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FUNDAMENTALS OF ANKIYA NATA: A STUDY OF *PARIJATA HARANA NATA*, AN
ASSAMESE MEDIEVAL DRAMA IN TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the 15th century poet-saint of Assam, composed six plays popularly known as *ankiya nata* (play in a single act) that formed part of his huge literary output intended to propagate his monotheistic Vaishnavite faith in Assam. These plays retained some of the elements of the classical Sanskrit dramas but differed mostly from them in their overall aesthetics of enactment and contributed significantly to the tradition of medieval drama of India. Based on ancient religious scriptures, these plays focused on the enactment of Sri Krishna's *lila* with a view to arousing devotion in the audience to the Supreme Being. Sankaradeva's play *Parijata Harana Nata*, a text in English translation, appears to justify the religious profundity of the plot besides making its characterization and dialogues attractive enough to conform to various sentiments (*rasa*) that usually pervade the action of classical and medieval drama. However, condensation of the songs and *slokas* in the translation has significantly reduced the aesthetic appeal which might pose a challenge to its enactment on stage.

Key words: *ankiya nata*, aesthetics, medieval drama, *lila*, *rasa*, *sloka*

1.0 Introduction

The 15th century poet-saint of Assam Sankaradeva (1449-1568) is credited with the distinction of heralding the dramatic tradition in Assam as one of the means, among many that he adopted, to propagate his monotheistic Vaishnavite faith which came to be known as *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* in popular literature. This dramatic tradition, better known as *ankiya nata* that finds its parallels in *Kutiuttam* of Kerela, or the *lila* plays of Mathura, is known to be a by-product of pan-Indian medieval drama which was strongly founded on religion unlike its European counterparts that addressed existential issues of man, justice, forgiveness, duty, political loyalty, war, sex and so on. (Das 57) Most of the Vaishnavite scholars are unanimous in tracing the nomenclature *ankiya nata* back to the *charita* (hagiographies) writers of the post-Sankaradeva period who employed it to denote a one act play. Noted Vaishnavite scholar Maheswar Neog observes that though the Sanskrit term *anka* is a derivation from the term 'utsristikanka' of the Sanskrit drama, *ankiya nata* retains none of the former's elements in theory and practice and there has been no other proven evidence of Sankaradeva's model being strictly founded on classical Sanskrit plays violating as it does many of the principles of Sanskrit dramaturgy.

(Neog, *Nandyate Sutradhara* 8) Neither does he ape contemporary medieval drama. William L Smith is of the opinion:

Shankaradeva must have been influenced by Maithili drama, which was flourishing at the time *ankiya nat* first appeared, but his plays do not follow Maithili models either. Shankaradeva was an innovator rather than an imitator. (Smith 16)

The governing principle of Sankaradeva's entire corpus of literature is *bhakti* though its manifestation differed from its pan-Indian counterparts in certain respects. The *ankiya natas* were composed with a definite objective of preaching devotion to the Supreme Being by choosing episodes from Indian classical texts and blending them with elements taken from contemporary folk life and society. The aesthetics that goes into the making of an *ankiya nata* is expressive of the colossal genius and originality of Sankaradeva who broke not only with Sanskrit drama but also with contemporary medieval drama in certain respects. By the time medieval drama started consolidating its footing, the Sanskrit literary tradition had already been on the decline giving way to a rapidly emerging *bhasa* tradition and *ankiya nata* can definitely be understood as an offshoot of the latter. Nevertheless, Sanskrit still being the 'canonical and hegemonic literature' (Das 57), medieval drama in general retained certain literary contents of the former while its theory and aesthetics disregarded many of the principles of Sanskrit plays. The following observation by B.K. Barua is noteworthy:

In Sanskrit dramas, there are some prohibitions regarding portrayal of certain incidents on the stage. According to the canons of Sanskrit dramaturgy it is improper to portray such events as deaths and diseases, the dethronement of a king, the siege of a town, and a battle. It is equally forbidden to depict a marriage or other religious rites or such domestic details as eating, sleeping, bathing, or anointing the body, amorous dalliance, scratching with nails or teeth or such ill-omened things as curses. These directions are, however, not observed in the Ankiya plays. On the contrary, scenes on marriage rites, battle, killing and amorous dalliances are elaborately represented on the stage. (Barua 20)

The aesthetics and nitty-gritty of Sankaradeva's *ankiya nata* invite a careful scrutiny against such a backdrop. This paper engages in an exploration of the fundamentals of *ankiya nata* based on the English translation of a play by Sankaradeva titled *Parijata Harana Nata*.

2.0 Components of an *ankiya nata*:

An *ankiya nata* is carefully designed around a medley of components that go into the making of its aesthetics. However, many elements of the aesthetics are not prescribed in the text of the play though they go inseparably with the staging of an *ankiya nata* as a customary practice. The most conspicuous aspect is its language that is known to be an artificial admixture of medieval Assamese, Oriya, Maithili and Bengali particularly Maithili. This language came to be designated as 'Assamese Brajabuli' unlike the one used by the poet-saint in many other of his literary creations. The entire staging of an *ankiya nata* entails a variety of elements blended into a whole—*Geet*, *Bhatima*, *Sloka*, *Raga*, *Tala*, *Badya*, Dance and Acting.

2.1 The Sutradhara:

The *Sutradhara* is a character retained from a Sanskrit drama who serves as a connecting chord between various scenes of the play by narrating the entry and exit of the *dramatis personae* and the incidents taking place in each scene. Very aptly he has been called the stage manager (Richmond 89). Before the actual play begins, the *Sutradhara* presents a dancing exhibition to the accompaniment of music and songs during which he narrates the entire plot of the play to the audience to groom them in an ambience replete with profoundly divine significance. The *Sutradhara* in an *ankiya nata* remains till the rendition of the *muktimangal bhatima* (benedictory ode) with which the play concludes. Eminent writer and folklorist B.K. Barua succinctly summarises the role of the *Sutradhara* in the following observation:

Unlike in Sanskrit plays, the Sutradhara is an integral part of an Ankiya Nat. In Sanskrit dramas the Sutradhara disappears altogether after the invocation. But it is different with the Assamese plays. Here the Sutradhara remains all along on the stage. Further, the Sutradhara in an Ankiya Nat combines the

functions of the producer and a running commentator. He dances with the orchestra, opens the play by reciting the *nandi* verse, introduces the characters, gives them directions, announces their exit and entrance on the stage, fills up lacunae in the action of the play by song, dance and speech, delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot. (Barua 18)

2.2 Gayana-bayana

Even before the *sutradhara* appears on the stage, a congregation of drummers and cymbalists sings hymns of God in an attempt to arouse devotion in the audience to the Supreme Being. This congregation is known as *gayana-bayana* in popular terminology which is an inseparable part of the performance of an *ankiya nata* and can very aptly be called the prologue to the dramatic performance. The *gayana-bayana* is modelled on a series of preliminaries prescribed in the *Natyashastra* prior to the staging of a play (Mahanta 140). This is a unique creation of the master poet who had thorough understanding of Sanskrit dramaturgy and some of the local dramatic forms existing elsewhere in contemporary India. But significantly, Sankaradeva avoided many of the complex technicalities of Sanskrit dramaturgy as his main intention was to kindle the popular interest of the folks and to arouse their devotion to the Supreme Being that was central to the propagation of his monotheistic faith called *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma*. In this respect Sankaradeva deserves comparison with the master playwright Shakespeare (1564-1616) who is also known to have discarded some of the principles of classical drama as prescribed by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) in *The Poetics* though Shakespeare's plays had nothing to do with religion.

2.3 The chorus and the music:

The chorus of an *ankiya nata* is constituted by the drummers and cymbalists who sit on a mat after the performance of *gayana-bayana* along with the *Sutradhara*. They assist the *Sutradhara* in rendering the songs to the prescribed tunes (*ragas*) and beat-patterns of the drum (*talas*) in chorus in conformity with the stage directions of the play.

2.4 The Religious Profundity of the Themes

All six of Sankaradeva's plays are based on profoundly religious themes the core of which centres on the supremacy of Lord Krishna among all gods and total submission to him by all ordinary mortals forms the essence of the faith that he propagated. It is the selfless devotion to the Supreme Being that is glorified throughout the action of each play. The texts of the plays have drawn profusely from the seminal scripture called the *Bhagavata Purana*. Different sentiments (*rasa*) enshrined in the *Natyasastra* pervade the action of the plays notably *veer(heroic)*, *karuna(pathetic)*, *hasya(humorous)*, *adbhut(queer)*, *bhayanak(horrendous)*, *roudra (angry)* etc.

3.0 An estimate of *Parijata Harana Nata* in translation

Parijata Harana Nata was the creation of Sankaradeva's later life although its exact dating has remained elusive so far. It has been stated already that the aesthetics of an *ankiya nata* is constituted in part by elements that lie outside the confines of the text and they form an inevitable component of its enactment regardless of any text. It deserves mention in the fitness of the things that the raw text of an *ankiya nata* cannot do full justice to the overall aesthetics of its enactment. Yet the text may give any interested reader a feel of the thematic profundity as well as other textual components. Sankaradeva "outlined its plot on the materials of the *Bhagavata* (X/59), but for most of its details he is indebted to the *Vishnpurana* (5/29.30). He has also borrowed at least three facts from the *Haribhamsa*." (Das 151) The text under scrutiny *Parijata Harana Nata* has been translated into English by noted Indologist William L Smith who makes an interesting point in the *Introduction* to the translation:

In the following translation, the prose dialogue has been included in its entirety, as are the remarks of the *sutradhara*(abbreviated as *sutra*). Most of the songs have been condensed to save space. (Smith 19)

It becomes evident from the above proclamation that the translated text 'condenses' the songs to 'save space'. But songs (*geet*) along with their prescribed *ragas* and *talas* form an indispensable component of an *ankiya nata*. As such, the translation falls short of a significant portion of the aesthetic appeal that the original

text contains. However, it must be mentioned that the aesthetic part of a drama full of dance and music may get maltreated in a translation owing to its 'untranslatability'. Besides, the perspective of the translator remains a factor to be considered which influences the translation. Sankaradeva's plays are so multi-dimensional in their essence that they offer acute challenges to the translator regarding which dimension to choose while undertaking the task of translation. Maheswar Neog remarks:

The *Parijata Harana* is Sankara's masterpiece with its well-developed dialogue, bold and almost realistic characterization, finely developed plot and humour which permeates into the very action. The lyrics of the drama, especially the initial *bhatima* or panegyric to Krishna, have also a remarkable character about them. (Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times* 203)

The text in translation invites a scrutiny of its fundamentals in the light of the above statement. The play is based on two parallel themes—slaying of Naraka and carrying away of the *parijata* flower from Indra's palace, woven nicely into the fabric of a single plot. The *sloka* with which the play begins is intended to instill supreme devotion in the audience. The numerous names and appellations used to address the Supreme Lord in Vaishnavite religion and also the unique way in which the gist of the plot is rendered are apparent in the opening *sloka*:

Hail **Krishna, Vishnu Achyuta**, the Supreme Lord.

Mounted on the shoulders of Garuda, he struck down his enemy.

In his joyful *lila* the son of Devaki

Carried off the *parijata* flower for the sake of his beloved.

Victory to Krishna. (Smith 24, emphasis mine)

The *Sutradhara* renders the *bhatima* (benediction) in which he appeals to the audience to submit themselves to the Supreme Lord who is their savior and uses other names to address him:

He is the subject of this play, its name is the *Parijata Harana*

Listen, everyone, with devotion,

You have no other friend except **Hari**.

So says Shankara, the servant of Krishna

Let everyone repeat the name of **Rama**. (Smith 24, emphasis mine)

Every *ankiya nata* begins with the majestic entry of Lord Krishna to stage to the accompaniment of a song rendered in prescribed *raga* and *tala*. As stated earlier, the *Sutradhara* is the connecting chord between scenes and the audience as he narrates the contents of each scene in prose by directly the audience followed by a song rendered in chorus. This is how he addresses the audience:

Good people! As I said, the Supreme Lord Krishna is coming here with his wives for the sake of the yatra. Listen with great care. (Smith 25)

The plot of the play centres round the arousal of jealousy in Satyabhama, a wife of Krishna, following his award of the *parijata* flower brought by Narada to Rukmini, another of his wife Rukmini. Sankaradeva displays exemplary mastery in weaving a plot that blends the divine with the mundane. Here one encounters not merely a Heavenly Being performing superhuman feats in an attempt to assert his supremacy over one and all but one descending to the level of a human with all omissions and commissions striking a balance between the heavenly and mundane duties. On being reported about demon Naraka's oppressions in Amravati by both Narada and Indra, Krishna sets out to slay Naraka and after performing the task on the way he ventures to 'steal' the *parijata* plant from Indra's palace in order to pacify a jealous and sulky Satyabhama. A sharp contrast and similarity pervade the action of the play in terms of plot construction as well as characterization. While slaying of the demon is prompted by a heavenly responsibility on the part of Krishna, the stealing of the *parijata* flower borders

on a mere mundane duty. Narada turns out to be an interesting character with his seemingly diabolical and cunning ventures to fuel and pave the way for a display of Krishna's *lila*. The following pieces of stimulating dialogue by Narada at two different points in the text pave the way for the ensuing *lila* of Lord Krishna:

Narada: Shri Krishna, how can you be happy here? Satyabhama has stopped eating and drinking because of the insult of the *parijata* flower. She's dying of grief. Go to her quickly and see for yourself. (Smith: 32)

Narada: Krishna, I see you're abandoning the work of the gods because of a woman. You've spent the whole day making up to her. (Smith: 35)

Presentation of Narada as a cunning and back biting character is not rare in scriptures, but painting a character who wanders the three worlds singing of Krishna's glory should insult the Lord he otherwise adores most speaks of the utmost liberty Sankaradeva has taken in his art of characterization. Indra who had fallen at Krishna's feet begging for his help to get rid of Naraka's oppressions, now is up in arms against him for the sake of the *parijata* flower just to pacify his protesting wife Sachi. Krishna and Indra both descend to the level of humans in their discharge of mundane responsibilities. Such turns and twists serve to enhance the dramatic quality of play to such an extent that no other of Sankaradeva's play matches. The following pieces of dialogue by Krishna and Indra respectively at contrasting points in the text bring to the fore their lively magic and also the dramatic ascent of the play:

Krishna: Indra, cease your lamenting! Your enemy's final hour has come! I will kill Narakasura right away for the sake of gods. (Smith 29)

Krishna: You evil king of the gods! Are you trying to frighten me? Let me see how mighty you are. (Smith 46)

Indra:O Krishna, there is nowhere else for me to go save the refuge of your feet. Please save me, Lord Jagannath, save me. (Smith 28)

Indra: O Yadava, why did you steal Sachi's *parijata*? I will put an end to your life with my razor-sharp arrows. How can you withstand me? (Smith 46)

The episode of the slaying of Naraka is condensed in the play by avoiding all exchanges of dialogue between Krishna and Naraka and presenting it only through a song put to the lips of the *Sutradhara* assisted by the chorus. The greater emphasis is laid on the succeeding episode i.e. stealing of the *parijata* flower. The characterization is at its best with contrasts and similarities among characters complementing one another making up arguably the best of Sankaradeva's *ankiya natas*. Narada is created as a lively character with a set of dialogues fitted to his lips to arouse humour and he appears to be at the root of the dramatic ascent of the play. The character of Krishna, the central protagonist of the play, is drawn as one caught between heavenly and mundane responsibilities. While being ever ready and proactive to lift the burden of evil from the shoulders of mother earth, he is at the same time extremely sensitive and responsive to the demands of his wives Rukmini and Satyabhama. In order to appease Satyabhama's sulkiness, he even ventures to steal the *parijata* flower from Indra's palace. The jealousy that arises in the mind of Satyabhama for Rukmini regarding the flower is so dramatically presented through some lively pieces of dialogue mouthed by Satyabhama:

Satyabhama: My husband, why are you trying to bamboozle a miserable woman like me with your clever talk? Go to your beloved Rukmini instead! What's the point of staying here? (Smith 33)

Satyabhama: Oh miserable me! I take second place to my co-wife! You have humiliated me so terribly, how can I stay alive? My life is ruined! (Smith: 33)

A fierce earthly quarrel between Satyabhama and Sachi, Indra's wife, provides another twist to the play. As Krishna ventures to 'steal' the *parijata* flower for Satyabhama, a heated exchange of words between the two women follows castigating and humiliating each other while each stakes claim to the flower by asserting her 'supremacy' over the other, Satyabhama on the ground of being the wife of the Supreme Lord and Sachi on the

ground of being the dweller of the heaven. In this quarrel, even Krishna gets relegated to an earthly being. Sachi addresses Satyabhama with piercing humiliation directed at Krishna:

Sachi: Satyabhama, I know all about your husband Madhava, the cowherd, who ran after gopis. No woman in Gokula was safe from him. Why even Kamsa's humpbacked servant girl Kubji couldn't escape his clutches? What else can I say about him? Is this profligate puffed-up Krishna going to steal my *parijata*? He and his family are doomed! (Smith 44)

Both Krishna and Indra descend to the level of humans in their attempt to appease their sulky and complaining wives who are hell-bent on their possession of the *parijata* flower. Both give into their wives' demands. Krishna's heroism in slaying Naraka is overshadowed by his succumbing to Satyabhama's childish demands. This is where the essence of the play lies that dramatises the *lila* of Krishna who appears to be more a human in flesh and blood than a heavenly being. This aspect of the play is deemed to have been instrumental in endearing it to the common masses of that time. As against Satyabhama and Sachi, Rukmini appears to be grave, solemn and mature to the core. Her attachment to Krishna is grounded on pure *bhakti* as is apparent in the reply she gives to the boastful words of Satyabhama:

Satyabhama: Oh princess of Vidarbha; your lord gave you a single *parijata* flower. Look, look here, he uprooted the entire *parijata* tree and brought it for me! Look at the great honour he rendered me! (Smith: 50)

Rukmini: My dear sister Satyabhama, what are you talking about? My husband Krishna is the Supreme Guru of the world. When one worships his lotus feet, can anything else in the universe seem precious in comparison? Then *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* can be obtained with the greatest of ease. What is a *parijata* compared to that? (Smith 50)

As evident from the dialogues of the play, the characters of Krishna, Rukmini and Satyabhama are symbolized as "the supreme Brahma, the *bhakti* and the *maya* respectively". ('Magadh' 151). Different sentiments (*rasa*) pervade the action, but among all the sentiment of humour rises to a crescendo in this dialogue between the two ladies as the action borders on an earthly spectacle. Every *ankiya nata* concludes with a benediction to the Supreme Lord mouthed by the *Sutradhara* as the main action of the play ends. The *Sutradhara's* final words before he renders the song in this play bring to the fore the lofty mission with which Shankaradeva wrote the plays:

Sutradhara :Acting out his *lila* in this way, Krishna fulfilled the desires of his devout wives and remained in the city of Dvaraka. The devotion of those who listen to and repeat the story of Hari's theft of the *parijata* flower with faith will greatly increase. Knowing this, repeat the name of Hari! (Smith 51)

Then the *Sutradhara* renders the song where he directly appeals to the audience to submit themselves to the Supreme Lord, and with this the play concludes:

.....
 Victory to the Supreme Person, the God of the Gods
 Whose feet are worshipped are worshipped by Brahma and Shiva.
 This play has been composed with great care
 In various meters in order to spread devotion to Hari.
 Parijata Harana is its name.

 Concentrate your mind on Hari, leave all other hopes.
 Put firm faith in the name of Hari.
 It is the name of the King of Dharma.
 So says Shankaradeva, the servant of Krishna:
 repeat the name of Rama!(Smith 52)

3.1 Findings and conclusion

It appears from the above discussion that Sankaradeva's *ankiya nata* deviates in many ways from Sanskrit dramas and also from popular medieval plays in terms of dramatic techniques. However, in conformity with Sanskrit dramas, some preliminaries have been prescribed which go inseparably with the dramatic performance. The language of the plays is known as *brajawali*, an artificial mixture of Oriya, Maithili, Bengali and Assamese. Certain Sanskrit *slokas* have been put in the mouth of the *Sutradhara* perhaps "to maintain its links with the classical world through Sanskrit. The employment of Sanskrit along with the language of the people might have also been prompted by the motivation to give the emerging *tadbhava* drama the respectability of the *tatsama*." (Das 62) He has taken utmost liberty in fusing the classical with the popular folklore and also in the art of characterization. The aesthetics of an *ankiya* play is intricately modelled on a theory that is central to the performance of each *ankiya nata*. *Parijata Harana Nata* is perhaps the most popular of his plays purely because of the balance between the divine and the mundane. The character of Narada is meticulously designed to serve as a connecting cord between two stories that are woven into the texture of the play and also serves to enhance the dramatic quality. The other characters also, especially Sachi and Satyabhama, bear close resemblance to the ordinary female characters of the mundane world and hence appear attractive with their lively dialogues. The songs and *slokas* put in the mouth of the *Sutradhara* aptly justify the divine profundity of the theme. The play presents a medley of various sentiments (*rasa*) that are enshrined in the *Natyasastra* namely *veer* (heroic), *karuna* (pathetic), *roudra* (angry), *hasya* (humorous) etc. The text in translation mostly justifies the thematic solemnity, the lively dialogues of the original version but avoids some of the aesthetic details like the mention of the *talas* and *ragas*. The fact that it also condenses the *slokas* and songs may pose a challenge to any group of performers who attempt to stage it with all its aesthetics in toto. This apart, the translation possesses all the resources to merit a rewarding experience for readers who intend to bask in the religious profundity of Sankaradeva's vast literary output.

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