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Coordination and one of the Flag Bearers of Culture – Bhaona

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Abstract:
The plays created by the great saint Sankardev are the foundation of Assamese nation and culture. Bhaona is a wonderful amalgamation of dance, song, drama, and acting. In the life of the people of Assam, the uniquely created Ankiya Bhaonas by Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev hold a special place. Through the performance of Bhaona, the gurus tried to convey the philosophical teachings of religion and the knowledge of scriptures to the common people through special enactments. Over time, Bhaona became an inseparable part of Assam's social life and culture. This Bhaona embodies devotion to God, deep respect, religious faith, and tradition. The uniqueness of Bhaona lies in its musical aspect. To build a healthy society, education, consciousness, social responsibility, morality, and one's own cultural tradition are extremely essential. The primary goal and purpose of the Ankiya plays created by the supreme artists, the gurus, was to unite everyone in the spirit of oneness.

Keywords: Bahona, Ankiya Plays, Sankardev, Culture, Tradition

Introduction:

The greatest and most innovative creations of the great saint Sankardev are the Ankiya Nat plays. Bhaona culture has a long history. Bhaona became a strong medium of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. The saint drew experience from his two pilgrimages and incorporated elements from dance-song performances prevalent in different parts of India into the Ankiya Nat plays. The Ankiya Nat plays written by Saint Sankardev are an important component of Sankari culture. Since ancient times, forms like Ojapali, puppet dance, etc., have been prevalent in India. Based on these, he created his plays following the pattern of Sanskrit drama with his own talent. Ankiya Nat and Bhaona are invaluable assets of Assamese literature and the Assamese nation. After returning from his first pilgrimage, the great man staged the silent symbolic performance 'Chihnajatra' in Bardowa. In this performance, the guru depicted the entry into the seven Vaikunthas. The great man enriched the treasury of Assamese literature with six dance-dramas he wrote, which are — Patniproshad, Kaliya Daman, Keligopal, Rukmini Haran, Parijat Haran, and Ram Bijoy. The subjects of these plays were presented to society by Sankardev through the medium of Bhaona. The principle that God incarnates from time to time for the triumph of righteousness, defeat of unrighteousness, suppression of the wicked, and protection of peace is conveyed through these Bhaonas.

Bhaona dance

In the plays created by both Mahapurushas, more emphasis was given to dance rather than the story or dialogue. In Bhaona, the dance varies according to the character. The entrance in Bhaona always begins with a dance. Bhaona dances are different from other dances. These dances cannot be performed in other

events without a Bhaona. Bhaona dances are often performed individually. Bhaona dances depend on music such as slokas, songs, and bhatimas. Although most of the dances used in Bhaona are based on the descriptions in the Natya Shastra, the Guru has incorporated local cultural elements into them. Thus, music, dance, and acting all draw devotion from the audience. He emphasised that through joy, ordinary people should be able to understand the theoretical aspects of devotion.

Singing and Musical Performance Dance:

Singing and musical performance are an integral part of the Bhaona culture. The term 'Singing' refers to the singer, and 'Musical performance' refers to the instrument player. The main programme of Bhaona begins with the presentation of singing and musical performance. Every Satra in Assam has singing and musical performance. Those who sing and play musical instruments perform a special type of dance, while some play the drum during the dance. Singers and musicians wear special types of attire. They wear a churidaar while kneeling on the ground. The singers and musicians have to wear a costume called 'Bachowal'. This is tied with bones and knots. Each singer or musician wears a turban. The main singer or musician decorates the turban with a garland of bakul flowers, tulsi, and sandalwood paste on the forehead. The front upper part of the turban is fixed stiffly and these turbans are wrapped in white cloth. Everything they wear is purely white. The white colour represents spirituality and purity. Musicians wear a rosary around their neck. Singing and musical performance is a team activity. Every member of the team sings verses and plays musical instruments.Keeping the purpose of spreading religion foremost, the great man created singing and chanting.

Sutradhari Dance

In Ankiya Nat and Bhaona, the role of the Sutradhari is very important. The Sutradhari's role is more intricate than other characters. In earlier times, in Ankiya Nat's Bhaona, the Sutradhari was considered as valuable as Krishna. The Sutradhari must remain throughout the Bhaona from beginning to end. Shankardev composed dramas for illiterate, unlettered, common viewers; his main goal was to propagate religion among ordinary people through Bhaona. He designed the character of the Sutradhari in such a way that the common audience could easily understand the main theme of the drama with its help. The Sutradhari simultaneously performs multiple roles such as announcer, dancer, singer, actor, and director. Upon entering the Bhaona site, the Sutradhari dances onto the stage in accordance with the beats of the khol, mridang, and taal and sings the Bhatima or praiseful songs.

Gosai dance

“The dance performed on stage in accompaniment with music by Lord Krishna or Lord Ramchandra is called the Gosai entry dance or Krishna entry dance.” (Asomar Sanskriti kosh – Page 191)

The introduction of this dance is done through auspicious gestures. “From the courtyard, the Gosai stands and performs the dance with foot movements and shows flute-playing gestures with his hands, taking the final pose in the tribhanga position. The dance has two parts – music dance and verse dance.” (Asomar Sanskriti kosh – Page 191)

The costume of Gosai dance is as follows – the dhuti worn is pale yellow. A pale yellow blouse covers the body up to the waist. From the back waist to the toes, a crafted cloth of blue colour with various embellishments. Waist adorned with a waistband. Necklace on the neck. Bangles on the hands; on the head, a crown decorated with intricate designs resembling a bird.” (Asomar Sanskriti kosh – Page 192)

Gopi Pravesh Dance

After the Gosai dance, the Gopi Pravesh dance is performed. In this dance, it is essential for the song to be melodious. After Krishna's dance, the Gopis make their entrance, expressing their profound love and devotion towards Krishna through the dance. The Gosai's mother, wife, Gopis and other women also participate in this dance.

Bhawariya Pravesh Dance

When a Bhawariya participates in a Bhawana, they enter the stage by performing one or two turns of dance. In this dance, characters such as Dasharath, Nanda, deities, Bhishma, Ram, Krishna, King Indra, Janak, Yudhishthira, Drona, Karna and others make their entrance. The literal meaning of the word Bhawana is 'to express emotion'. The dance postures vary according to the character in the Bhawana. The dance of characters like Lord Krishna or Ramachandra, who are serious and profound, is different from the dance of kings, maharajas, warriors or demons. The dance posture of Narada is delicate in nature. Depending on the character, the costumes of the Bhawariyas are seen to be different. Some men act in female roles, while some Bhawariyas enter the play at touching moments to provide comic relief to the audience.

War Dance

Performers present a special type of dance during and before a battle. The dances vary according to different parts of the war. The postures of the dance differ in group battles and one-on-one fights. The characters of the gods perform the war dance. This dance is performed both in sorrow at defeat and in joy at victory. This dance includes the use of the drum.

Gita-Shlok Bhatima Dance

The narrator of Bhava performs this dance. It is performed in harmony with Sanskrit verses and songs.

Khoronam Dance

An inseparable part of Bhava, the Khoronam dance is performed at the end of the Bhava. All performers and characters including the king, Nanda, Yashoda, Devaki, and the gods participate together in this dance. It praises the virtues of the gods, with the drum rhythm going at a fast pace. The dance concludes with Mukti Mangal Bhatima.

Gesture dance

The essence of gesture dance is the various postures of dance. The different types of characters in a play perform dance in different ways, which is called gesture dance.

Costumes used in Bhaona

According to the character of the play, performers wear costumes in Bhaona. Singers, musicians, and the narrator wear a white dhoti or ghori, a vest, a pajama, chalang, and a white turban on the head. They wear a churidaar with a short top when sitting on the ground. The singers wear a garment called 'Bachuwal'. Over the Bachuwal, a short white jacket is worn, called 'Buku Chola'. The turban they wear is white with pleating at the front. In some satras or Naamghars, a Mughal-style turban is used. For the portrayal of

Ram, the body and hands are smeared with blue and yellow mixed paint, a long mark is drawn on the forehead, dark or yellow dhoti is worn with a colourful chalang-cloth. Performers wear various types of ornaments such as armlets, anklets, waistbands, jewels on the chest, pearl necklaces, flower garlands, crowns on the head, various types of clothes with jewels and beads, etc. All the sages and seers are seen with dreadlocks on their heads of black or white colour, sandal paste marks on their foreheads, yellow-coloured dhotis, rudraksha necklaces around their necks, anointed bodies, garlands in their hands, kamandalu and some even wear flower garlands over their dreadlocks. Kings and ministers wear royal attire like chapkan or sherwani adorned with jewels and pearls. They wear necklaces around their necks, lokapar earrings in their ears, and jeweled armlets on their arms. For the character of Narada, one must wear a thin yellow or white dhoti tied properly, hair black with a topknot adorned with a white flower garland, white garlands on the chest, arms, and shoulders. The hand holds a veena. Women wear lehenga or ghuri made of cotton or silk in any colour, with a matching dupatta over the lehenga. They wear necklaces on their neck, gejera and dudugi on their hands, and kanphuli earrings. Married women wear colourful tikas. To enhance beauty, artists apply a kiss mark on the costumes they wear. Men, to portray female characters, tie their hair with a morapaat and also use morapaat for beards and moustaches.

Musical instruments used in Bhaona

Bhaona is primarily focused on music. From beginning to end, performers emphasize music. In Bhaona, music and dance are considered essential. Mahapurusha introduced and popularized the use of the khol drum in Bhaona. For Borgeet and Sattriya dance, the khol is an indispensable instrument. During Sankardev's time, khols were made from clay, but later on, wood started being used to make khols. Besides this, instruments such as mridang, negara, patital, bhoratala, borkah, khutitala, daba, kah mandira, conch, bell, flute, and kali are also used.

Masks used in Bhaona

According to Guru Charitra, Mahapurusha was the first to use the Šo-mask to organise the Chihnajatra Bhaona. In Bhaona, masks are mainly made of bamboo and paper. It was Sankardev himself who made a mask from bamboo sticks and used it on stage.Among the various decorative masks, the ones of Panchanag, Brahma, Rajahamsa, Vrishabha, Garuda, etc., are prominent. The masks are generally made using wood, bamboo, cane, clay, and metal. Bamboo and paper masks are used more frequently in Bhaona. To make a bamboo mask, first the shape of a human head is created using bamboo sticks, then clay mixed with cow dung is applied, and eyes, ears, nose, etc., are added to complete the face. After this, different colours like vermilion, yellow, blue, etc., are applied to the mask. Paper masks are much lighter. Bamboo masks being thinner are more convenient for the performers. The mask is pierced to suit the performer's eyesight. In this way, masks of Ganesh, Ravan, Kumbhakarna, Bhim, Putana, etc., are made for performers. In addition, maces, bows, chakkars, war chariots, tridents, axes, etc., are also made. To depict Ravan in reality, a mask is essential. Ravan's ten heads, twenty arms, and huge body are represented in Bhaona through the mask. Masks of monkeys, bears, Hanuman, and sages are indispensable for classical Bhaona performances of characters like Barah and Narsingh. Through these masks, actors evoke emotions such as bravery, humour, pity, calmness, and fear.

Conclusion

The essence of creating Bhona by the great men was primarily to propagate the name of the deity among

the common people. Later, it became a form of entertainment for the public. The stories enacted in the Ankia Nat Bhona are based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata, although some fictional tales can also be found. From the birth of Bhona itself, there was a need for a stage to perform it, and this requirement was fulfilled by the Namghar. Since ancient times, Bhona has been eliminating superstitions and malpractices, fostering peace, fraternity, national unity, and preserving tradition among the common people.Bhaona gave Assamese social life a well-disciplined form. The triumph of truth over falsehood, non-violence in place of violence, affection, fraternity, humanity, moral character, and the idea that truth is beautiful are all reflected through Bhaona. By eliminating all kinds of caste distinctions and avoiding hierarchical differences, Bhaona is performed with joy in village communities. People from distant regions also come together to participate in Bhaona and take part in the performance. Occasionally, marital relationships also develop through Bhaona. Like Rangali Bihu, Bhaona facilitates the exchange of feelings between young men and women, many of whom choose their life partners through it. Many parents search for suitable matches for their sons and daughters. If any family in the village is at fault and isolated, there is a tradition of offering punishment and seeking forgiveness during the year-long Bhaona period. People who observe Bha treat themselves with fasting the day before and engage in recitation and seek blessings from the community during the day.

In ancient times, only men could perform the roles in Bhaona. Men also enacted female characters and entertained the audience because societal norms prevented women from participating directly in these plays. Nowadays, this thinking has changed significantly. Women have gained equal status with men in education and other areas, and similarly, they now have opportunities to perform in Bhaona as equally as men. Moreover, sometimes women have been observed performing male roles as well. Modern staged Bhaona is no longer confined to satras or namghars; today, Bhaona can be performed on theatrical-style stages using various new artistic techniques. Compared to the Bhaona of Guru's time, contemporary Bhaona has changed in many ways. Bhaona is very much needed to maintain a sense of community and affection among the people of a village.

Being attracted to the new is an inherent trait of humans. The current mechanisation has made humans ego-centric, leading to a lack of unity among people. Under the influence of Western culture, the present new generation is moving towards a solitary and weak life. Harmony and the sense of unity can be found amid these conditions. The primary aim of the gurus was to sow the seeds of devotion and spirituality in human minds, eliminate caste and class differences, and unite all people. Therefore, as Assamese, it is the duty and responsibility of each of us to keep alive the creations and ideals of these great individuals. Bhaona is not just culture; it is a standard-bearer of society.

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