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DEVOTIONAL THEATRICAL ELEMENTS OF ASSAM

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The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Sattras of Assam grew and developed in 15th-19th centuries can be regarded as a local variant of the modern museum and archive because of the way they fostered, preserved and archived traditional artefacts and accessories of various types. These holy Sattras of Assam have always been zealous repositories of a traditional distinctive culture with an emphasis on the arts, both performing and the visual. Under the four walls of these scores of Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Sattras developed and cultivated performing art and various forms of minor art and crafts which were based on spiritual ideologies that moved beyond the borders of Assam bringing in its wake not only a flow of ideas but also a circulation of painters, artists and materials goods. It has evolved a wide range of different practices including preparation of colours, dyes, brushes, clay pots and different types of traditional and locally developed accessories. In devotional Assamese theatre or plays popularly called *bhāonā* where devotees does not distinguish between art and religion, but, rather, fails to find one without the other.

As in Sanskrit tradition, *upakarana* or accessories is equally important in neo-Vaiṣṇavite Sattras in staging devotional plays. In Indian tradition, *ahārya* (decoration) or accessories mentions in the *Nāṭya-Śhāstra* (c.200B.C-A.D.200) of Bharata are measured by the following four features- i) Body movement (*aṅgaviṇaya*) ii) Speech (*Vacikabhiṇaya*) iii) Expression of feeling and sentiments (*samanybhiṇaya*) iv) Accessories (*ahāryabhinaya*).

As existed in Indian traditions some skilled craftsman and artisans with their expertise are traditionally found engaged in various minor art and crafts for preparing elements or accessories required in occasional and annual dramatic performances held at the Vaiṣṇavite Sattras and *nāmgharas* in Assam from 15th century. Only a few such crafts are still lingering in a few Sattras.

According to the *Nāṭya Śhāstra*, model works mask (*mukhā*), ornaments (*alaṅkāra*), *Saijiva* forms the main accessories of Indian theatre.ⁱ *Saijiva* include masks of animals, birds, fish, arms and accoutrements made of light wood or bamboo are in general use in Assamⁱⁱ. In Indian tradition, the mask are usually highly exaggerated and formalised, share an aesthetic with the carved images of monstrous heads that dominate the facades of Hindu and Buddhist temples.ⁱⁱⁱ Masks are used for their expressive power as a feature of masked performance - both ritually and in various theatre traditions. The ritual and theatrical definitions of mask usage frequently overlap and merge but still provide a useful basis for categorisation. Traditional Assamese masks used in devotional plays are of three types - Cho, Lotokoi and Mukh. Cho is the biggest in size and usually made up of two parts - head and body. Lotokoi is a smaller version of the Cho mask and the Mukh covers only the face.

Accessories which form a part of decoration (in nepathya) in traditional Vaiṣṇavite devotional plays are subdivided into four groups. These plays have been variously named as *aṅka*, *nāta*, *nāṭaka* and *yātra*, but popularly it is known as *aṅkiyā nāṭa*^{iv}. Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568), a 15th-16th century Assamese saint-scholar, playwright, and social-religious reformer in the cultural and religious history of Assam created Aṅkiyā-Nāt, a popular form of traditional devotional theatre in fifteenth century. Traditional accessories of *aṅkiyā nāṭa* include effigies (Sk. *pustā*) or Assamese ‘*Cho*’ and *Saijivas* of the Indian stage were widely used in neo-Vaiṣṇavite devotional theatrical performances. Accessory which forms a part of decoration in a *nāṭa* popularly called *bhāonā* is divided into four different groups.

The *pustas* were widely used in *Sattriyā* performances are made of bamboo and canes and covered with leather or cloth called *saṅdhimā* in Sanskrit. *Khanikars* of Sattras created different types of elements in ateliers. The variety of masks that used in *bhāonā* which forms a striking feature of Assamese theatrical performance may be classified primarily into the following types :- i) Those representing grotesque form or hideous persons such as Rāvana, the king of *Rāskṣhasa*, *Kumbhakarna* etc.ii) Secondly the different animals Garuḍa, Kāliya serpent, boar, monkeys, Jaṭāyu-bird and other such actors_iii) Comic forms of the buffoons and the jesters.^v

In many performances elaborate life size effigies are indispensable particularly in play like *Rāvana badha*, where life size mask with ten heads are used. The buffoons wear small

masks from clay clothes, roughly prepared from clay, cloth tree barks, bark of plantain is also used to serve temporary purposes.

Masks of different sizes and varieties are used to create an illusion of reality. Masks of different sizes and varieties representing rākṣasas, Asuras and some other characters are used. The earliest ever references of usage of first mask or *mukhā* in Assamese *bhāonā* was dated back to Śaṅkaradeva's time when '*chihna-yātrā*', the first dramatic representation which was probably a dramatic spectacle enacted at Bardowā, his ancestral site. On that occasion one mask of Garuḍa, the vehicle of Viṣṇu was worn by an actor Sarbejaya by name enthralled the spectators. One of the references of usage of a huge effigy of a Kāliya serpent at Narowā sattrā is found in the Aniruddha Carita (a biographical account) when *Kāliya damana bhāonā* was enacted at the Sattrā during the time of Ramākānta Ātā, the second superior in second half of 18th century. On *bhāonā* day, one Rāmacarana, a Sattrā *khanikar* made a huge '*Cho*' of a Kali which was worn by one *Kālārāi-Bangarāi*, a comic character of the Sattrā.^{vi} The mask was so real that the illiterate audience were made to believe that *Kālī nāga*, the serpent king regained its life and started fleeing following hue and cry. We shall try to explain it to be an attempt at reality made by an expert sattriya artiste bestowing credit to the him who craved such monstrous '*Cho*' and the actor as well ; who played the role so brilliantly that led to the episode a real one. After this bizarre episode people of that Sattrā group belonging to the Puruṣa saṁhati order of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Sattrā stopped to enact the *Kāliya daman bhāonā*. Another such comic character of that Sattrā like *Kālārāi* was Bhumuk bahuā who once came out with the musical troupe of the Sattrā when Ahom King Gaurinath Simha visited the shrine.^{vii} Following the tradition Lakṣmīdeva, the erudite playwright and an *sattriyā* artiste of high calibre in 19th century designed some model works for various characters portrayed for his three celebrated plays like *Nṛsimha-yātrā*, *Rāvana Vadha* and *Kumar harana*. With bamboo sprinkles he created a huge *pusta* of Nṛsimha and some wooden masks of different shapes covered with clothes for characters of bear and monkeys. The actor who put on such huge '*Cho*' made the illiterate masses surprise the character suddenly appeared from a hidden spot. *Rāvana Vadha* of Lakṣmīdeva became a much admired and popular play for maximum usage of huge and attractive effigies and masks of various shapes in post-Śaṅkaradeva era. For his most celebrated play *Kumara Haran*, various traditional and local techniques were employed for drawing attention of the audience. The play demands various

‘*Cho*’ and ‘*mukhās*’ for animals characters created by Citralekhā through her illusion and called them in the stage narrating the story before sage Narada.

Very often the actors are found playing the roles of animals (*saijiva*) by wearing huge but light weighted ‘*Cho*’ designed and prepared by the *sattra khaṇikars* by bamboo splinters, clothes, jute fibres and painted with various vegetable colours are also used. Sometimes upper mask are carved out of light woods. For characters of bear and snake coats (*jalām*)^{viii} were made of clothes to which were stitched hanging fibres of jute, for their movement in the show where black thread was used.^{ix} For one play *Govardhana Yātrā*, the chief attraction, Govardhana hill was built by bamboo and piths on which man could even stand and requisites of worship could be kept. *Vyajma* (those made by mechanical process and those covered only with clothes (*Vestima*)^x include chariot, heavenly tress, larger snake are also produced and used in some dramas of Lakṣmīdeva (1775-1858) and other dramatist of that period. It is said Lakṣmīdeva himself supervised the *kārkhānā* of these greenroom articles, the tradition for which the *Sattras* are still highly acclaimed. The tradition continues till sixties of the last century.^{xi} Among the mask artiste Bhuban Ch.Goswami and Durlav Devagoswami of Kujī and one Malakhu *Suttradhāra* of Kobāikotā in Morigaon district were well known who practiced these traditional crafts required in presentation of *bhāonā* in village *nāmghars* and *Sattras* till 20th century.^{xii}

Apart from puṣṭas elements required for Angaracanā (decoration of body) and Alankāra (ornaments) *Sattrīyā-khanikars* of some of the *Sattras* played a major role. H.N. Dutta Baruah, Kayasṭha genealogist points out to one such earliest practice of preparing and procuring gunpowder (one basic element) by the *Kāyastha gosāins* (*Adhikāras*) who were expert in this form of art.^{xiii} Some Copper plate grants of the Ahom period allowed the *Sattradhikars* the authority to produce ‘*ya-khar*’ (Potassium nitrate) primarily for use in fireworks and Canon. We have recorded some references in Copper plates of Ahom period about special permission of king to procure gunpowder to some of the *Sattra* functionaries for dramatic performances.^{xiv} For creating colourful lights called ‘*Ātach-Vāji*’ at *bhāonā* pandel (*rabhā*) and giving an attraction to different sequences of the play *Cengalī*, *Cakraṇ*,^{xv} *mahatā* were procured traditionally from gun-powder. These are similar to Alāta Chakra of the Nāṭya-shāstra. Generally the measurement for some fireworks differs from one to another, in some cases according to expert hands where

ingredients are used with specific weight called *tolā*.^{xvi} To procure varieties types of fireworks, ingredients like Potassium nitrate, Sulphur, yellow orpiment, Gandhak, charcoals, are most commonly used along with powder of wild egg plant, swallow-wart shrub, Scoriae of iron etc.

For instance in preparing *Mahata* or *ma'ta* cited above which is of two kinds- Red and white, Potassium nitrate, blood of Amphipouous *euchia* (*Kusiya*) are required for the first type. Saltpeter is to be infused on that blood for procuring *Ma'ta* which illuminates the pandel. In some of the Sattras a group of monks were specially trained and appointed for preparing *masks*, while others engage themselves on the work out of pleasure. There used to be *khanikars*, painters and workers of earthen models, who were responsible for the tasks.^{xvii} The *Bhakat-mālā* of Bālisattra records one such *khanikar Sariānanda*, a close associate of Rāmadeva Ātā of Narowā Sattra.

For procuring gun powder locally called *khār-bārod*, some conventional but interesting methods were employed. The detailed preparation procedures of various fireworks are found in some old manuscripts (no.5, 6 and 7) of the Balisattra in Nagaon district.

- a) In the first place, fungus traditionally produced in the cowshed (pen) from the Cow-dung and cattle urine are mixed and put into a bamboo tube (*cunṅā*) and allowed to drop down in a plantain leaf. Next, the watery mixture is made to boil, when it cools down Sulphur is produced. In another method, the cowshed plastered with cow dung liquid and floor had to be remaining unused for three days. After that Sulphate began to spring up from the floor. The Sulphur thus collected is allowed to dry in Sunlight and mixed with different ingredients for producing various kinds of fire items. In some Sattras and *nāmghars* dramatic entrance called *pravesha* of some charterers like King, Asura and animals are accompanied by exploding locally made many indigenous fireworks. The aforesaid methods are said to have been employed in most of the Sattras in middle Assam till early decades of the last century.
- b) For preparing one such most commonly used fire work, *Cengali* the following ingredients were used. This exquisite firework is prepared with 46.66 gm. Sulphur, 17.49 gm. charcoal-dust of *bhekuri* (phlogocnthus tube flours) and *bāhak* (*Justicia-Adhatoda*) which are put together in a small bamboo tube which produces bright

light when it is ignited in the small hole (*jāmuki*). The *Cakravān* is one such fabulous arrow said to have been used by heroes of yore in *bhāonā*.^{xviii} It is an eye catching fire items consisting of wheel fixed on upper end of a stick and when ignited revolves on the stick and scatters fire all round. Lighting stick one such common decorative items are said to have prepared with the following ingredients namely saltpetre, sulphur, and charcoals of *bāhak* tree, iron dust and lemon juice. We have come across a pair of old stone grinder at Bālisattra and the local people claim that earlier it was used by Sattra *khanikars* to grind some ingredients required for procuring gunpowder for Canon and fireworks for *bhāonā*.

- c) For illuminating the *bhāonā-ghar* or *nāmghar* and clear vision; at least one *āriyā*,^{xix} few *cautāras*^{xx} and many *dalā-cāk.i*^{xxi} are used. For this purpose another items like *bhatā*, (a big lamp) *cāki* (earthen lamp) *mahatā*, *Agñigarh* (arched shape light-stand) are traditionally used.^{xxii} On the *bhāonā* night *Agñigarh*, prepared by two bamboo sticks of lights is raised just inside the entrance to the prayer hall. Small lighted torches are placed in holes drilled at the top of the bamboo arch. One such item put up at Bardowā *Kṛtanghar* had been visualized by Farely P. Richmond as a bridge between the physical and spiritual world or merely the point of transition between the *māyā* of the real world and that of the drama. When Lord Kṛṣṇa himself enters through the archway his arrival is signaled by exploding fireworks.^{xxiii} Richmond who visited Bardowā Sattra in 1969 to study *Aṅkiya bhāonā* believed such elements are not to be found anywhere in India.

Some Sattra artisans earned their livelihood by preparing greenroom accessories for *bhāonā*, and working as a makeup artist and sometimes imparting training to *gāyana bāyana* troupe (orchestra) and actors in different villages. In fact services of expert *gosāins* and artisans who excelled in dramatic arts were sometimes requisitioned who specialised in the art of preparing costume, decorations and accessories. By organizing occasional training of dance and acting in village *nāmghars* and Sattras they managed to earn their livelihood by means of earning some money and foodstuff now and then. The materials for paintings of actors by Sattra-*khanikars* on the stage were generally vermilion (*heṅgul*) yellow arsenic (*hāitāl*), chalk or *dhal*,

brown ochre (*gereu*), lamp black, (*teli-cāi*), colleyrium, mica, some of which were used in painting other decorative artifacts of Sattras.^{xxiv}

Conclusion:

From the above discussion it could be gathered how some accessories and decorations were traditionally developed and prepared since the beginning of the 16th century till the end of the Colonial period centring round the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam. The growth and popularity of *bhāonā* or theatrical performances required specialised elements and some professional classes and in course of time it became a sort of hereditary art confined to a few families which found suitable atmosphere for their practice and growth. Unfortunately, the tempo of the traditions received a set back during the period succeeding the 19th century. The rapid development of new technology in the last two centuries has brought about quite a few worries in fading away of skills and methods which have been applied for hundreds of years by indigenous artisans called *khanikars*. People now believe that it is meaningless for artisans to maintain and practice those outdated ways of producing and making elements of ore. This happened mainly due to large production and availability of such materials, political turmoil and lacking of patronages to artisan classes.

Notes and References

- ⁱ. Nāṭya-Śhastra, Ch. xvi
- ⁱⁱ. Kaliram Medhi, (ed.) *Aṅkāvalī*, 1st edn., Guwahati, 1948, p. XLI
- ⁱⁱⁱ. Byjohn Emigh, *Masked performance: The Play of self and other ritual and theatre*, University of Pennsylvania, 1996
- ^{iv}. Traditional Assamese one act Play, a unique creation of Śaṅkaradeva in 15th-16th Century
- ^v. B.K. Baruah, 'The Father of Assamese drama and stage', B. P. Chaliha (ed.), *Śaṅkaradeva studies in Culture*, p.27
- ^{vi}. *Aniruddha Carita*, (MS) vv.371-390
- ^{vii}. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, 3rd edn., DHAS, Guwahati, p.98
- ^{viii}. A long coarse robe like garment usually worn by a buffoon, vide ; *Hemkosh*
- ^{ix}. Some villagers of Bālisattra and Carikhuliya Sattras informs this author about this traditional craftsmanship once practiced in these Sattras.

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- ^x. *Natya-Shastra*, XXI -57
- ^{xi}. *Gangadhar's Narowā Gosāin āru Bālisattra Vamśāvalī*, (Ms) now preserved at Narowā Bālisattra
- ^{xii}. *Śilpukhurī*, Souvenir, *Morigaon district Sahitya sabha*, 2005, p.8
- ^{xiii}. H.N. Dutta Baruah, *Pracin Kamrupiya Kayastha Samajar Itibrittya*, Guwahati, p.16
- ^{xiv}. M. Neog, *Prācyā Śasanāvali*. (ed.) 3rd edn., Guwahati, 2008, vide; C.P. 10, 12, 13, 17 and 27.
- ^{xv}. It is prepared with the help of joining two *Cengelis*.
- ^{xvi}. Tola or Taka means the weight of a Silver Rupee.
- ^{xvii}. Cited in M. Neog's, *Sankaradeva and His Times*, p. 271, vide. ch. XI of *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, entitled the gradation of *sattra* functionaries.
- ^{xviii}. *Hemkosha*, (Assamese dictionary) Hemchandra Baruah (ed), Etymological words and idiomatic phrases done into English, 13th edn., Guwahati, 2007
- ^{xix}. A bamboo torch where wicks of clothes are sucked in kerosene or mustard oil. The person who holds the torch at Bhāonā is called 'Ariā dharā.'
- ^{xx}. A metal made wide lamp stand where four lamps –wicks can be lighted at a time for generating bright light.
- ^{xxi}. Earthen lamp of small sizes.
- ^{xxii}. P.D. Goswami, *Sattriya Utsavar parcai Tatpajya*, Dibrugarh, 2004, p.267
- ^{xxiii}. Farley Richmond, 'The Vaiṣṇava drama of Assam', *JSSRI*, vol. II, (ed.) Nagaon, 2006, p.9
- ^{xxiv}. M. Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and his Times*, Guwahati, rpt.2008, Guwahati ,p.273,