UNIT 15: CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to-

- explain the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardev and the resultant cultural developments,
- describe the Bargeet and Bhaona of Sankardev that developed as an offshoot of the Neo-Vaishnavite culture, and
- discuss Satriya nritya as a form of performing art that was initiated by the Neo-Vaishnavite culture.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we discussed the religious development under the Mughal rulers. In this Unit, we will shift our focus from northern and southern India to Assam in north-eastern India. We shall discuss the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the cultural development that was brought about by it.

Before that, let us first know about who propounded the Neo-

Vaishnavite Movement in Assam. It was Sankaradeva (1449-1568) who introduced the Bhakti Movement in Assam towards the end of the fifteenth century CE. He was assisted by his disciples, chief among whom was Madavadeva (1489-1596). The religion preached by Sankardev is Neo-Vaisnavism. It is based on the *Bhagavata Purana*, popularly known as the *Bhagavata*. Therefore, his religion is known both as Neo-Vaisnavism and as Bhagavati Dharma. It enjoins the devotee to take shelter in one God. This God is none other than Krishna, a form of the Hindu deity Visnu. As it believes in one God, it is known as *Ekasarana Nama Dharma*. It emphasizes on Naama (reciting or uttering God's name) as a way of expressing devotion to God, for which it is known as the Nama Dharma. It is sometimes also termed as *Mahapurusiya Dharma*, as Sankaradeva is considered to be a "*Mahapurusa*" ("Great Man").

Besides spreading religious and spiritual messages, Sankaradeva also shaped Assamese culture by founding the Satra (a religious monastic institution) and Namghar (a type of prayer-house) and by creating art forms like Bhaona ("drama"), Satriya Nritya (a dance form) and Bargeet ("holy songs of high order"). Sankaradeva's plays are known as Ankiya Naat.

15.3 BARGEET

Literally, Bargeet means 'great or best songs.' They are a collection of devotional songs in lyrical poetry form composed by Sankardev and Madhavadev primarily for preaching and propagating the Neo-Vaishnava religion. The ideals of Bhakti and activities of Lord Krishna were the main components of the Bargeets. But, we do not find any evidence that Sankardev and Madhavadev themselves named their devotional lyrical musical compositions as Bargeet. It was probably their followers or disciples who considered their devotional lyrical musical compositions as 'great or best songs' and hence coined the term 'Bargeet'.

Initially the Bargeets were sung for the commencement of the prayer services in the satras and namghar. The bargeets were written in the Brajabali language. The popularity of the bargeets inspired many others, mainly neo-

Vaishnava heads of the satras to compose songs in the line of bargeets till the beginning of the 19th century. But these similar types of songs were not considered to be Bargeets. The Bargeets had an edge over all other similar kind of compositions because it was a combination of lofty spiritual ideals, literary craftsmanship, and soul-stirring music.

The satras played a key role in popularizing the bargeets. All satras maintained a regular band of vocal musicians headed by an expert called *gayan* and a party of instrumentalists known as *bayan*. The instruments required for performing the Bargeets were the same as those needed for *satriya nritya.*

The Bargeets used to have specific ragas The important ragas originally associated with the Bargeets are *ahir, asowari, kalyan, kamod, kedar, gauri, puravi, basanta, bhatiyali, mallar,* etc. The rendering of the bargeets normally starts with rag-diya or rag-tana similar to alapa. In rag-diya the common syllables used are ha, ri, ta, na, hari, ram, govinda or krsna-sankara guru-ram. The rhythm or beat within the song have different parts like *ga-man*, *ghat* and *cok* during rendition. Listening, practise and memory are essential for the transmission of the music.

Bargeets can be sung in any tala or a combination of many *talas* associated with the specific *raga*. Some of the major talas are *Ektal, Rupak, Yati tal, Parital, Kharman*, and others. The minor *tals* are *Actala, Adsari, Ar-bisama, Una-yati, Olota Ganjal, Rup-Ganjal, Math-tal* etc.

The *Gurucharitakatha* records the important activities undertaken in the field of art and culture. It was Sakaradeva who composed the first Bargeet piece (*Mana men rama carana hi lagu*) while he was at Badarikasrama. Another class of rag based song compositions which forms a part of Ankiya Nat is the Ankiya Geet or Ankar Geet.. Each song has to be sung in a particular tala specified in the play.

There is a lack of unanimity with regard to the number of Bargeets composed by Sankardev and Madhavadev. According to the *Charitaputhis*, (biographies of the saints) Sankardev composed 240 Bargeets. He gave these Bargeets to Kamala Bayan for committing them to memory and to be sung. However, all the manuscripts of the Bargeets were destroyed in a

fire. Only 34 or 35 Bargeets were in the memory of the Bhakats which were later on rewritten and which continue to exist till today. This unhappy incident dampened the spirit of Sankardev towards the composition of Bargeets. As such, he asked his favourite disciple Madhavadev to start composing Bargeets which are 191 in number and of which 182 has been recovered and are sung today.

15.4 BHAONA

The word 'bhaona' literally means to play act. This Neo-Vaishnava form of drama owes its birth to the exceptional genre of plays "nats" or anka which later came to be known as *Ankiya Nat*. This theatrical form of dance or *bhaona* represents the practical aspect of a play written in the Ankiya Nat model.



LET US KNOW

Ankiya Nats are the one act plays composed by Sankardev and Madhavadev. It consists of songs and dialogues interspersed by Sanskrit *slokas*. The Ankiya Nats were composed in the Brajabali language with the theme of composition being primarily centred on Lord Krishna. The different subject matter in the Ankiya Nats of Sankardeva was taken from the *Bhagavata Purana, Harivamsa, Ramayana, Mahabharata,* etc. Sankardeva is believed to have written six Ankiya Nats namely, *Patni-Prasada, Kaliya-Damana, Keli-Gopala, Rukmini-Harana, Parijata-Harana,* and *Rama-Bijaya.* Most of the plays written by Madhavadeva were not full-fledged plays; rather they are skits and as such called *Jhumura*.

The first Ankiya Nat composed by Sankardev was believed to be *Cihnayatra*, the text of which was not found. His last play was *Rama Bijaya*. *Arjunabhanjana*, by Madhavadeva was his sole full-fledged Ankiya Nat. The others were the Jhumuras namely, *Bhumi Lotowa, Bhojana Vihara, Kotora Khela, Choradhara, Rasa Jhumura, Rama Yatra,* etc.

Sankardev and Madhavadev did not name the plays written by them as Ankiya Nats. They used the term like *nat, nataka, jatra, jhumura* to denote their creations. Later biographers used the term Anka to refer to their plays. This Anka gradually became the Ankiya Nat. The mode of performance of the Ankiya Nat was the Bhaona. Many refer to the performance of Ankiya Nat as Ankiya Bhaona. The Ankiya Nat has no divisions in the acts and scenes and the different episodes are connected through the activities of the *Sutradhar*.

The tradition of writing plays continued in the post Sankardev-Madhavdev period, yet the plays written by the spiritual gurus are termed as proper ankiya nat. While the performing of a drama written from any other play other than proper Ankiya Nat is termed as bhaona. The presentation of an Ankiya Nat in a traditional style is termed as ankiya bhaona. The tradition of writing plays for bhaonas have continued and it is written in Brajabali, while those written in Assamese are termed *Matrbhasar Bhaona*.

Bhaona is a traditional form of entertainment having always a religious message. It is regarded as a Neo-Vaishnava form of drama owing its origin to the unique type of plays composed by Sankardev and Madhavadev known as *Ankiya Nat*. This form of drama shows the victory of truth at the climax using the fictitious or mythological characters in the form of kings, queens, demons, Gods, etc. Initially, the story of the bhaona shows the superficial triumph of the evil, but ultimately the good prevails over the evil with the intervention of the divine.

Sankardev through the bhaona tried to convey religious messages to villagers with entertainment. Before the composition of Ankiya Nats, the stories for the bhaona were taken directly from the *Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata*, etc. The bhaonas were generally staged at the *satras* and *namghars*. The artists or the characters for performing the bhaonas were selected from among the villagers on the basis of their acting skills. The bhaonas were generally performed on the day of special occasions like birthday of lord Krishna, birthday of Sankardev and Madhavadev, Dol Jatra, Ras Purnima, etc.

Much emphasis was laid on the writing of plays on the model of Ankiya Nats and it became compulsory in some satras for the new *satradhikara* (the abbot or head of a satra) to write and produce a play on the occasion of his investiture.

In the bhaonas the artists play the different characters of demons, Gods, etc by wearing different masks. They speak the dialogues in lyrical form in the Brajabali language. However, now-a-days, bhaona is also performed in spoken Assamese language in Upper Assam. Song and dance are a key component in the bhaona performance. The artists enter and move on the stage with rhythmic step.

There are no division in the scenes and acts in a bhaona. The episodes are connected together through the activities of the *sutradhar* (narrator or master of ceremonies) who plays the role of an anchor in introducing the play, announcing the entrance and exit of characters, explaining the various situations, leading in the singing of the benedictory songs, etc. The *Sutradhari nach*, performed by the Sutradhar on his entry to the arena, is a major item. During the course of his entry he sings benedictory pieces and establishes a relation with the audience. The sutradhar is not considered a formal artist in the bhaona, but used to be a perfect artist, a dancer, and a singer.

Other characters in the bhaona are the bhaoriyas - the artists - performing different characters; gayan, the singers; and bayan, the party of instrument players playing khol (drum), taals (cymbals) and banhi (flute), etc from the beginning to the end of the bhaona.

Experts have highlighted the importance of Bhaona and Ankiya Nat in the context of the development of the medieval vernachular drama. Kapila Vatsyayan praises this art form and its influence in regions beyond Assam, for example in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Bhaona performances are organized on a large scale in many places of Assam even in the present times. In the districts of Nagaon and Sonitpur, Bhaona troupes perform in a grand manner in different acting arenas all under one *pandal*. Such occasions are organised by a large number of

villagers who collectively come forward to put up such a show. This type of Bhaona performed on a large scale is termed as Barecahariya Bhaona or Hejari Bhaona.



Bhaona performance with mukha

Bhaonas also have links with local folk traditions. At the actual performance level, the popular and folk character of bhaona becomes apparent. A hybridised form of bhaona which is on the verge of extinction is the Khuliya Bhaona.

The Ahom rulers were great patrons of music and art. Chilarai the brother and general of the Koch king Naranarayan was married to Bhuvanesvari an accomplished Bargeet singer. Chilarai was moved by the songs and he took initiation from a spiritual guru. Rudra Simha encouraged the import of music and art from western territories (Bhatides). Queen Phulesvari was a dancer who belonged to the nat category before she became the queen of the Ahom king Siva Singha. The impact of visual and performing arts was so high that Rudra Simha and Siva Simha undertook to compose songs set to ragas.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: How many Bargeets did Sankardeva compose?

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Q2: What are Ankiya Geets?

_____

Q3: Which play of Madhavadeva was a full-fledged Ankiya Nat?

_____

Q4: What is the mode of performance of the Ankiya Nat?

_____

Q5: Mention a few musical instruments used in Bhaona.

_____

Q6: Name the first Ankiya Nat composed by Sri Sankardeva.

_____

15.5 MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Some of the musical instruments used in the performance of Bhaona and Bargeets are given below:



Khol (Source : Google images)

Daba (Source : Google images)





Tal (Source : Google images)

The *Khol* is a barrel shaped drum used during the performance of Bhaona, Ankiya Nat and Bargeets

Daba as shown in the picture is a big drum and used as a musical instrument in Bhaonas and forms an integral part of the Neo-Vaisnavite culture. The Daba is also played in the Namghars.

Tal or cymbals are of different types. Large cymbals are referred as *Bar-tal,* the flat cymbals are known as *Pati-tal*, cymbals also come in smaller sizes and are known as *Saru-tal, Khuti-tal or Manjira.*

Besides the above mentioned musical instruments, *banhi or muruli* (flute) along with gong and *Sankha* (conch shells) were used for the performance of *Bhaona*. It must also be mentioned that *Kaliya* (pipe) was also in vogue in some places. In contemporary times, other instruments like harmonium and violin are also being made use of in the performance of Satriya Nritya.

15.6 SATRIYA DANCE

Satriya Nritya is a classical form of dance associated with the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement that developed in Assam. With its own distinctive code of movements for the hands, body, feet, choreographic patterns, makeup and costume, including masks, the Satriya Nritya is a complete form of art. It was created by Sankardev and generally meant to accompany the performance of the Ankiya Nat and bhaona which were initially performed only in the *satras* or Neo-Vaisnavite monasteries..



Sangeet Natak Akademi: It is the national level academy for performing arts set up by the Government of India.

The Satra institution grew as an adjunct of the Neo-Vaishnavite order in Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries. As such, the Satriya dance form developed and grew within the satra institution for which it came to be known as the satriya nritya. These institutions developed as centres for the dissemination of the creative art and socio-religious ideals associated with Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam.

It is also believed by many that Sankardev through the Satriya Nritya wanted to showcase the rich cultural tradition of Assam in a new form at the all India level. But the classical rigidity, the strict adherence to certain principles, and the non-engagement of academic research on the dance form all delayed the recognition and acceptance of Satriya Nritya as classical dance form of India. It was only on 15th November, 2000 that the Sangeet Natak Akademi gave Satriya Nritya its due recognition as one amongst the eight classical dance forms of India.

After Sankardev, his chief disciple Madhavadev following in his master's footsteps, not only continued the Satriya Nritya, but also contributed towards the classical dance form by adding new forms to it like Natua Nritya, Chali Nritya, etc. But, while introducing new aspects to the Satriya Nritya, he kept them in conformity with the principles of Satriya Nritya framed by his master or guru.

At Barpeta, Madhavadev constructed a Kirtanghar which was called *Rongiyal Griha* for the practice of Satriya Nritya, mainly the new forms introduced by him. One of his disciples, Padma Ata the founder of Kamalabari Satra learnt the Satriya Nritya at Barpeta and spread it to Upper Assam.

Even after the demise of Madhavadev, the tradition of Satriya Nritya continued within the satra institution which has been preserving, promoting, and popularising it. Different satras also keeping intact the very basic principles of Satriya Nritya while introducing newer forms keeping in view the taste and demand of the changing times like *rajaghariya chali nritya*, etc.

The royal houses bestowed honour on some satras and provided a platform for the performance of the Satriya Nritya in the royal assembly.

This helped in bringing out the Satriya Nritya outside the walls of the satra institution where it was confined until then. More than the religious aspect, the artistic aspect of the Satriya Nritya came to the forefront during its performance in the royal assembly.

Until the first half of the 20th century, the Satriya Nritya was performed in a highly ritualistic manner only by *bhakats* (male monks) within the satras as a part of their daily rituals or to mark special festivals. Females were not allowed at earlier times like today to perform the Satriya Nritya. As women were prohibited from performing this art form, young boys called *natuwas* were trained to execute the female dance moves or play the female characters.

An elaborate system of training known as *mati-akhara* was provided to the young boys consisting of 64 ground exercises. But, today the Satriya Nritya is performed on stage, in public, by both male and female dancers. Traditionally, the theme of the Satriya Nritya revolved around the mythological stories. However, today, the Satriya Nritya is based on both mythological and other themes.

Broadly, the Satriya Nritya can be classified into two categories, one that is dependent or derived from the *Ankiya Nat* and *bhaona* or other dramatic representations, and the other, which is independent.

The Satriya dance forms which are associated with Ankiya Nat and bhaona are *sutradhara nritya, gosai prabeshar nach, gopi praveswar nach*, etc.

The Sutradhari nach is the dance of the Sutradhar of a bhaona whose main role is to introduce the characters and through recitations and songs, establish a rapport with the audience. The other characters also enter the stage with subtle dance movements like *pravesar nach, gosai pravesar nach* or *Krisna nach* and *gopi pravesar nach*. The latter has graceful movements as it marks the entry of the *gopis* or cowherdresses. Characters like demons, clowns have their distinctive gaits. Among the dances derived from the dramatic representations are the *jhumura, behar* and *nadubhangi* dance. The *rasajhumura* and the *nadubhangi* dance centres around the

feelings or emotions of the gopis of Brindavan. The *behar nach* is derived from the play composed by Madhavadev titled Bhojana-Vyavahara. A similar dance based on plays written by Sankardev (*Keligopala*) and Madhavadev (*Rasajhumura*) is the *rasar nach*.

The independent dance forms of Satriya Nritya are *chali nritya, rajaghariya chali nritya, apsara nritya, natuwa nritya,* etc. The chali nach expresses the sentiments of women and hence is more feminine and involves the execution of intricate footwork in different talas. The rajaghariya cali is a type of cali nach developed to be presented in the royal court and includes- *ramdani* (preliminary) and *ga-nach* (main dance).

All these different forms of the Satriya Nritya like all other Indian classical dances are performed by rhythmic movement of body and feet accompanied with poses and gestures of hands (*mudras)*, suggesting various ideas and sentiments. The dance movements are an important element to the *dhemalis* or preliminaries that precede the play. The Satriya Nritya served the purpose of propagating Bhakti ideals and reaching out to all sections of the society through a medium that also provided entertainment.

The costumes for performing the Satriya Nritya are usually made of pat silk. Costume of the male and female dancers have little differences. The male costume consists of the *dhuti* and *chadar*, and that of the female of *ghuri* and *chadar*. The waist cloth which is known as the *kanchi* or *kingkini* is worn by both the male and female dancers. The ornaments for both male and female dancers are the traditional Assamese ornaments like *muthi kharu, bana, dugdugi, galpata,* etc.



Satriya Dance

Source : Google images



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Name one independent dance forms of Satriya Nritya

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Q 8: What is a *kingkini*?

_____

Q 9: Name the founder of Kamalabari Satra

_____



15.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that-

- Satriya Nritya as a classical form of dance was evolved by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev in Assam for propagating Neo-Vaisnavism among the people of all sections in the society.
- Devotional songs or Bargeets gained wide popularity in preaching and propagating the Bhakti cult under the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. Bargeets are now an integral element of the Assamese cultural milieu.
- The one act plays or Ankiya Nats were composed by Sankardev and Madhavadev in the Brajabali language with the theme of composition being primarily centred round Lord Krishna. The traditional form of entertainment like bhaonas or dramas were either based on the ankiya nats, called ankiya bhaona or were independent.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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4) Datta, Birendranath. (2012). C*ultural Contours of North East India*. New Delhi, India : Oxford University Press.



15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: 240

Ans to Q No 2: A class of raga based song composition which forms a part of the Ankiya Nat is the Ankiya Geet

Ans to Q No 3: Arjunabhanjana

Ans to Q No 4: Bhaona

Ans to Q No 5: Khol (drum) and Tal (cymbals)

Ans to Q No 6: Cihnajatra

Ans to Q No 7: Chali Nritya

Ans to Q No 8: Waist cloth worn by male and female Satriya dancers

Ans to Q No 9: Padma Ata



15.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each within 50 words)

Q. 1) Who are the bhakats?

Q. 2) What is the role of Sutradhar in a bhaona?

Q. 3) What do you understand by the term mati-akhara?

Q. 4) Who composed the Bargeets?

B) Short Questions (Answer each within 150 words)

Q. 1) Write a short note on

- Barecahariya Bhaona

- Madhavadev
- Sutradhar
- Raga and Talas in Bargeets

C) Long Questions (Answer each within 500 words)

Q. 1) Describe the role of Sri Sankardev as a cultural icon.

Q. 2) Examine the role of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in the development of various art forms in Assam.

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