

# Sankardeva's Dramatic Movement: A New Genre in Assamese Literature



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## Abstract

*Srimanta Sankardeva is widely regarded as the founder of Assamese drama and a leading figure who shaped the dramatic movement in Assam. His contribution goes far beyond writing a few plays – he introduced an entirely new dramatic tradition that influenced the cultural and literary life of the region. During his twelve-year pilgrimage across India, Sankardeva came into contact with classical Sanskrit drama and various folk performance traditions. These experiences helped him develop a new kind of play known as Ankiya Naat. Although inspired by earlier forms, Ankiya Naat was original in style and purpose. Sankardeva likely drew from pre-Vaishnavite Oja-Pali recitals, local folk theatre, and different regional practices he encountered during his travels. He wrote his plays in Brajawali, a special literary dialect that blended Assamese with Brajabuli, giving his dramas a unique flavour. His use of colourful costumes, painted faces, and occasionally masks added a lively visual appeal to the performances. The method of stage lighting used in Ankiya Naat, mainly through earthen lamps, was also innovative for its time. Sankardeva designed his plays as one-act dramas with clear structure, devotional themes, and a strong moral purpose. At the same time, they remained engaging, musical, and entertaining, making them easily accessible to the common people. Through this blend of education and entertainment, Sankardeva played a central role in shaping Assamese literature and theatre. This paper discusses the nature of drama in his works and examines its lasting impact on Assamese cultural history.*

**Keywords:** Ankiya Naat, Oja-Pali, Assamese, Brajawali, Cultural History

## Introduction

Drama is an important art form because it imitates human life. It is built on emotions like love, imagination, beauty, and human experience. In the primitive era, when early humans returned from hunting, they used to act out the events of the hunt for their companions. In this way, the earliest form of drama was born.

In ancient Greece, drama evolved from the dances and songs performed in the temple of Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Many literary traditions around the world claim that drama originated from religious rituals. In Europe, priests used

to act out stories from religious texts to teach the public. From this practice, mystery plays and miracle plays developed.

The history of Indian drama is ancient. It is believed that Bharata Muni composed the *Natya Shastra* around the second century. Since then, many Sanskrit plays and various regional folk theatre forms have been created. Assam also had several folk theatre traditions dating back to ancient times.

The *Kalika Purana* mentions that the Odra-Magadhi style continued the traditions of ancient Pragiyotishpura and Kamarupa. The *Charyapada*,

written in early Assamese, also shows that folk theatre existed in Assam long ago. *Krishna Kirtan* gives a description of the folk theatre practices of that period.

Drawing inspiration from earlier Sanskrit drama and local folk theatre, Srimanta Sankardeva composed the first Assamese play in the 15th century. During his time, different folk dramas were already popular. Ramcharan Thakur, in the *Gurucharit*, mentions that Sankardeva even showed Jagadish Mishra a performance of Ojapali. Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) was not only a saint and religious reformer but also one of the greatest creative minds in Indian cultural history. Born in Bardowa in present-day Nagaon, Assam, he grew up during a time when society was deeply divided by caste, superstition, and ritualistic practices. From a young age, he showed extraordinary talent in poetry, music, and philosophy. His early education at the *tols* (traditional schools) shaped his understanding of Sanskrit texts, religious scriptures, and classical literature. However, what made him truly exceptional was his ability to reinterpret complex spiritual ideas in a simple way so that ordinary people could understand them.

Sankardeva travelled extensively across India for nearly twelve years, visiting places such as Mathura, Vrindavan, Puri, Dwarka, Rameswaram, and Badrinath. These travels allowed him to observe the rich variety of Indian folk and classical performance traditions. During this journey, he witnessed various forms of theatre, including dance dramas, devotional singing, storytelling traditions, temple rituals, and dramatic enactments of mythological scenes. These experiences laid the foundation for his later creations. When he returned to Assam, he carried with him a broad vision of how art could uplift society.

He believed that performance could be a powerful medium for expressing devotion and spreading moral lessons. Instead of restricting religion to rituals, he sought to bring spirituality closer to the people. This belief became the basis of *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, where dramatic storytelling blended with music, rhythm, and devotion. His

works also promoted equality, unity, and compassion – values central to the Eka Sarana Dharma movement he founded. For Sankardeva, theatre was not just entertainment; it was a spiritual journey that united people, transcending caste and class barriers. His introduction of the Brajwali language, devotional songs (*Borgeet*), and literary masterpieces, such as *Kirtan Ghoxa*, further strengthened the cultural foundation on which Assamese identity was built.

### Objectives

The study was conducted with specific objectives in mind, which are summarised as follows:

- The primary objective was to analyse how Ankiya Naat systematically organises all components of a one-act play, ensuring coherence and maintaining narrative gravity from start to finish.
- To explore how Sankardeva's plays influenced and entertained the common people of Assam, emphasising their educational and moral values.
- To examine how Sankardeva ingeniously structured his ideas, innovations, and themes methodically and coherently within his plays.
- The study sought to delve into the origins and evolution of Assamese and broader Indian dramatic traditions, placing Sankardeva's contributions within this larger cultural framework.

These objectives collectively aimed to provide insights into Sankardeva's profound impact on Assamese literature, culture, and the dramatic arts while exploring his broader influence on Indian theatrical traditions.

### Hypothesis

- Sankardeva's plays educated and entertained the common people of Assam.
- Ankiya Naat by Sankardeva embodies the origins of Assamese and Indian drama cultures.
- Sankardeva pioneered the use of plays for proselytising, a first in the world.
- Bhaona marked the initial steps in social reform efforts.

- Ankiya Plays continue to thrive as a dynamic style in the realm of drama.

### Significance of the Study

Sankardeva, the father of the Assamese nation was an extraordinary figure who excelled across multiple knowledge domains. His contributions laid the foundation for Assamese literature, culture, and social structure, shaping them into what they are today. He was a prominent playwright in Assam, leaving a significant mark on Indian theatre. His inaugural play, 'Cihna-Yatra,' is considered to have pioneered regional plays in modern Indian languages. Without precedent in Assamese drama, Sankardeva's creation of Ankiya Naat showcases his unique skill and vision.

Sankardeva's mission extended beyond national borders; driven by a love for humanity, he advocated for peace and brotherhood on a spiritual basis, emphasising the universality of religion. The relevance of studying his teachings lies in urging today's youth to discard social prejudices and work towards building a society marked by social harmony, unity and goodwill.

### Research Methodology

This study follows a descriptive and analytical research method. The descriptive approach is used to present historical facts, events, and the development of Sankardeva's dramatic tradition. The analytical method helps examine how various elements such as language, structure, performance style, music, dance, and religious themes shaped the evolution of *Ankiya Naat*.

Primary data has been collected from research articles, journals, newspapers, published theses, and dissertations. Secondary information has been gathered from books, magazines, and reliable online sources. The analytical framework used in this paper involves comparing Sankardeva's dramatic techniques with classical Sanskrit dramaturgy and Assamese folk theatre traditions. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of how Sankardeva integrated multiple traditions to create a new dramatic movement in Assam.

### Discussions

The Indian tradition of religious drama had a strong influence on Sankardeva. He likely had a profound understanding of Sanskrit theatre, as described in the *Natya Shastra*, and during his extensive travels across India, he observed numerous regional theatre forms. When he developed his own style of drama, he drew upon all these experiences. He treated drama as a sacred art and made it an important part of the Bhakti movement. In this way, his plays became both a form of worship and a source of entertainment for the people.

Understanding Sankardeva's dramatic innovation requires recognising the intellectual and spiritual depth behind his philosophy. As a saint and scholar, he believed that art should serve a higher purpose. His dramas, therefore, worked on two levels: they entertained the audience with lively music, colourful costumes, and energetic performances, and they also conveyed deep ethical and devotional messages. For him, drama was a way to guide society toward a moral life based on devotion to one God. Because of this vision, *Ankiya Naat* became not only a cultural creation but also a spiritual mission.

Because he was familiar with different folk traditions from many regions, Sankardeva introduced a new kind of play called *Ankiya Naat*. The structure of these plays came from Sanskrit drama. He included features like the *Nandi Sloka*, the Sutradhar with helpers, and *Muktimangala*, which is similar to *Bharat Bakya* in Sanskrit plays. But the goal of his plays was different. He wanted both educated people and ordinary villagers to feel a sense of devotion through drama. In his plays, the Sutradhar became the main performer, acting, singing, and dancing, which is very different from the limited role in Sanskrit theatre.

Sankardeva's deep knowledge of Sanskrit texts and his connection to North Indian devotional movements, especially Vaishnavism, influenced many of his artistic choices. However, he did not simply copy classical forms he reshaped them to fit Assamese culture. His unique use of the Sutradhar as narrator, dancer, and singer dem-

onstrates how he creatively adapted classical ideas. His plays focused on emotion, community involvement, and moral teaching. This made his dramas easy to understand and enjoy for both literate and illiterate audiences.

Sankardeva's innovation, *Bhaona*, marked a significant milestone in Assamese theatre. His first play, *Cihna-Yatra*, is considered the beginning of regional drama in modern Indian languages. He designed Ankiya Naat without any earlier Assamese model, which shows his creativity. It is said that *Cihna-Yatra* employed new techniques, such as drop scenes and a seven-layer raised stage, which were rare at that time. His second play, *Patni-Prasada*, also showcases his originality, as it features teenage boys as characters – a new idea in Indian drama.

Sankardeva wrote all his plays in Brajawali, a mixed language combining Assamese, Brajabuli, Charyapada, Hindi, Maithili, and other dialects. Unlike Assamese, where words often end with consonants, Brajawali words usually end with vowels. This gives the language a soft and musical quality. He used this special language to create a devotional and serious atmosphere that felt different from everyday speech. Even after five hundred years, this language still feels meaningful to people.

Another important part of Sankardeva's work is his use of music. He composed *Bargeets*, devotional songs set to specific ragas and talas – which later became a key part of Assamese classical music. These songs were incorporated into the Bhaona and enhanced the emotional and spiritual impact of the performance. His focus on rhythm, gesture, and body movement demonstrates that he understood the power of non-verbal expression on stage.

Ankiya Naat was always performed at night, so lighting was very important. Large chandeliers (*gacha*) with many earthen lamps filled with mustard oil were used to brighten the stage. Bright fire lamps (*mahata* or *mata*) marked the entrances of important characters, such as kings and demons. Lamps with glass covers also lit the playhouse. Even today, although electric lights

are common, a traditional earthen-lamp chandelier is kept burning near the *Manikut* as a sacred custom.

Bhaona depends on four main elements: song, dance, musical instruments, and dialogue. Songs guide character entry and exit, set the mood of scenes, and express emotions such as love, sorrow, or anger. Actors must sing while dancing, acting, crying, or even quarrelling, making the performance rich and expressive.

In Ankiya Bhaona, all characters move in a rhythmic manner. Dance steps, hand gestures, and facial expressions help tell the story. Movement and rhythm are at the heart of Assamese theatre. The Sutradhar leads the whole performance, he dances, narrates, and expresses emotions, especially after chanting the Nandi.

Sankardeva also introduced instruments like the *khol* and *tal* to Assam. Through Ankiya Bhaona, he taught ordinary people, many of whom could not read, how to enjoy music, dance, and acting. This improved their cultural taste and understanding. His simple dialogues created a devotional atmosphere, helping people connect with stories from the Epics and Puranas.

Sankardeva's influence also extended to social reform. By allowing people of all castes to participate in satras and plays, he helped reduce social divisions and encouraged equality. The Satras and Namghars he founded became centres of culture, education, and community life. His dramatic movement was not only artistic - it was spiritual, educational, and socially transformative. His ideas were far ahead of his time. His legacy continues to shape Assamese culture, identity, and performing arts, proving that his contributions remain meaningful even in the modern age.

### Conclusion

Sankardeva's Bhakti movement played a transformative role in shaping the artistic and literary culture of Assam. His introduction of *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* created a bridge between classical traditions and folk practices, making drama accessible to all social classes. In contrast to Sanskrit plays, which required a highly knowledge-

able audience, *Bhaona* became a popular medium through which ordinary people learned stories from the epics and Puranas.

Sankardeva's innovations is his use of Brajawali, his restructuring of the *Sutradhar's* role, and his integration of music, dance, and spiritual themes redefined dramatic art in Assam. These contributions not only shaped Assamese theatre but also influenced later developments in regional performance traditions across India.

Although specific claims about "global firsts" must be supported with more substantial evidence, there is no doubt that Sankardeva created a new dramatic movement that continues to thrive even after five centuries. His plays continue to be a source of joy, devotion, and cultural pride for the people of Assam. Thus, Sankardeva stands not only as the father of Assamese drama but also as one of India's pioneering playwrights who reshaped the meaning and purpose of theatre.

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