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## Dramatic Techniques of Sankardeva: An Analysis

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### Abstract

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), the towering figure of Assamese culture and religious reformation, played a pivotal role in shaping the dramatic art form in Assam. His pioneering contributions, particularly through the Ankiya Naat (one-act plays), laid the foundation for Assamese drama, weaving together devotion, social messaging, and artistic brilliance. This paper explores the dramatic techniques employed by Sankardeva, such as his use of Bhaona, Sutradhar, musical narration, symbolism, and dramatic structure. Emphasis is placed on how these techniques served not only as religious expressions but also as tools for community engagement and cultural dissemination. By analyzing select plays like Patni Prasad, Parijat Haran, and Keli Gopal, this research highlights the unique narrative strategies, performance aesthetics, and didactic content within Sankardeva's drama. The study uses historical, literary, and performative lenses to understand the continued relevance of his dramatic methods in contemporary Assamese theatre and cultural practices.

**Keywords:** Sankardeva, Ankiya Naat, Bhaona, Assamese drama, Sutradhar, dramatic techniques, Neo-Vaishnavism

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### Introduction

Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint, poet, dramatist, social reformer, and spiritual leader of 15th–16th century Assam, initiated a cultural revolution that left an indelible impact on Assamese literature, music, art, and drama. Among his multifaceted contributions, his development of a unique dramatic tradition known as Ankiya Naat (one-act plays) and Bhaona (a traditional form of theatrical performance) is especially significant. These plays, written in Brajavali—a synthetic literary language—combined theatrical performance with religious instruction, aiming to propagate the ideals of Bhakti and Vaishnavism. This paper seeks to explore and analyze the dramatic techniques employed by Sankardeva in his theatrical works. By focusing on textual structures, performative strategies, narrative devices, and audience engagement, the study reveals the richness of Sankardeva's dramaturgy and its vital role in the socio-cultural transformation of Assamese society.

### Objectives of the Study

To identify and examine the dramatic techniques used by Sankardeva in his Ankiya Naat.

To understand the structural and thematic patterns of Sankardeva's plays.

To analyze the role of music, dance, and visual art in his dramatic tradition.

To assess the socio-cultural impact of Sankardeva's dramatic techniques in Assam.

To explore the continuity and relevance of his techniques in modern Assamese theatre.

### Significance of the Study

Sankardeva's contributions to Assamese drama are foundational, yet systematic academic studies focusing on his dramatic techniques remain limited. This research enriches the discourse by exploring his works not only as devotional literature but also as complex artistic performances. It emphasizes the intersection of religion, aesthetics, and communication in Sankardeva's theatre, offering insights valuable to scholars of literature, performance studies, religious studies, and cultural history.

### Scope of the Study

This research focuses primarily on Sankardeva's dramatic contributions. However, a more comparative analysis with other Bhakti dramatists like Chaitanya or Kabir could expand the horizon. Performance studies integrating modern adaptations of Bhaona can offer interdisciplinary insights.

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research method. Primary texts such as Patni Prasad, Parijat Haran, Keli Gopal, and Rukmini Haran are examined for their structural and stylistic features. Secondary sources, including historical accounts, literary critiques, and journal articles, are used to

provide contextual and theoretical grounding. Performance aspects of Bhaona are also analyzed using observational insights and existing video/documented performances.

### **Literature Review**

Several scholars have touched upon Sankardeva's contribution to Assamese drama. Neog (1965) offers a historical outline of Assamese literature with attention to Sankardeva's plays. Barua (1986) focuses on the aesthetic elements in Bhaona. Dutta (1990) studies the ritualistic and religious dimensions of Ankiya Naat. However, there is scope for a detailed study that focuses specifically on the dramatic techniques of Sankardeva across textual, performative, and communicative planes.

### **The Ankiya Naat: Structure and Content**

Sankardeva's plays, known as Ankiya Naat, are short, devotional plays that incorporate stories from the Bhagavata Purana and other Hindu scriptures. Each play follows a similar structure: Purvaranga (Opening Rituals): Musical prelude with Gayan (singers) and Bayan (drummers). Sutradhar's Introduction: The Sutradhar (narrator-director) introduces the play, performers, and plot.

Main Play: The narrative unfolds with dialogues, songs, dances, and dramatic actions.

### **Benediction and Moral Conclusion.**

Each element is carefully orchestrated to maintain audience engagement while conveying spiritual teachings.

### **Key Dramatic Techniques**

#### **1 Use of the Sutradhar**

One of the most innovative devices in Sankardeva's drama is the Sutradhar—a narrator, stage manager, and interpreter. The Sutradhar speaks in both prose and verse and interacts directly with the audience, thereby breaking the "fourth wall." His role bridges the gap between the audience and the performers, offering summaries, moral commentary, and transitions. "The Sutradhar technique not only guides the audience but also controls the rhythm and emotional engagement of the play." (Neog, 1965)

#### **2 Musical and Choreographic Elements**

Music and dance are integral to Ankiya Naat. Sankardeva developed his own musical compositions, known as Borgeet, which are sung at appropriate moments to heighten dramatic effect. The inclusion of Nritya (dance), particularly the Krishna Nritya, adds visual and emotional intensity to the performance.

#### **3 Symbolism and Costuming**

Costumes and masks are used symbolically. For instance, actors portraying gods wear specific masks and garments to signify divinity. Stage props are minimal, relying instead on stylized gestures and symbolic movements to depict scenes like battles, miracles, or divine manifestations.

#### **4 Religious Messaging through Drama**

Each play is infused with Bhakti (devotion), and dramatic dialogues are vehicles of philosophical messages. The protagonists—often Krishna or Vishnu avatars—demonstrate virtues like humility, compassion, and divine justice.

#### **5 Communal Performance: Bhaona**

The performance tradition of Bhaona, which enacts the Ankiya Naat, is a collective and participatory event. The village community contributes to the production, with Namghar (community prayer hall) as the stage. This transforms drama into a communal ritual, blurring the line between audience and performer.

### **Case Studies of Selected Plays**

#### **1 Patni Prasad**

This play focuses on the humility and devotion of Sudama, a poor Brahmin who visits his childhood friend, Krishna. The dramatic technique centers on emotional contrast—Sudama's poverty versus Krishna's divinity—depicted through dialogues, expressive songs, and minimal props. The Sutradhar provides commentary that underscores the value of sincere devotion over material wealth.

#### **2 Parijat Haran**

A more dynamic play, Parijat Haran features conflict, divine power, and comic relief. The interplay of Krishna and Satyabhama is dramatized with elaborate costumes and humorous dialogues, while the celestial Parijat tree becomes a symbol of spiritual longing and divine grace.

### 3 Keli Gopal

Centered on Krishna's playful acts, Keli Gopal uses dance and song to depict divine joy. The dramatic rhythm of the play mimics the rhythm of life itself—alternating between mirth and moral instruction.

#### **Influence on Assamese Drama**

Sankardeva's dramatic techniques continue to influence Assamese theatre:

The Sutradhar is retained in modern adaptations.

The religious and moral core remains prominent in village dramas.

Musical narration and group dance are widely adopted in contemporary Assamese cultural events.

His plays have inspired later playwrights such as Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha.

#### **Conclusion**

Sankardeva's dramatic techniques exhibit an advanced understanding of theatre as a tool of communication, devotion, and social reform. His fusion of narrative and performance, music and message, simplicity and symbolism, renders his plays timeless. As a dramatist, Sankardeva not only laid the foundation for Assamese theatre but also showed how art can be a vehicle for moral and spiritual transformation. His dramatic tradition, sustained through centuries by Bhaona and Namghar culture, remains a living testament to the power of theatre in shaping community consciousness.

#### **Findings**

1. Sankardeva pioneered the use of integrated dramatic forms combining text, music, dance, and ritual.
2. His use of the Sutradhar as narrator-director is unique in Indian theatre.
3. The dramatic techniques aimed to educate the illiterate masses in spiritual philosophy.
4. Sankardeva's minimalistic but symbolic stagecraft focused more on emotion and devotion than realism.
5. His plays are still performed in the Bhaona tradition, ensuring cultural continuity.
6. The audience is not passive but becomes a part of the performance through collective devotion.
7. Drama served as a socio-religious reform tool under the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

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