and flourished in this part of Assam. The tradition was alive for a period in a very feeble form only in the Barpeta Satra. Probably, the Koch kings could not encourage and patronize the tradition as was done by the Ahom kings in Upper Assam\(^5\), and, this might be the reason as to why the Bhāonā performance-tradition could not be rooted deeply in the Lower Assam compared to that of Upper Assam. But of-late, efforts have been taken to revive the performance-tradition in the Barpeta
Satra after a long period with the performance of *Rukmini-Haraṇa Nāṭ* on 14th September’03.⁶

*Bhāonās* change not only in the compositions but also in the level of performance. Gradually, it was performed with secular objectives rather than simply devotional. In the courts of Āhom kings an Aṅkīyā Nāṭ was performed on the occasions such as, *Abhiṣek* (initiation rites), victory of wars and in entertaining the guests. Entertaining honourable personalities with a performance of drama was practiced even by Śaṅkaradeva, who performed a *Mahānāṭ* for the pleasure of Jagadis Misra⁷. This practice was recurrent during the reign of Āhom Kings such as, Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769 A.D.), in the court of whom *Rāvaṇ Badh* was played in the honour of Cachar and Manipur kings; *Padmāwati Haraṇa bhāonā* was performed in the court of King Gouri Nāṭh Simha by the son of Na-Gosāin; in the days of Kamaleshwar Simha, the Mahantas of Bareghar Satra performed *Rukmini Haraṇ Nāṭ* and the Mahantas of Dihing-Namati Satra performed *Akruragamaṇṭ*.

Following the basic form and technique this dramatic tradition underwent considerable changes in many aspects at various stages. As mentioned
earlier, changes creep into the tradition at a very early phase of its development. Mādhavadeva himself in his plays gave a distinctive identity of his own. Although Brajabuli is the language of his plays, influence of Assamese language is observable in Chor-dhārā nāṭ, Pīmpara Gucuā nāṭ. The succeeding generations of playwrights, who followed Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva also made changes in the line of language. Dr. S. N. Sarma demarcated two probable reasons for the change of language as, lack of sufficient knowledge of the Brajabuli language in the case of the later Mahantas and the preference given by the audience for the language of the popular scriptures, Kīrttan and Daśam, i.e., old Assamese rather than Brajabuli⁹. In the later period the language of Brajabuli was gradually fading away from the minds of the people. It became an unintelligible language for the commoners.

While performing in the village Nāmghars the writing of plays also came into the hands of commoners from the Mahantas of the Satras. Probably during the 18th-19th century this dramatic tradition took an inclination for many transformations to cater the popular needs. The standard set by the Gurus are seemed to be incompetently maintained. As
a result, numerous dramas evolved in the style of 
Aṅkiyā Nāṭs, which certainly can not be regarded as 
Aṅkiyā Nāṭ, nor are the performances as Aṅkiyā Bhāonās. These later developments are Dhurā Bhāonā, 
Phaujiyā Bhāonā, Juri Bhāonā, Cukragānar Bhāonā, 
Bāresahariyā Bhāonā or Hezāri Bhāonā and Māṭrbhaṇgār 
Bhāonā.

A brief note on the types of Bhāonā that evolved
during the 18th-19th century:

Dhurā Bhāonā: A ‘pseudo-bhāona’\(^{10}\) evolved after the coming of the British with the influence of Bengali Dhūp-Kīrttan. In this performance Sūtradhār has the main role to play, who dances to the songs and explanatory words about the subject-matter and plot of the play, with a whisk or cowar in his hand. Analogous to Aṅkiyā Bhāonās it has ślokas, Īś bandanā, Guru-bandanā, Nāṇī, Bhaṭīmā, Praveśar and Prasthānar git (songs of entry and exit), bilāpas, etc. It shows its distinction in the lyrics of the songs, dress, dances and hand gestures. Dialogues and prose pieces are completely absent instead verses and payārs are used. It is called as Dhurā Bhāonā, probably for the predominance of dhurā
songs. The language used here is old Assamese but not Brajabuli. This kind of Bhāonā is said to be originated in the Barpeta Satra and later it was developed in the Kamalabari Satra. According to Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma it is a folk form of Bhāonā performance.

Phaujiyā Bhāonā: With the influence of Bengali Jātrā, a kind of Bhāonā called as Phaujiyā Bhāonā, coming through Kochbehar and Barpeta, made its entry in Kamalabari Satra. The Sūtradhāra has the vital role to play in Phaujiyā Bhāonā. The language used here is a queer mixture of Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Śrī Mathurā Dās Ātā of Barpeta Satra developed this kind of drama, who later on wrote dramas, employing language completely influenced by Bengali. This kind of Bhāonā was also practiced in the Āunīāṭi Satra which was simply known as ‘Bhāonā’ with dialogues in the amritākhyar verse in Assamese language interspersed with Sanskrit words.

Juri Bhāonā: This kind of Bhāonā gained its currency in the early part of 19th century in the Kamalabari Satra. In the days of Lakshmikanta Deva Goswami, a drama was performed in the Kamalabari Satra by the abbots of the Barpeta Satra. The drama was Rāma Banabāsa which was in Bengali language and
is called as 'pāla' rather than 'ṇāṭ'. Later in the style of this drama Chandrakanta Deva Goswami developed a kind of Bhāonā known as Juri Bhāonā. He wrote two plays Rāma Banabāsa and Mahirāvaṇa Badha and infused in them juri songs composed in bandhā rāg (i.e., sung in fixed rhythm or tāl). Sūtradhāra is absent in this kind of Bhaona and features like bhaṭtimā, ślokas, etc. are also absent. There are at least two or three members in the group of Juri Bhāonā who sing the songs of an episode accompanied by a dhulukī (a small drum) and cymbals. The language used in it is Assamese.

Cukragānar Bhāonā: In this kind of Bhāonā also the Sūtradhāra has no role to play. Generally four youths performed the play with hand gestures (hastas). The language is Assamese and the directives used here are same as Juri- Bhāonā.

Barecahariyā and Hezāri Bhāonā: It is a kind of spectacular performance, where more than a dozen Bhāonās are performed in the same arena over one night or consecutively several nights. Such a kind of tradition of Bhāonā is prevalent in the Kaliabor region of Nagaon and Jamuguri of Sonitpur districts. In Kaliabor this form is known as Hezāri Bhāonā.
Hezāri or Hejerīyā is derived from the term 'hezar' which means 'a thousand' (a count of a khel or artisans guild employed during the Āhom regime) also known as 'Bora-kheliya' (from khel) Bhāonā. And, the Barecahariyā (from cahar, 'a well-defined area; a village; a town') Bhāonā is a practice prevalent in Jamuguri area. The tradition of this institution is about two hundred years old, for it is said that the Āhom Governor Salāl Gohāin, posted at Satinya near Jumuguri, patronized this kind of bhāona13. Later, the people of greater Jamuguri area have been promoting this traditional practice till today.

This performance is generally held in the dry season. A part of the paddy fields is cleared to prepare the ground and to make the stage. The plays are produced in a large pandal that consist of a central circular and many facet ground plan, covered by three-terraced structure at the centre, and the constituent pandals (khalā) for each play, radiating out from the central structure. A large holy pedestal that holds the Bhāgawata Purāṇa is kept in the central structure. The performance in all the Khalās start at the same time, each by a village or a group of villages with gāyan-bāyan. Similarly, Sūtradhāra appears in all the khalās. The parties
may select a drama either an Aṅkīyā Nāṭ or a latter-day piece, i.e., Matṛbhaṣar Nāṭ. This is a unique performance, a true multi-coloured spectacle.

Matṛbhaṣar Bhāonā or Asamiyā Bhāonā is another emerging form of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā during the period of 17th-19th century. It is also simply known as Bhāonā. On the basis of its language, this form is termed as Matṛbhaṣar Bhāonā or Asamiyā Bhāonā. The term 'Matṛbhaṣar' means mother tongue (Matṛ = mother, Bhāṣā = language). In this kind of drama, the language used in the dialogues is the modern Assamese or old Assamese instead of the Brajabuli language of the Śaṅkarite dramas. Prof. Maheshwar Neog defined this form of Bhāonā as “dramas written by the later Mahantas, which may not have the sweet brajabuli idiom, but only the everyday Assamese speech for its language (and, therefore, sometimes called matṛbhaṣar nāṭak in recent times) and may not have the rich aṅkīyā bājanā to accompany it”. Kesavananda Deva Goswami defined Matṛbhaṣar Nāṭ as a later development of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, a queer admixture of modern theatre with colloquial language and the use of Shakespearian blank verse.
Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami treats the evolution of Matrābhāṣar Bhāonā as a recent development in the tradition of Aṅkīyā Bhāonā with many changes, apart from the change of language from Brajabuli to colloquial Assamese. According to him, Matrābhāṣar Bhāonā usually comprise of three to four Aṅkās (Scenes) instead of one Aṅka in Aṅkīyā Bhāonā. He also pointed to the diminishing function of Sūtradhāra in this kind Bhāonā\(^{16}\).

According to Dr. Pitambara Deva Goswami, although the Satras maintained the tradition of Aṅkīyā Nāṭs, the change of language to colloquial Assamese was perceivable in the Satras of Upper Assam which was used in the dialogues in verse. This kind of Bhāonā, according to him was known simply as 'Bhāonā' and was practiced by the Āuniāṭi Satra. He further adds that in this kind of drama, the importance of Sūtradhāra diminishes; all the preliminaries are not performed by the Gāyana and Bāyana.\(^{17}\)

The tradition of Bhāonā emerged in the Satras, developed in the course of time within it with many transformations. As mentioned earlier, the change of Brajabuli language into Assamese was first initiated
by Madhavadeva and his later playwrights in some of the songs and verses. It is said that Auniati Satra first made the practice of writing Nāfs in Assamese language instead of Brajabuli. The founder Satradhikar (Head of the Satra) of Auniati Satra translated the Sanskrit drama Prabodhacandrodaya into Assamese, casting in the model of Ankīyā Nāṭā
t.

Gradually, Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā met with many significant developments outside the Satras, when it was started to be practiced by the Non-Satriyas. People prefer the change of language as more communicable with the performance-tradition gaining its popularity both as an art-form and as an ‘act of ritual’.

Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonā, both its scripts and other dramatic aspects, has been treated by several playwrights and performers with their own creativities, in a variety of platforms with different objectives. This resulted in a widespread diversification within the genre.

Given below is a list of plays written during the period from 17th century to early 19th century. These names are taken from the collections of Gauhati University, Department of Historical and
Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, and from
the catalogue compiled by B. C. Saikia²⁰.

Rāma Plays: Ahalyā hāraṇa, Daśāṇaṇa (Rāvaṇa)
Badh, Dūrvāṣa Bhojan, Kapindravijay (Māhirāvaṇa
Badh), Lakshmāṇa digvijay, Lavaṇa-Daitya Badh, Lava-
Kuṣar Juddha, Rāma Asvamedh, Rāma Svargāgamaṇ, Ram
Banabash, Rāvaṇa Badh, Satashkandha Rāvaṇa Badh,
Sahasraskandha Rāvaṇa Badh, Sitār Pāṭāl Gamaṇ, Sābitri
Uddhār, Sindhumuṇi Badh, Sitā Haraṇ, Sitā
Barjjan, Sitār Ajodhyā Gamaṇ, Biravedhu Badh.

Mahābhārata Plays: Abhimanyu Badh, Asvakarṇa
Badh, Bāghasūra Badh, Bhūmisvyambara, Bhisma Niryān,
Bhisma Bijaya, Droṇa Parba, Draupadi Haraṇa,
Draupadi-Svayambara, Kālakunja-Shoshaka Badh, Karna
Badh, Kulācala Badh, Kurmaval Badh, Kurukhetra
Samar, Naridarva, Pāṇḍava Banabāsa, Pāṇḍava Bijay,
Pāṇḍava Svargārohan, Probāś Jāṭrā, Sindhurā Jāṭrā,
Sudhanava Badh, Babrubāhana, Bijaysūr Badh, Birāṭ
Parba, Brshaketu Badh.

Bhāgavata Plays: Ajāmila, Amṛta Manthan, Bali-
Calan, Dākha Jajīya, Danda Parba, Dhruba Carita,

Plays from Other Sources: Parśurāmar Matṛ Matṛ Hatya, Haricandra Upākhyān.

Apart from these plays, there are plenty of play-scripts which have been being preserved in many Satras.

The sources of the above-mentioned Matṛbhāṣar Bhāonās are mostly Mahabharata and Ramayana rather than the Bhāgavata. Moreover, tales telling of fights and killings with love scenes became more popular in the later plays.

The dramas of the recent period which started from the early part of nineteenth century seem to be over-ridden with secular commitments. Importance has been given to melodramatic and other secular elements, making a medium of recreation and pleasure rather than attaining Spiritualism that envelops within the Aṅkiyā Nāṭ. As such every aspect of the tradition of this kind of Bhāonā has been
characterized by such attitudes. Thus, influences have been noticeable not only in the composition but also in the manner of presentation, level of performance and so on and so forth.

This emergent genre as termed as Matrðbhāṣar Bhāonā was not characterized only with the change of language, but also with visible distinctions in other aspects of the performing tradition, which is discussed in Chapter 5. The term has been also accepted in the academic parlance, as evident from the writings of illustrious scholars like Dr. Maheswar Neog, Dr. Kesavananda Deva Goswami, Narayan Chandra Goswami, Dr. Pitambar Deva Goswami, Gajen Barua and others.

Nevertheless, in the popular parlance also, the term 'Matrðbhāṣar Bhāonā' is well known to the commoners, both to the active performers and the audiences as well as the connoisseurs of this art form. In many cases, simply the term 'Bhāonā', without the prefix 'Matrðbhāṣa', is also used to designate the same genre. Other different terms, found to be used by the people in different places, to designate this particular category of the performance are, 'Katha Bhāonā' ('Kathā' meaning
prose), 'Abhinaya' (Abhinaya-literally means acting) or simply 'Nāṭ'.

The use of the term 'Kathā Bhāonā' in Biswanath Chariali of Sonitpur District seems to be significant. An explanation provided by an informant on the use of this term is that the Bhāonā performances using colloquial Assamese language in dialogues are less lyrical in nature in contrast to those Aūkīyā Bhāonās of Brajabuli language. For this reason, the term 'Kathā Bhāonā', which implies, "Bhāonā in prose", is used to describe such performances.

The term 'Abhinaya' is used by the people of Latabua Gaon near Rupahi of Nagaon to mean a contemporary Bhāonā performance.

In most of the remote areas of Sivasagar and Jorhat Districts, the term 'Nat' is also used to designate a performance of Bhāonā in this contemporary period. This term, otherwise refers to denote the scripts of a Bhāonā performance.

With the range of other developments, today, active association of different ethnic communities with this performance-tradition is also noticeable. They participate in the various activities of the influential Vaiṣṇavite culture, including the
performance of Bhāona. This development is marked by the distinctive production of Bhāona performances by such communities in their own style. In many cases, it is has been observed of using either their own language or Assamese language (with code mixing) by such communities. Mention can be made in this connection about the Mishing communities of Majuli, and certain tea garden communities of Central Assam, Bodo, Sonowal Kachari, etc.

These developments are also taken into the realm of Bhāona or Matrbhāṣar Bhāona in its wider extent, created in the warp of Aṇkiyā Bhāona, with certainly many features in common which identify it with the tradition, along with its dissimilarities. This is discussed in details in Chapter 5.

Moreover, Bhāona has also its impact in some of the regional dramatic performances of the Lower Assam in the later period. Such performances as indicated by Dr. Bhattacharyya, as “performances allied to Bhāona”. They are mainly, Pācatī, Api-Oja-party and Nām-Bhāona, which are exclusively performed by women and, are associated to ceremonial occasions having ritualistic significance. Bangāli Bhāona is also of such kind of performance prevalent in the Darrang district, is not in vogue now. Such
performances can not be called as full-fledged drama. They have elements which are analogous to the Bhāonā performance which pointed to the fact of its influences.
Notes


3 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 27.

4 ibid, 28.


7 Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 5.


9 ibid, 76.


Pitambar Deva Goswami, personal interview, 02 Nov, 1996


Arup Saikia, personal interview, 23 Jul, 2004

Haren Kalita, personal interview, 24 Aug, 2002

Harichandra Bhattacharyya, (1964) 51.