

Ankiyâ Play and Bhônâ of Srimanta Sankaradeva

Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti

-
A masterful innovator in the field of Indian (and world) drama who got constructed a seven-layer stage for his [maiden play](#)- 'the first play in the whole range of modern Indo-Aryan languages' - and employed boy actors for the first time in Indian theatre in his second, a pioneering playwright who experimented with new themes and forms, successfully combining elements from classical dramaturgy with local culture, fusing high philosophy with folk-taste, to create an irresistible medium of mass-entertainment, all with the ultimate objective of propagating the ideal of Devotion to Lord Krishna among the hoi polloi, India and Indian theatre surely owe a special debt of gratitude to Srimanta Sankaradeva the dramatist.

In this paper by Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, apart from throwing a flood of light on the special contributions of Sankaradeva in the field of drama, the author also adduces several weighty points in support of the contention that even the Maithili and the Bengali playwrights were influenced by the dramatic form innovated by Sankaradeva. This need not appear surprising as Vaisnavism had already struck deep roots in Assam by even as early as the close of the fifteenth century and the floruit of most of the personalities of the other movements was at a much later date.

That Sankaradeva is the earliest composer of devotional lyrics in Vrajawali is beyond doubt ('we can safely consider it (Sankaradeva's first Bargit) to be the first lyric to be written in Brajabuli in Assam, Bengal, and Orissa', [The Bhakti Cycle of Assamese Lyrics: Bargits and After](#), Maheswar Neog). In this he preceded even Yasoraja Khan of Sultan Husain Shah's (1493-1519 A.D.) court. Again, it has been proved that the 'credit of writing the entire play in a Desi Bhāshā goes to Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva of Assam' ([Dashrath Ojha](#)). The eminent historian of Maithili literature Jayakanta Misra also places the Ankiya plays of Sankaradeva in the early phase of the growth of literary output in Maithili.

The researchers of Indian theatre must now acknowledge the achievements of Sankaradeva and probe, in all intellectual integrity, into the possible impact of Sankaradeva's dramas on the plays of North India. Some work has already been done in this regard. See, for instance, [The Impact of Sankaradeva's Dramas on the Literatures of Northern India](#)', in which paper the writer accepts that 'one fact is perhaps to be accepted that Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva influenced the dramatic activities of the North to a great extent' and that 'the Lilā players might have got the suggestions from Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva at the time of his pilgrimage to Vrindāban'.

-

Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568 AD) was a leading playwright of Assam as well as India. He set several world records as a playwright and director. His maiden play ***Chihna yâtrâ (Cihna Yatra)*** launched the movement of regional plays in the modern Indian languages. This play was enacted in 1468 AD at Tembuwani (Bardowa)¹. Unfortunately no script of this play survived, because of which many

persons opine that it was not a written play. But there are vivid descriptions about Srimanta Sankaradeva writing this play in the ancient hagiographies². Moreover several songs are also available which are traditionally known as songs of *Chihna yâtrâ*. So the script of this play was lost due to lack of proper care³.

The plays composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva are known as *Ankiyâ* play or *Anka*. Enactment of these plays in a distinctive style is known as *Bhâonâ*. Enactment of the plays written by the followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva is also called *Bhâonâ*. But their plays are not called *Ankiyâ* play. The term *Ankiyâ* play is reserved only for the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The plays written by Madhavadeva are called *Jhumurâ*. Only the play *Arjuna bhanjana* by Madhavadeva belong to the same genre as Srimanta Sankaradeva's plays, because of which that play can be called *Ankiyâ* play.

Scripts of several *Ankiyâ* plays have been recovered till now. These are *Patni prasâda*, *Kâliya damana*, *Keli Gopâla*, *Rukmini harana*, *Pârijâta harana*, and *Sri Râma vijaya*. Srimanta Sankaradeva composed and enacted another play named *Janma yâtrâ* when he was residing at Patbausi, according to the hagiographer Ramcharan Thakur. The saint composed that play after returning from his second pilgrimage⁴.

The script of the play *Janma yâtrâ* is however not available now. The Vrindavani cloth which was woven later, incorporating the incidents in **Sri Krishna**'s life starting from birth till the killing of Kamsa was a painting form of the *Janma yâtrâ* play only. Unfortunately the Vrindavani cloth has been lost and only a part of it remains in a London museum. Other two plays authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva were *Gopi Uddhava sambâda* and *Kangsa badha*. The first was gutted in fire, while the latter was lost⁵. Anyway, we can list the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva as *Chihna yâtrâ*, *Patni prasâda*, *Kaliya damana*, *Keli Gopala*, *Rukmini harana*, *Pârijâta harana*, *Janma yâtrâ*, *Gopi Uddhava sambâda*, *Kangsa badha* and *Sri Râma vijaya*.

Once Srimanta Sankaradeva lived at a place named Gajalasuti for six months. It was during this period that he composed the play *Patni prasâda*. It was written in 1448 Sakabda or 1526-27 AD, according to Ambika Nath Bora. This play is not enriched with

dramatic characters like the other plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva⁶. This is however not hard to understand. The playwright wrote this play in order to express his anguish. It was composed as a reaction to the stiff resistance to his effort for preaching the ideology of *Eka-Sharana-Nâma-Dharma*.

Srimanta Sankaradeva set **several world records** with his play *Chihna yâtrâ*. He used drop scenes in it for the first time in the world. Also he got constructed stages at higher levels than that of the audience⁷. It may be mentioned that a seven layer stage was constructed for this play, which was yet another innovative experiment in the entire world. *It was also the first play in all modern Indian languages*. The second play of the saint litterateur, *Patni prasâda* also experimented another innovation. The playwright introduced here the character of teenager boys *for the first time in any Indian play*⁸. Before this, only adult characters were incorporated in the plays. So the play *Patni prasâda* deserves a distinctive place in the annals of Indian plays.

Ram Rai, a cousin of Srimanta Sankaradeva once organized a toy-dance at Dhuwahata. Srimanta Sankaradeva then asked Ram Rai if he wanted to enjoy a good festival. Ram Rai immediately answered in the affirmative and requested Srimanta Sankaradeva to hold a *Nât yâtrâ* (drama festival). The former took the responsibility of finance. It was then that Srimanta Sankaradeva composed the plays *Kâliya damana* and *Pârijâta harana*. He enriched them with dramatic components as he did not have to worry about the pecuniary aspect during their enactment. People came from far and wide to enjoy these plays when these were enacted⁹.

Srimanta Sankaradeva used Brajawali (Vrajawali) language in his *Ankiyâ* plays also like in his *Bargeets*. Perhaps he wanted an all India audience, so that his message could spread in Northern India. The playwright succeeded also in this goal. The Bengali society and the Maithili society were highly influenced by the *Ankiyâ* plays. Even the popular *Yâtrâ* movement in Bengal was derived from Srimanta Sankaradeva's *Ankiyâ* plays, which used this word 'Yâtrâ' in nomenclature. It may be mentioned that the name *Bhâonâ* to denote enactment of *Ankiyâ* play came to be popular in Assam only much later. Earlier, the *Ankiyâ* plays were known as *Yâtrâ*. That the very first play of the saint

was named *Chihna yâtrâ* is also significant in this context. The method of entry by the actors in both Bengali *Yâtrâ* plays as well as in the Maithili plays is similar to the method of entry in the *Ankiyâ* plays. Moreover the enactment of these plays right in the middle of the audience is also derived from the Sankari plays. The *Nandi* is followed by the prayer song to God in the Maithili plays just like in the *Ankiyâ* plays. All these traditions were carried from the *Ankiyâ* plays to the Maithili plays, thanks to the use of Brajawali.

The second possible reason behind the use of Brajawali in the *Ankiyâ* plays is that Srimanta Sankaradeva tried to create a sombre atmosphere during the enactment of his plays by using a different medium in these from the *lingua franca* of the majority of the people. He succeeded in that too. That is why his creations as well as his styles have remained alive among the masses even five centuries later. *Ankiyâ* plays still remain a vibrant style in the world of drama. These are looked upon as a source of healthy entertainment in the Assamese society even in the twenty first century.

The play *Kâliya damana* crossed the geographical boundary of Brahmaputra valley and became widely popular in Bengal too. Even a cultural era was created there by this play. The period from sixteenth century to the middle part of nineteenth century is known as *Kâliya damana yâtrâ* era in Bengal. The popularity of this play was so high that all plays with the subject matter of Lord Krishna's life and activities came to be known as *Kâliya damana yâtrâ*. Many stage managers included this play in their commercial circuit till the nineteenth century¹⁰.

The Maithili plays were also influenced by the *Ankiyâ* plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Two Maithili playwrights influenced by the Saint were Govinda, who composed his plays around 1640 AD and Umapati who was a playwright of the transition period between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. The Maithili playwrights derived the concept and materials for their *harana* plays from the *Ankiyâ* plays. The *harana* plays like *Ushâ harana*, *Rukmini harana*, and Umapati's *Pârijâta harana* etc. are vivid examples of this. The influence of *Ankiyâ* plays in these Maithili plays is seen in the nomenclature, enactment during night, enactment at regular place like in *Bhâônâ*, entry

of *Sutradhâra* (compere) after the reading of *Nandi*, costume, headgear etc. The Maithili historians have accepted this truth¹¹.

Srimanta Sankaradeva did not want his devotees to live a dull and insipid life, even though they lived very pious lives. The Saint composed his *Ankiyâ* plays in order to offer quality entertainment to his disciples as well as lay public. That was why he embellished them with lots of songs and dances.

It may be noted that the *Shânta rasa* prevails over all other *rasa* in the *Ankiyâ* plays. Other eight *rasa* are relegated to a secondary position in these plays. The concept of *Shanta rasa* was not there in the *Nâtya shâstra* written by Bharata. Scholars like Ananda Bardhana and Abhinava Gupta incorporated it in the *Alankâra shâstra*¹².

The very fact that Srimanta Sankaradeva laid emphasis on the *Shânta rasa* departing from the tradition of *Nâtya shâstra* proves that he was quite revolutionary for his time. This *rasa* gives the pleasure of spiritual bliss to the audience. Srimanta Sankaradeva wanted to deliver this pleasure to his audience through the *Bhaona* of his *Ankiyâ* plays. He did not give importance to gross scintillating pleasures. So the remaining eight *rasa* i.e *Shringâra*, *Karunâ*, *Adbhuta*, *Hâsya*, *Bira*, *Raudra*, *Bhayânaka*, and *Bibhatsa* always remained subservient to the *Shânta rasa* in the *Ankiyâ* plays. ***The character Sutradhâra always reminded the audience about their spiritual duties.*** Thus religious sermons got the upper hand over acting in the *Ankiyâ* plays¹³.

The *Ankiyâ* plays are termed as sermons rather than plays by some writers because of the predominance of sermons and the *Shânta rasa* in these¹⁴. But this is not a proper analysis of these plays. We cannot judge the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva by the standard of ancient Sanskrit plays which always gave importance on *Shringâra* and *Bira rasa*. The saint had his own original approach in his creative works, which have now been recognized. Moreover the *Shânta rasa* has been accepted as an important *rasa* in the period after Bharata. So we cannot say that the *Ankiyâ* plays are deficient in dramatic characteristics. Srimanta Sankaradeva created his own style which had the dual purpose of proselytizing and giving entertainment to the audience. It would be an injustice to

Srimanta Sankaradeva if we judge his original play-form by the standard of other play-forms.

The *Ankiyâ* plays were certainly a tool for Srimanta Sankaradeva to spread his message. He was the first person in the world to use the plays as a medium of proselytizing. He was a forerunner to even Bertolt Brecht in this respect. The former had achieved the purpose of using drama as a tool for social reform and reconstruction way back in the sixteenth century, a feat that the latter performed only in the twentieth century. Moreover Srimanta Sankaradeva used his static plays for a different purpose by keeping the actors in a low profile and giving them minimum actions. The plays of Maeterlinck have similar characteristics, because of which Srimanta Sankaradeva can be called a forerunner of Maeterlinck¹⁵.

There is no record in the hagiographies of making elevated stage for any play other than *Chihna yâtrâ*. So we can guess that the present tradition of enacting the plays in the *Kirtanghar* was started during the lifetime of Srimanta Sankaradeva himself. The system of enacting a play in *Kirtanghar* or any open space amidst the audience is called Proscenium. The purpose of Proscenium is to achieve contact between the actors and the audience. This Proscenium concept came into effect only after 1650 AD in the West¹⁶. So we can say that this concept also was actually an innovation of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Thus the rest of the world lagged behind by a century. They lagged behind also in incorporating religious elements in the plays. The religious play of Valentiena was enacted in the Mansion stage of Paris only in 1547 AD¹⁷.

Srimanta Sankaradeva preached the main tenets of *Eka-Sharana-Nâma-Dharma* among the masses through his *Ankiyâ* plays. So the enactments of these plays were symbolic. The screen used for covering the actors before their entry symbolizes *mâyâ* (illusion). The character of **Krishna** enters the arena of acting after this screen is removed. This symbolizes the fact that truth dawns in one when the veil of ignorance is removed. Similarly, nine wicks in the *Agnigarh* symbolize nine types of devotion. Sometimes twelve wicks also are used. Then they signify the *Bhâgavata* scripture, which has twelve cantos. Srimanta Sankaradeva gave stress on two particular modes of

devotion to God more than other modes. These were chanting and listening to God's Name. Two *Ariyas* (beacons) used for illumination of the arena of acting signifies these two modes of devotion¹⁸.

The audiences of *Bhâonâ* were reminded about their spiritual duties and the tenets of devotion through the above symbolic tools. A *Bhaona* is generally performed in the *Kirtanghar*. *Naivedya* has to be offered to God in that place before starting the performance. This is compulsory, even if the *Bhaona* is held in some place other than the *Kirtanghar*. ***It implies that the Bhaona is actually a form of worship of the Supreme God by the devotee actors.*** Prayer to God by singing *Nandi* verse at the very outset, wishing welfare and salvation for all by singing *Muktimangala Bhatimâ* verse at the end, etc. also signify the importance on spirituality by this performance. The *Muktimangala Bhatimâ* is absent only in the play *Patni prasâda*. The background of this play has already been described. So this exception is not surprising. Moreover the spiritual aspect has been duly highlighted in this play also through several songs.

Srimanta Sankaradeva did another noteworthy act by composing these *Ankiyâ* plays. ***This was the introduction of prose style in Assamese language and literature.*** All literary works till the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva were composed in verse. It was He who used prose for the first time in the *Ankiyâ* plays. So the prose style came into being in the Assamese literature with these *Ankiyâ* plays only. This prose was innovative and different from the colloquial prose form. Unfortunately the script of the first ever *Ankiyâ* play, *Chihna yâtrâ*, is not available. So we will have to consider ***the second play, Patni prasâda, as the first available instance of prose form in Assamese literature.***

Some people hesitate to confer the status of first prose writing to the *Ankiyâ* plays since these were a little poetic and since these were written in the Brajawali form of language¹⁹. But we should consider these plays as an innovation in the medieval Assamese literature, which later became an indispensable part of the literature. Now we cannot and do not exclude these plays from the realm of Assamese literature. They should be considered as the first instance of prose in Assamese literature.

It has been stated earlier that Srimanta Sankaradeva departed from the tradition of Bharata's *Nāṭya śāstra* in the context of *rasa*. Actually he had departed in several other aspects also. For instance, he did not abide by the prohibitory norms of this scripture. Some activities are not enacted in the Sanskrit plays.

*Durâhvanang badho yuddhang râjyadeshadi biplavah
Bibâhobhojanang shapotsargow mrityu ratang tathâ*

This means that the scenes of calling from a distance, battle, revolution, killing, death, wedding, eating, giving curse etc. are not depicted in the Sanskrit plays. But Srimanta Sankaradeva did not abide by these prohibitions. For instance, he incorporated a scene of eating in the play *Patni prasâda*. Again, the play *Rukmini harana* has scenes of battle and wedding; in fact these constitute the very subject matter of this play. The play *Keli Gopâla* has the scene of killing. The playwright incorporated as many as three prohibited elements in his last play *Sri Râma vijaya*. These are 'battle', 'killing' and 'wedding'. Thus Srimanta Sankaradeva developed his own play-form, independently from the Sanskrit play-form.

It may be mentioned that *Sri Râma vijaya* was the last play as well as literary work of Srimanta Sankaradeva. He composed this play in 1490 Shaka or 1568 AD, at the request of Chilarai²⁰. The *Svayamvara* of princess Sita and the wedding of **Lord Rama** was the main theme of this play. Srimanta Sankaradeva arranged the enactment of this play at the request of Chilarai and even directed it himself in spite of his old age²¹. This proves the special interest of Srimanta Sankaradeva in plays.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was encouraged to evolve his own form of play because of his flair for it as well as his inimitable expertise in this medium. He departed from the Sanskrit plays in the respect of *Sutradhâra*'s role. The *Sutradhâra* does not have any duty in the Sanskrit plays after the introduction of the subject matter, when he comes off the stage. But he remains there from the beginning till the end in Srimanta Sankaradeva's *Ankiyâ* plays. The *Sutradhâra* keeps the audience abreast of the developments in the story from time to time and also explains the spiritual significance of these. He assists the *Khol* players and the singers too. If necessary, he participates in acting also.

Srimanta Sankaradeva presented his spiritual sayings through the character of *Sutradhâra* since he was using his plays as a proselytizing medium. It is significant that he himself acted in this role in his maiden play *Chihna yâtrâ*. That highlights the importance attached to this role by the playwright. The above analysis also proves that the *Sutradhâra* of *Ankiyâ* play was not derived from the *Sutradhâra* of Sanskrit plays. Rather Srimanta Sankaradeva created this character from the indigenous cultural heritages like toy-dance and *Ojâ pâli*. There are many similarities of the *Sutradhâra* of *Ankiyâ* play with the *Ojâ* (compere) of *Ojâ pâli*²². The characteristics of the *Sutradhâra* of toy-dance also resemble that of the *Ankiyâ* play to a great extent. The fact that the Saint was attracted to composing and enacting some more plays after his cousin Ram Rai had organized a toy-dance is also significant in this context. This proves that the former was an admirer of toy-dance.

It may be mentioned that there are instructions like “*Iti Sutra niskrântah*” in some places of the *Ankiyâ* play. But in reality the *Sutradhâra* remains in the arena of acting through the entire performance. So we can term these words as later entries²³. The elaborate and independent functions of the *Sutradhâra* of *Ankiyâ* play proves the originality of this character created by Srimanta Sankaradeva. For instance, the *Barbhangi* and *Sarubhangi* presented by *Sutradhâra* of *Ankiyâ* play are not found in any other play-form or in any scripture on acting. Thus the ingredients of *Ankiyâ* play establish it as an independent form of play.

-

References and Notes: -

1. It has been mentioned in hagiography that Srimanta Sankaradeva held *Chihna yâtrâ* at nineteen years of age. *Guru charit : Srimanta Sankaradevar lilâ charit*, (in Assamese), Ramcharan Thakur, edited by Harinarayan Dutta Barua, 6th edition, Guwahati, 1985 AD, pp. 315-316.

2. *Katha Gurucharit*, (in Assamese), Chakrapani Vairagi, composed in about 1758 AD and collected by Dr Banikanta Kakoti, edited by Upendra Chandra Lekharu, 15th edition,

Guwahati, 1987, p. 36. Since the play *Chihna yâtrâ* was enacted in a very elaborate and prolonged manner, we can guess that it had a written script. The well planned event would not have been possible without a written script.

3. As many as twenty eight boxfuls of ancient books have been damaged at Ganakkuchi Than due to ill preservation. Since Madhavadeva resided there, we can guess that many of Srimanta Sankaradeva's own hand-written scripts had been preserved there. Unfortunately, these have been lost for ever.

4. Ramcharan Thakur, 1985 AD, pp. 732-733.

5. *Mahapurusha Sri Sri Gopâladevar Charit*, Purnananda Dwija, edited by M. C. Bordoloi & N. C. Bordoloi, 1st edition, 1978 AD, p. 215; *Bordowa Gurucharit*, Puwaram Mahanta, edited by Maheswar Neog, 1st edition, 1977 AD, p. 165.

6. *Sri Sri Sankaradeva*, (in Assamese), Dr Maheswar Neog, 5th edition, Dibrugarh, 1985 AD, p. 77, 129. Neog himself also opined that this play was composed at Dhuwahata. [ibid, p. 88] But the hagiographies do not support this view.

7. *Mahâpurusha Sankaradevar samparke Chaitanyapanthir apaprachâra*, (in Assamese), Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, part II, in *Natun dainik*, edited by Surjya Hazarika, Guwahati, October 19, 1997 AD.

8. *Ankiyâ Nât and the Medieval Indian Theatre*, Dr Sisir Kumar Das, in *Glimpses of Vaisnava Heritage of Assam*, edited by Dr Pradipjyoti Mahanta, 1st edition, Guwahati, 2001 AD, p. 131.

9. *Gurucharit Kathâ*, (in Assamese), Chakrapani Vairagi, [name not mentioned], composed in about 1758 AD and collected by Dr Naren Kalita, [unedited], in *Katha*, Vol 1 No 1, Guwahati, 1992 AD, pp. 146-147. The collector has also wrongly opined in his brief foreword that *Patni prasada*, *Kaliya damana*, and *Parijat harana* were composed at Gajalasuti. Actually only *Patni prasada* was written at Gajalasuti. Remaining two plays

were written at Dhuwahata. Moreover Ram Rai did not stay with Srimanta Sankaradeva at Gajalasuti, as opined by the collector.

10. *Asomiyâ Nâtya Sâhityar Jilingani*, (in Assamese), Dr Harischandra Bhattacharya, 3rd edition, Guwahati, 1988 AD, pp. 28-29; *Bangla Sahityer Sampurna Itibritto*, Dr Asitkumar Bandopadhyaya, reprint, Kolkata, 2002-2003 AD, p. 336.

11. *Natun Poharat Asomiyâ Sâhityar Buranji*, (in Assamese), Dimbeswar Neog, 6th edition, Guwahati, 1993 AD, pp. 177-178.

12. *Sâhitya Alochanâ*, (in Assamese), Trailokya Nath Goswami, 4th edition, Guwahati, 1994 AD, pp. 50-51.

13. *Aitihāsik patbhumit Mahapurusa Sankaradeva*, (in Assamese), Bap Chandra Mahanta, 1st edition, Jorhat, 1987 AD, pp. 353-354, 364.

14. Ibid, p. 353. Mahanta even cites the lack of stage as a reason of not including the *Ankiyâ* plays within the ambit of drama. Such analysis is only result of ignorance. The *Ankiya* play's arena of acting was unique and not like other plays elsewhere.

15. Trailokya Nath Goswami, 1994 AD, p. 141, 176.

16. *Sankaradevar Outdoor Theatre âru Nâtyashilpat Navya Proscenium*, (in Assamese), Bhupen Chakravarty, in *Prantik*, edited by Pradip Barua, Guwahati, August 16-31, 1991 AD, pp. 27-30.

17. Ibid, p. 29.

18. *Satriyâ Sanskritir Svarnarekhâ*, (in Assamese), Narayana Chandra Goswami, 1st edition, Majuli, 1984 AD, pp. 67-68.

19. Dr Maheswar Neog, 1985 AD, pp. 132-133.

20. Chakrapani Vairagi, 1987 AD, p. 214.

21. *Sriguru charit*, (in Assamese), Ramananda Dwija, written in 1678-80 AD, 1st part, edited by Maheswar Neog, 1st edition, Nalbari : Guwahati, 1957 AD, p. 390.

22. *Asomiyâ Sâhityar Samikhâtmak Itibritta*, (in Assamese), Dr Satyendra Nath Sarma, 2nd edition, Guwahati, 1984 AD, pp. 140-141.

23. Narayana Chandra Goswami, 1984 AD, p. 612.

-

*[Reproduced from the Facebook Group 'Followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva', launched by Dr. Sanjib Kr Borkakoti, http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_183678848341109
We are grateful to the author for permission to incorporate the document -
editor@atributetosankaradeva.org]*