



WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN BHĀONĀ: A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Bhāonā is a major traditional art form of Assam. Sankardeva, the founder had taken ideas from Bharata's Natyasastra for its creation. Usually women are not allowed to act in *Bhāonā*. Neither the Natyasastra, nor Sankardeva had mentioned such points. Instead there are some rule regulations regarding women acting in the *Natyasastra*. For example Bharata says in chapter thirty five: *When women impersonate female characters and men male characters and their ages are similar to that of the characters represented, the impersonate is called natural*. Even there are hints of women performing male roles. It might be impossible for women to act in *Bhāonā* in the contemporary social condition during the period of Sankardeva and if they had acted we have no evidence. Anyhow, a rigid rule appeared that women cannot act in *Bhāonā*. Such rule does not contribute in the progress of art. On the other hand it is not humane from the social perspective. This rigidity prevails even in the twenty first century Assam. This paper is going to discuss the different perspectives regarding this issue of women acting connecting the rules provided by the *Natyasastra* taking some examples from the current situation.

Keywords: *Bhāonā, NamDharma, Natyasastra, AnkiyaNata, Vaisnava, Vaisnabite, Sankardeva, Character.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bhāonā is a major traditional art form of Assam. Sankardeva invented this dramatic form as a tool to preach his *NamDharma*. *Bhāonā* is thenounform of the verb—*Bhao*, which means to act. In literary terms *Bhāonā* means Acting. On the other hand it is a traditional cultural event of Assam. It is an impact of the *vaisnavamovement* in India Sankardeva had experienced during his two pilgrimages. Sankardeva seemed to have taken ideas especially from Bharata's *Natyasastra* for its creation. Usually women are not allowed to take part in *Bhāonā*. But neither the *Natyasastra* nor Sankardeva had mentioned such points. Instead, there are some rule regulations regarding women acting in the *Natyasastra*. Even there are hints of women performing male roles. It might be impossible to act in *Bhāonā* during the period of Sankardeva. And gradually a rigid rule appeared that women cannot act in *Bhāonā*. This rigidity prevails even in the twenty first century Assam. But however, we have found a few traditions grown in some small areas of Assam where women take part in *Bhāonā* with man. Academically this new tradition has found its way to light for the first time only through

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Studies in Performing Arts, Dibrugarh. (established in 2009). It has taken exceptional initiation regarding this matter which may leave a legendary impact in the socio-cultural-history of Assam. The different perspectives, regarding this issue of women acting connecting the rules provided by the *Natyasastra* and the specific role played by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Studies in Performing Arts, Dibrugarh University, have been discussed in this Article.

II. Aim of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to find out the reasons why women acting never get importance in the practice of *Bhāonā*. Along with this it will show the impact of women acting in *Bhāonā*.

III. AREA OF THE STUDY

This seminar paper will give importance to the topic of women acting in *Bhāonā*. In order to do this we have to look upon the social and political background of Sankardeva as he was the founder of *Bhāonā*. Moreover it will have a special look upon some rule regulations in relation to women

acting in Bharat's *Natyasastra*, as it was the base book of *Bhāonā*. It will include some views of different critics while necessary.

IV. WOMAN ACTING IN BHAONASINCE SANKARDEVA UPTO PRESENT CONTEXT

During the period of Sankardeva female characters in *Bhāonā* were not played by women. We do not have any clear justification for it, but have sufficient examples which prove that female characters were played by man. That is why Kapila Batsayana has said: "costumes for the actors playing female roles were prepared in such away that an acceptable illusion could be created. A saree or Assamese mekhela had been worn by an actor with an unnatural breast and hair as we find in Kerol's *Krishnattom*".¹

Let us discuss the probable reasons behind man playing female roles. During the period of Sankardeva the social system of Assam was newly converted to feudal system. It made a lot of changes to the prevailing condition. Scholars show how the economy system came fully under male control; female lost their freedom to take decision in any activity. In that condition women were unable to make any decision of acting in *Bhāonā*, because religious activities were controlled by man only. It is noticeable that women were regarded as not only inferior to man but also equal to the lower castes of Hindu religion as Sankardeva says in *Bhagavata*: "streesudragana/adhama yavana/anojati/papinare".²

In that condition there was little hope that Sankardeva would give importance to the topic of women acting (whether they should act or not), moreover he had to face lots of turmoil and conflicts with the political situation. He gave importance to extend the *Vaisnava Dharma* in Assam as a part of the new *Vaisnabite* movement evolving round in the middle ages of India. *Ankia Bhāonā* was one of his medium to spread his *EkSaran Nam Dharma*. Mayadevi Mahanta rightly says, "It is notable that in the religious reformation movement of the middle Ages women's position was very poor. The leaders of religion keep them away in a long distance regarding them as an obstacle in the way of freedom of living beings".³ Dr. Satyendra Nath Sharma says also in his book-*The New Vaisnabite movement and the Satra institution of Assam*, "It has been the custom with the spiritual thinkers of all times to condemn woman".⁴

However, Sankardeva has never stated that woman should not act. But it is difficult to get a clear idea of his attitude towards women. If somewhere he sings of men-women working together then somewhere he condemns women. In his book, *Srimanta Sankardeva Kriti and Krititwa*, Sivanath Barman logically establishes that Sankardeva was not free from the patriarchal ideology. There are some hints of disliking for women in a few pages of the *Bhagavata*, the *Kirtana* or the *Bhakti Ratnakar* by Sankardeva, like the line from *Bhakti Ratnakar*: "Parama Anarthakari nari samastaya/narisange ratha dukha purushe labhaya".⁵ It means that women are nuisance and men gains only misery from their company. But somewhere he says positively about women, as he says in *Kirtana*: "Tiriye Purushe Hoiba Ekamoti / Tebeshe Sijiba Harita Vakati", which means the ultimate result, is possible only if man and woman work together. Indirectly it indicates that women can act in *Bhāonā* with man along with the other working areas of life. Mayawati Mahanta says, "The negligence we find towards women in the works of the mahapurusha (great man) are not of his own but from the all India voison vavi ewpoints".⁶ So we cannot deny when Dr. Pradeepjyoti Mahanta says in his article *Sankardeva Nat aru Teonr Natyacinta* (Sankardev's Plays and his Dramatic thoughts) that Sankardeva has established women dignity through the greatness of the wives of the Brahmins in the play *Patniprashad*.⁷

There were two factors of growing anti women ideology: one is natural and the other is physical. The natural indicates the natural instinct of the stronger dominating the weak (as we find sometime rich dominating the poor, not always) as women were socially weak (as we have mentioned above the feudal system). The physical factor was women's menstruation period, which was regarded as something very impure in the concept of Hindu religion. Moreover women might feel uncomfortable themselves to come out during this period. So, it is natural to keep them away from the *Bhāonā* system. Besides Sankardeva's main intention was to produce his plays by any means. That is why he had to use his *vakatas* (followers) playing both male and female characters.

Let us see what happened after Sankardeva's time. It seemed that after Sankardeva the situation for women acting in *Bhāonā* became more rigid. His thoughts were handed over to the Aryans and

women along with other tribes remained apart from the main stream. It is notable that although the power came to the hands of male centred society there were still the existence of women centred tribes. We have lots of evidence from the PreSankari culture and literature. For example *Yogini Tantra* says, “*Sarbata Birala Devi Kamrupa Grihe Grihe*” (Goddess is there in every home of Kamrupa).⁸ So conflicts appeared questioning women position in different sectors. It has been continuing till now and the influence is still noticeable when we find women taking part in *Bhāonā* along with man in some places. For example: in Ketekibari, Tezpur; in Chandanpur, Jorhat; in Dhemesi, Dibrugarh etc. we find women have been taking part in *Bhāonā* along with man.

IV. BHARATA'S NATYASAŚTRA AND A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF WOMEN ACTING:

Sankardeva based on Bharata's *Natyasastra* in order to create his plays. So, let us discuss what Bharata says in the *Natyasastra* regarding women acting.

Women took part equally with men in the religious rituals, like *Yagna*, in the *Vaidic* period of India. Gargee, Atreyee, Moitreyee are such examples. A myth says that even *Hrishi Yagnyabalka* was unable to defeat Gargee in debating in the royal court of king Janaka.⁹

The most important thing written in the *Natyasastra* is that “...*drama came to be established in heaven through Rambhā, Urvaśī and the like [nymphs]...*”¹⁰. So it is through women that acting was established. That is why we find lots of rules relating to women acting.

a. Women playing as women

In ancient India women acting was not something impure or unholy. Bharata talks about women acting in his legendary work *N.S* which hints its practice during that period. Here we may have a quote from A.B. Keith: “...*In the legend of Bharata's exhibition of the Lakṣmīsvayamvara the nymph Urvaśī is represented as playing the chief rôle, and in Dāmodargupta's Kuṭṭanīmata, we here an actual representation of the Rātnawalī described, we find a woman in the rôle of the princess*”.¹¹ So we find women playing as women which is nothing unusual for us as Bharata says— “...*When women impersonate female characters and men male characters, and their ages are similar to that of the characters represented, the impersonation is called natural (anurūpā)*”¹²

b. Men playing as women

There was also another practice while men play the role of a woman if condition demands. Again Bharata says, “...*When a man assumes a woman's character, the impersonation is called imitative (rūpānusārīnī) by the best actors. A woman also may assume if she likes a man's role in actual practice...*”¹³. So it appears that during the period of Bharata sometimes men had to play as women also. That is why A.B. Keith has said, “*The taking of women's parts by men has, seriously enough, a very early piece of evidence, for the Mahabhāṣyā mentions the word Bhrūkuṅsa, which was used to denote a man whomade up as a female*”.¹⁴

c. Women playing as men

There is also a division entitled “*Women in Man's Role*” where he states: “...*In temples, palaces and houses of army leaders and other prominent persons, dramatic performances (prayoga) are mostly held by women in man's rôle*”¹⁴. We find another division entitled, “...*Women's Special Merit*”, where he says, “...*A delicate person's rôle is always to be taken up by women. Hence, in case of women as well as gods and men of delicate nature [women are to assume their rôles]*”¹⁵.

So in Bharata we find that in acting the rôles can be taken up by their proper persons. A complete humanism can't be thought of without women. In acting a picture of human society is being depicted and while woman is socially prohibited from acting it is nothing but to accept rigidity denying reality. Either it is acting or another art while it talks about a society where there are difference between man and woman, caste and sub-caste, it cannot proceed towards greatness. So a civilization needs both man power and woman power and our tradition says so. On the other hand man playing as woman is a very challenging one where an actor has to keep balance between his acting and spectators. If a performance demands then an “imitative” (*rūpānusārīnī*)¹⁷ may occur what Sankardeva had done because he had to stage his plays by hook and crook. Let us illustrate this point with a reference to a *Bhāonā* produced by *Bhāonā* Committee, Dibrugarh University. The Name of the *Bhāonā* was *Dandwiparba—Urvashi Udhar* (story of Dandwi and rescue of *Urvashi*). As soon as queen Padmawati entered which was played by a youngster, people broke out laughing, because he was a male in a female costume. In a scene Queen Padmawati was chased by Captain Brajashindhu. As a result *Bivatsa Rasa* should

becreated amongthe audience, butitendupwithlaughter.

After a field study we find women playing roles in *Bhāonā* here or there. But it has not yet grown as a tradition in all over Assam. The social psychology of Assam is still under the prejudice women should not (*Napai*) act in *Bhāonā*. Even in University of Assam this tradition of man playing the role of women has been remained as a dominating ideology. For example, we don't find any woman taking part in *Bhāonā* organized by the *Bhāonā Committee* of Dibrugarh University. But there is a reflection of a positive dimension from the same university. D.B.H.C.P.A. was established in 2009 at Dibrugarh University. In 2011 *Satria Nritya* was included as an M.A course in this institution. The first batch students of this course performed the *Parijat Haran* directed by Dr. Jaganath Mahanta. In the history of D.U. and of Assam also it is a significant phenomenon, because only through this performance, co-acting in *Bhāonā* was established academically. Here *gayana-bayana*, i.e. the

introductory part of a *Bhāonā* was also played by women. It is citable that a few months later this team was invited to Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Gohati.¹⁹ The occasion was Sankardeva's *Avirbhava Tithi* (birth day). There the *Sutradhari Nritya* (dance) and the female characters were allowed to be played by women, but the *gayana-bayana* was prohibited by the authority of Kalakshetra to be played by women. At that period the director of Sankardeva Kalakshetra was Saradi Saikia. Anyway, D.B.H.C.P.A. continued this journey of co-acting. That is why in 2014 we find women playing male roles in another *Bhāonā Ram Bijoy* directed by Haricharan Bhuayan. Thus it was proved that in condition not only man can play female roles but also the reverse can happen in *Bhāonā*. However all these roles never challenge, but support the principles of the *Natyasastra*. Because in the *Natyasastra* also this is stated as we have quoted before. It is notable that the specialists for direction of *Bhāonā* produced by D.B.H.C.P.A. are coming from different Satras of Assam.

Many want to deny women in the name of tradition, but tradition is not something created by one in one day. It is a dynamic process. If time demands women can be introduced to acting in *Bhāonā*.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is evident that *Bhāonā* in Assam has three dimensions relating to woman acting: the first one is man playing as both male and female where woman is totally prohibited from acting, the second one is man playing as male and woman playing as female which means both men and women take part equally. The third one is women playing both male and female roles. Indian classical system also says almost the same. Whether it is contemporary or traditional the most balancing assumption is the second one. Here we can escape from sophistication.

However, the probable reasons for men performing as women are as given below:

- In conditions sometimes man has to play as women.
- Sometimes woman wants to come out but social rigidity does not allow. As a result man has to play as women.
- Sometimes woman does not go ahead as she herself cannot get out of that social prejudice.

So we may conclude that when situation demands or performance demands man may play as woman and the reverse may happen also. But it is not just to say that woman should not act in *Bhāonā*. Steps should be taken ahead so that women may break out of all prejudice as taken by D.B.H.C.P.A. As a result tradition will not be decreased but will be increased. The *Satria* dance and its *tala* and *laya* in *Bhāonā* depict a rich heritage of Assam, on the other hand the prohibition of woman acting in *Bhāonā* hints of its poverty. It is acceptable from the cultural theory also. We may find out such a theory from the famous quote by Jyotiprasad Agarwala: "*Changes make the world beautiful*". Another important quote on Sankardeva by Jyotiprasad is: "*The cultural philosophy that he gave us five hundred years ago, could not we proceed with it to the new world of the new days? We should analyze this minutely in the new light and should proceed accordingly*"²⁰— here the idea of, *minute analysis in the new light* is very significant. It is time for us to interpret the traditional concept of women acting in our own way.

FootNotes

¹ Birendranath Dutta (trans), *Paramparagata Bharat iya Natya*, p. 109

² Sankardev, *Bhagawata*, p. 602

³ Mayadevi Mahanta (article), *Mahapurush Sankardev Drishtit Nari*, *Prantik*, p. 40 (Feb. 1-15)

⁴ S. N. Sharma, *The New Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, p. 65

⁵ Sankardeva, *Bhakti Ratnakar*, 1018

⁶ Mayadevi Mahanta (article), *Above quoted*, *Prantik*, p. 40 (Feb. 1-15)

- ⁷. RactimRanjanSaikia/MonoranjanBordoloi(ed.), *BhaonaDarpan*, p.158
- ⁸. BarmanSibanath, *Srimanta Sankardeva-KritiAruKrititwa*, p.92
- ⁹. MayadeviMahanta (article), *Abovequoted, Prantik*, p.40(Feb.1-15)
- ¹⁰. ManmohanGosh, *TheN.S.*, (stanza.39)p.218
- ¹¹. A.B.Keith, *TheSanskritDrama*, p.362
- ¹². Gosh, Manmohan, *abovequoted*, (stanza.28)p.217
- ¹³. Gosh, Manmohan, *abovequoted*, (stanza.31-32)p.217
- ¹⁴. A.B.Keith, *abovequoted*, p.362
- ¹⁵. Gosh, Manmohan, *abovequoted*, (stanza.37)p.218
- ¹⁶. Gosh, Manmohan, *abovequoted*, (stanza.38)p.218
- ¹⁷. *Whenamanassumesawoman'scharacter;theimpersonationiscalledimitative(rūpānusārini)bythebestactors.* Gosh, Manmohan, *above quoted*, (stanza.31-32)p.217
- ¹⁸. JyotiprashadAgarwala, *JyotiprasadRachanawali*, 459
- ¹⁹. OneofourwriterwasinvolvedasanactorinthePerformance.

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