

Medieval European Dramas and *Ankiya Nats* (One-Act play) of Srimanta Sankardeva in Assamese Literature: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Theatrical practice in England in the medieval period was intimately connected to the life style and social condition of the people. The main form of the medieval drama was religious and they were popularly known as the mysterious plays, miracle plays and morality plays – mostly portrayed biblical story or account of the life of a saint or the dramatization of the abstract states. During the later part of the same medieval period, Sankardeva – the great preacher of Vaisnavism in Assam – had composed religious and moral plays known as *Ankiya Nat* (one-act play) based on the epics or the Puranas. The main purpose of these plays was to instil into the hearts of the audience the message of ‘bhakti’ (loving devotion to God). The present paper is an attempt to explore the similarities of the *Ankiya Nats* with that of the medieval European dramas. The study shows that the *Ankiya* plays of Assam and the medieval plays of the West reveal some identical features despite the immense difference of space.

Keywords: Ankiya Nat, One-Act play, Medieval drama, Mystery plays, Morality plays, Sankardeva

1. Introduction

Medieval drama relates to the drama of the period between the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century A.D. and the starting point of the Renaissance in the 15th century A.D. The Dark Age covers all plays generated in Europe over the thousand year and indicates to various categories such as liturgical dramas, mystery and morality plays, masques and farces. In the 10th century, starting with *Hrosvitha* of Gandersheim, Medieval theatre was for the most part very religious and ethical in its essence, staging and conventions. The best outstanding instances of the Dark Age theatre are the English cycle plays, the *York Mystery Plays*, the *Chester Mystery Plays*, the *Wakefield Mystery Plays* and the *N-Town Plays*, and the morality drama, *Everyman*.

The chronicle of Indian drama is expanded over various centuries. The early glance be witnessed in the primitive cave paintings. The archeological discoveries concerned with Indus Valley Civilization that prove to its existence in Vedic and Buddhist literature. Existence of the earliest dramatic deeds belong to the 4th century B.C. During the Gupta period, the Indian play touched its pinnacle with Kalidas. Dramaturgists in India regarded theatre as an all-embracing life-size art. Bharata Muni observed “there is no wise maxim, no learning, no art, no craft, no devise, no action that is not found in the drama” (Muni, 1951: 116). It had been regarded as the most prominent art and a meeting ground of all kinds of arts and sciences.

In medieval India, various dramatic institutions were practiced in different regions of the country. A few of them may be mentioned as *Yaksagana* of Karnataka, *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Terrukutta* and *Bhagavata-mela Nataka* of Tamilnadu, *Bhavai* of Gujrat, *Lalita* of Maharashtra, *Rasa-lila* and *Ram-lila* of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and *Yatra* of Bengal. It is true that there are some resemblances between the *ankiya nat* (one-act play) of Assam and these dramatic shows. Archana Bhattacharjee (2011) stated:

Sankardev was a much-travelled man, he must have been familiar with such dramatic entertainments as *Ramlila*, *Rashlila*, *Yatra*, *Kathaka*, *Yaksagana*, *Bhagavatam* and *Bhawai*, popular at that time in other parts of India. On the other hand, there were such rudiments of dramatic entertainments in Assam as *Deodhoni-nac*, *Putala-nac*, and *Oja-pali* performances. (p.1)

Though the history of Assamese literature started with the *Charyapadas*, Sankardeva – the great dramatist, poet, philosopher, song composer, and social reformer and priest of the neo-Vaishnavite class – was the guiding as well as the inspiring pioneer of the orderly chronicle of Assamese literature. He entered into the arena of culture, religion and literature and began penning in heterogeneous genres. Besides the *Harichandra Upakhyan Kavya*, *Rukminitarana Kavya*, *Kurukshetra Kavya*, *Balichalan Kavya*, *Amrit Manthan Kavya*, *Bhakti Pradip*, *Anadi Patan*, *Nimi-Navasiddha Sambat*, *Kirtana-Ghosha* and the *Borgits*, he had in his credit six dramas viz. *Kali-damana* (Subjugation of Serpent Kali), *Patni-prasada* (Favour to Wives), *Rasa-krida* or *Keli-Gopala* (Sport with the milkmaids), *Rukmini-harana* (Abduction of Rukmini), *Parijata-haran* (The Theft of the Flower Parijata) and *Rama-vijaya* (The Conquest of Rama). With the few dramas of Sankardeva, it was for the first time Assamese dramatic literature began as early as the first half of the sixteenth century. He emerged and stood as the guiding and inspiring spirit to see a band of poets and dramatists and composers of songs, making their powerful entrance into the arena of literature, culture and religion. As the themes of the medieval drama was based on religion and

morality and the same is applicable to *ankiya nat* (one-act play) of Sakardeva, this article endeavours to find out the similarities between the medieval drama and the *ankiya nats* of Sankardeva.

2. Medieval European Drama

In medieval England, the theatrical practice was intimately connected to the way of life and social milieu of the masses. The initial structure of medieval play was religious. The main dominant forms of religious play were mainly – the mysterious plays, miracle plays, and morality plays – were preoccupied with different emphasis but addressed the same audience and expected a response of faith in both the cases. The dramatic performance, called a mystery, was essentially based upon a biblical story; a miracle play, on the other hand, was a dramatized account of the life or episode(s) of a saint. The morality play set on the dramatization of the abstract states. Death or Seven Deadly Sins were very dominant subjects of these ethical expressions.

3. The Characteristics of Medieval Drama

The growth of the Mysteries and the Miracles did not take place first in the native tongue. The earliest vernacular play was probably *Jacob and Easu*. The two earliest plays- *Adam* and *The Resurrection*—which had a tremendous popularity, were in French. The stage at first was stationary. It was later made mobile. The theatre moved on wheels, and was bodily taken to different stations. The Mysteries and the Miracles were produced rather crudely. There was little or no stage property. The effect of reality was tried to be achieved by means of some symbols. The presentation of the supernatural certainly helped the Elizabethan dramatists in the treatment of ghosts and spirits, an important aspect of the Elizabethan drama.

The Mystery and Miracle introduced the humorous scenes and figures that made the stage alive with mirth and merriment. The Mystery and Miracle were no outstanding work. Nevertheless, the effective Mystery and the Miracle plays, like *Abraham* and *Isaac*, *Noah*, *The Resurrection*, *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherd's Play* had a useful role in the evolution of the drama in England. Besides, a new type of dramatic literature, with a moralizing, didactic tendency, gradually grew up in medieval England, known as the Moral or Morality Play.

The importance of the Moralities in the development of the English drama is immense. As a matter of fact, in their theme, tone and technique, they may well be taken as the harbingers of the regular English Plays. In many ways, they seem to add to the quick growth of the dramatic literature in England.

The Morality Play was, in fact, a dramatized allegory of man's life and deal with the moral problems of his life—his temptation, sin, conscience, inner confrontation and search for salvation. The hero represents the universal man—mankind every man—and he is beset with other characters, personifying some abstract qualities – virtue, vice, conscience, knowledge, good deed, wisdom and so on.

The Moral plays introduced a new set of dramatic personae. The theatre was no more dominated by the scriptural figures or saints, but mostly by the personified abstractions or allegorical personalities. Its theme was not religious or scriptural, but moral. It was concerned with the contention between the personified good and evil powers for the possession of the precious human soul.

The Moral plays brought out the conflict in man's inner self under two opposite pulls and the ultimate triumph of his moral conscience over the evil forces of temptation, corruption and sin. Morality was essentially allegorical in character, and its appeal was intellectual rather than visual. The Mysteries and the Miracles had an appeal for the common, vulgar people. But the appeal of the Morality was mainly for the intellectual and aristocratic people.

The audience that could follow and appreciate the moral play differed from the lay and vulgar admirers of the mystery or miracle play. Moreover, the Moral plays were much longer, and some of them had acts and scenes, like regular tragedies and comedies.

The middle of the 15th century, perhaps saw the first real Morality plays. Three Moralities, found in one manuscript marked the beginning of the Moral plays. Those plays are –*The Castell of Perseverance*, *Mankind and Mind*, and *Well and Understanding*. All these plays are found to deal with the allegorical combat between good and evil for the conquest of the soul of man.

The Pride of Life, *The World*, and *the Chyld*, and *John the Evangelyst* are all allegorical depiction of struggle of man against evil forces, trying to seduce and trap him. But the most remarkable of all the Moral plays is certainly *Everyman*. The work is found to reach a high degree of perfection in dramatic craftsmanship, and possesses a kind of universality to retain its hold even on a modern audience.

The Morality plays, however, in course of time, had a new wing, known as the Moral Interlude. Moral Interludes were much shorter, needed no stage accessories and they were mostly performed by four to five actors. They were mainly concerned with the temptation of youth and didactic in nature.

4. The Ankiya Nat (One-Act play)

Formal history of Assamese drama started with Srimanta Sankardeva (1449—1568). His plays are described as *Ankiya Nats*, not by himself, but by the posterity. Sankardeva never called his plays as *Ankiya Nats*. Instead, he described his plays as *nat*, *natak*, *yatra*, and *anka*. Ramcharan Thakur, the third generation disciple, might have named the plays of the Master with the adjectival form of *anka*. Sankardeva was the first Indian dramatist of the medieval time.

Sankardeva made drama as an instrument for the establishment of his *bhakti* drama, being described as *eka sarana nama dharma* (shelter in one religion) or *eka sarana-bhagavata dharma*. He was the first dramatist of medieval India to write drama in a language that does not belong to any specific place or people. He wrote in Brajabuli, regularly dotted with Sanskrit *slokas* and Brajabuli songs. Gahan Chandra

Mahanta (2004) observed, “the plays of Sankardeva are interspersed with beautiful Sanskrit verses composed in diverse metres” (p.127). Sanskrit part was for the learned audience, while Brajabuli was for the common masses. Projesh Banerjee (1983) remarked, “Sankardeva preferred to produce his compositions in the dialect of his land, because that was the only language in which he could transport his message to his countrymen, which they could follow properly” (p.82).

Sankardeva created a form of religious play known as *Ankiya Nat*. The meaning *Ankiya* is ‘act’ or ‘episode’ and *Nata* indicates ‘play’. Hence, *Ankiya Nata* implies a ‘one-act’ play and it has a particular mode of construction. Sankardeva wrote many plays for spreading the tenets of Vaisnavism among the masses. *Ankiya Nata* can be compared with the North Indian *Ramlila* and *Rasalila*, Tamil Nadu’s *Bhagavata Mela*, Kerala’s *Krishnattam*, and Orissa’s *Prahlada Natakam*.

5. The Chief Characteristics of *Ankiya Nat*

The plays are written in the Brajabuli languages. This is not the language of Assam only, but it’s the language of the people of a vast region comprising Assam, Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Satyendranath Sarma (1973) asserted:

Sankardeva and his followers used this language because this would be intelligible not only to the common people of Assam but to those of the whole of Eastern India. It was well-suited to glorify the activities of Krishna before the common folk. While Sanskrit would be Greek to them if it were adopted, ordinary day to day Assamese would be too mundane for the purpose. (p.18)

The *Sutradhar* (the manager of the stage) of Sankari plays remain on the stage all through. He is the director, manager, actor, announcer, singer, dancer as designed by the dramatist. He opens each scene and remains on the stage till the play is formally declared closed by him. He narrates the story contents of the play, introduces the characters, and prays to God before and after play, wishing well for all concerned. “He is an integral part of the play, and can very well be called the pivot on which the whole performance revolves”. (Kakati, 2014: 114)

The plays were without any division into acts, scene etc. They are regarded as one act play. Pona Mahanta (1985) beheld:

A one-act play, unlike the Sanskrit, is not divided into acts or scenes; changes of scenes are either announced by the *Sutradhara* or indicated through orchestral singing. The Assamese drama is also conspicuous by the absence in it of the Jester or *Vidusaka*, who is so prominent a character in the Sanskrit drama. (p.20)

Interspersed with prose-dialogues, the plays are notable for their lyrico-rhythmic appeal. According to Birinchi Kumar Barua (1964):

In these plays, songs and verses greatly preponderate and the playwrights largely use them to bring home the message inculcated in the play. Many situations and incidents are suggested by mere descriptive verses instead of being represented through character and action. (p.34)

Initially, the plays of Sankardeva did not have a separate and isolated stage away from the precincts of the *namghars* (prayer hall). Performing space had to be improvised within the *namghar* in front of the *monikut* (sacred throne). Wherever necessary, temporary *rabhas* (cloth *pandals*) were erected within the *namghar* with some decoration here and there. Along the acting space there was a special closet called *cho-ghar* (green room), wherein the actors groomed up for performance. The acting space was sufficiently lit up earthen *chaki* (lamps) lighted with mustard oil and cotton wick, decoratively placed over a *gosa* (earthen lamps) made of banana trees. Around such lights there remained the bigger flames, normally called a *ariyas* or *agnigheras* (archway of lights), emitting almost flash-light effects over the entire area, covering the acting area and the space of the audience.

Sitting arrangements were made for different sections of the audience. The *Sutradhar* and the social elders used to sit near *monikut*, while the general audience used to occupy the rest of the space around the acting area. Audience, actors, singers, dancers, instrument-players hailed from different professional committees, irrespective of caste, creed, and community.

The play does not begin all of a sudden. Elaborate preparations are done before the play starts. One day before the enactment of the play, the actors used to fast and pray. This is strictly followed by those actors who took the role of the *Sutradhar*, Lord Krishna or Lord Rama. These actors had to spend the day by day mass prayer, chanting devotional numbers.

During the lifetime of Sankardeva, his plays were enacted within the four walls of the *namghar* institutions. After his passing away in 1568, Madhabdeva, the chief disciple of Sankardeva had taken the charge, however, the tradition of drama and their enactments had to pass through many pitfalls. Their plays began to be enacted not only within the premises of the *satras* (Vaisnava monasteries) and the *namghars*, but also outside in different festive occasions.

6. A Comparative Study

It has already been seen that Assamese drama also had its origin in the religion of the time. The motive of Sankardeva in writing *Ankiya Nat* was mainly religious rather than secular. The playwright’s aim was to teach the audience about the principles of Vaisnavism through stage presentation before them the activities of Krishna and Rama. The stories are taken from the epics or the *Puranas* where the activities of Krishna and Rama are glorified and their superiority to all other gods and goddesses is asserted. According to Maheswar Neog (1965):

Plot, characterization and dialogue are all subordinated to the dramatist’s main purpose of instilling into the hearts of the audience the message of ‘bhakti’.....The dramatist’s energy is directed towards evoking a devotional fervour in the audience. The plot is so arranged as to glorify the hero, Krishna or Rama. (p.246).

The *Namghar* or prayer-hall played almost the same role as that of the Church in medieval Europe. The medieval *mystery*, *miracle* and *morality* plays were performed in and around churches. In spite of its emphasis on the sinfulness of acting and travelling performances, the medieval church acted as instrument to revive the Medieval theatre. Much in the same way, performances of the *ankiya nat* took place in a prayer hall or in temporary *pandals* built around it. The Church, as is well known, was everything for the Middle Ages in Europe. In the same way, it can be said that religion was everything for the Assam of Sankardeva's time, the dominating faith being Vaisnavism, the cult of Krishna worship. In the opinion of Pona Mahanta (1985):

Because of this identity of spirit – the spirit of religion – it is but natural that the *ankiya* plays of Assam and the medieval plays of the West reveal some identical features despite the immense difference of space. This is supported by the fact that the writers of both the plays had the same purpose before them. As the aim of the medieval British playwright was to show to an uneducated folk the scriptural story in visible wise, thus counteracting the lack of vernacular versions of the Holy Writ, so also the aim of the *ankiya* plays was to teach the unlettered people the tenets of Vaisnavism by glorifying the activities of Krishna and Rama, as told in the epics and the Puranas, in visual forms. (p.22).

The miracles were plays dealing with the lives of saints, while the mysteries dealt with the themes taken from the Bible, although in England the two were practically synonymous. As mentioned above, the four great surviving cycles of English mystery plays, E.K Chambers (1967) noted:

The *York Mystery Plays*, the *Chester Mystery Plays*, the *Wakefield Mystery Plays* and the *N-Town Plays* have a kernel of common matter which corresponds very closely with just the dramatic stuff which was handled in the liturgical and the earliest vernacular drama. (p.125).

These plays usually performed by the great guilds, must have been acted without scenery, or with scenery of a most crude kind; but much importance was given to costuming even though it might be of a grotesque and primitive sort. In the same way, “the *ankiya* plays were also performed by the different *khels* or guilds, which laid great emphasis on elaborate costuming and make up” (Mahanta, 1985: 23). The actors in the mystery plays “were all amateurs – members of the various companies who for a time put aside their labour to perform in the sacred mysteries”. (Nicoll, 1978: 27). In the same way, Assamese acting was also the work of amateurs – actors drawn from the villagers usually during the recess after harvesting.

The *ankiya* plays may also be said to have some resemblance with the morality play. The characters are almost abstract and not legendary or scriptural figures. They were, as the name implies, are moral plays showing the victory of good and defeat of evil. The cardinal feature of nearly all the moralities was the pursuit of *Everyman* by evil forces and his rescue by Conscience or Wisdom. In the *ankiya* plays, Krishna or Rama, on the one hand, and characters like Sisupala and the *Asuras* or demons, on the other hand, may very well be considered as symbolic of good and evil respectively, the latter being routed by the former. “*Ankiya Nat* is primarily a religious institution. Besides entertaining the audience, the *Bhaona* attracted their minds towards the *Vaishnavite Bhagwati Dharma* (religious faith)”. (Borthakur, 2020: 10)

7. Conclusion

It has been observed that the European drama of the later medieval period and the drama of Srimanta Sankardeva were very popular institutions. These popular institutions were intended for the people, executed for the masses and received pleasure by the peeps. Despite the features of a medieval play, the dramas of Sankardeva unfurl certain characteristics of a modern play. Sankardeva wrote and enacted his own concept of social equality through bhakti and submissiveness only to Lord Krishna. Sri Krishna always stood beside the poor and the oppressed. His incarnations are meant for the emancipation of men from the bondage of slavery, drudgery, oppressions and repressions worked out by the repressive agencies and evil forces. To conclude, in the words of Pona Mahanta (1985), “although the *ankiya nat* was developed largely out of indigenous materials, Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy also influenced the playwright to a great extent much in the same way as English drama in its early stages was influenced by the dramas of Greece and Rome (p.20).

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