

## Examining Gender Dynamism in Srimanta Shankardeva's *Ankiya Naat* Performances : Contemporary Perspectives and Interpretations

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**Abstract.** *Ankiya Naat*, a form of spiritual dance drama or play, holds significant cultural and religious importance within the Assamese community. Authored by the revered saint Srimanta Shankardeva in the 15th century, these performances are deeply intertwined with folk rituals and sacred practices conducted in *Naam Ghars* and *Sattras*, the community's congregational places of worship. This research paper aims to explore the social and familial roles expected of men and women within the cultural and religious framework of *Ankiya Naat* performances in Assamese society. It will examine the gender roles, cultural construction, representation, interpretation, and their portrayal within the context of *Ankiya Naat*. It also aims to elucidate the generational transformations and deviations in the sacred traditions and rituals usually practiced by both the genders in the Assamese society, which are associated with *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* performances. A combination of ethnographic methodology, textual analysis, and interviews were used as the primary research methods.

**Keywords :** Shankardeva; *Ankiya Naat*; *Naam Ghars* and *Sattras*; Gender roles; *Bhaona* performances; Assamese society.

Culture is a way of life for a society; it is what we address as customs, traditions, dress, behavior, food-habits, rituals, art, and native beliefs. Assamese culture is one of the richest and diverse attributes in terms of ethnicity or indigenesness. It encompasses various aspects of life including handcrafts, weaving, language, literature, art, music, dance, agricultural rituals, cuisine and festivals. Assamese folk culture, with its myriad customs, rituals, and traditions, stands as a testament to the resilience and continuity of a community deeply rooted in its roots. Beyond the confines of academic curiosity, the preservation of Assamese folk culture holds profound implications for the broader discourse on cultural diversity and identity. Srimanta Shankardeva (1449-1568) who was a

Vaishnavite reformer with a vision to unify the people of the region through Neo-Vaishnavism initiated the cultural-revolution in Assam. Shankardev represented the pioneering figure of Northeast India, and his revolutionary initiative aimed to redefine social norms and foster an environment conducive for transformative historical changes. *Ankiya Naat* is a form of one-act drama written by the Vaishnavite saint scholar *Srimanta Shankardeva* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. *Ankiya Naat* plays a pivotal role in Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam by bringing people together in a communal prayer hall known as *Naam Ghar*, which was established by *Srimanta Shankardeva* in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Noted Vaishnavite scholar and 1974 'Padma Shri' awardee, Dr. Maheswar Neog observes that though the Sanskrit term '*anka*' is derived from the '*utsristikanka*' of the Sanskrit drama, *Ankiya Naat* retains none of the former's elements in theory and practice and there has been no other proven evidence of *Shankardeva's* model being strictly founded on classical Sanskrit plays violating as it does many of the principles of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Moreover, *Shankardeva* was influenced by Maithili dramas, which was flourishing at the time *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona*, first appeared. But his plays do not follow Maithili models either. *Ankiya Naat* is carefully designed around a medley of components that go into the making of its aesthetics. The central theme of these medieval *Ankiya Naats* revolves around the worship of Lord Krishna and Rama. Apart from his other creations like "Bargeet", "Bhatima", "Slokas", "Kirtan", the *Ankiya Naat* establishes and communicates various facets of gender roles that are traditionally expected of both genders. *Srimanta Shankardeva's* vision of a progressive and egalitarian Assamese Vaishnavite society was primarily based on elevating the status of women in the society.

### **Masculine Roles in and around Assamese Vaishnavite Society**

The role of masculine aspects has been predominant since the creation of the theatrical art form of *Ankiya Naat*. The masculine perspectives were nurtured directly or indirectly through the contemporary performances and the social or societal norms which were prevailing in *Shankardeva's* contemporary society. *Ankiya Naat* plays are originally the adaptations recreated through the technicalities and scripts learned, explored and later developed in a regional tone in Assam. These plays not only brought the religious scriptures of the mainland, but also brought along with them the existing socio-cultural aspects regarding the divinity, art, performances and also gender roles. Thus, the expectation for the gender roles saw the

rise in Assamese society. Lalit Sonowal in his research paper titled, “Neo Vaishnavism and the Status of Women in Assam” (2019) stated, “Shankardeva was skeptical about the independent entity of women”.(18) Shankardeva wrote in the “Rukmini Haran Kavya”, “*Swavabate tiri jati, nohe swatantari*” which can be loosely translated as “independence is not the nature of women.” This was perhaps because Shankardeva feared that a woman would not be allowed to observe the tenets of Vaishnavism going against the will of her husband. Women had no honor and Shankardeva redeemed women from that degraded state and elevated her to equal status with man in the performance of devotion.

While, Vaishnava reformer like the immediate successor and disciple of Shankardeva, ‘Mahapurush Madhavdeva’, who advocated Puritanism, considered women as a source of temptation and therefore passed derogatory comments on women. This is learnt from an incident narrated in the “Katha-Guru-Charita” (1952). Once, Shankardeva proposed Madhavadeva to marry his daughter ‘Vishnupriya’. Madhavadeva flatly refused and requested him not to repeat the proposal. His attitude towards women can be gleaned from his following comment, “*Mayamai bisai, posupakhir sarirate pai, aka lagi asha bharasa kara nai bihmai bih bahnit nepelaba*” (17) which can be loosely translated as “this is a temptation which existed in the bodies of birds and animals. I am not hankering after that and please drag me not into the fire of poison and pain.” Sonowal also commented that Shankardeva on his part was somewhat liberal in his attitude towards women. He had great respect for his grandmother Khersuti, who brought him up. He had also led the life of a householder and did not encourage celibacy. But he had reservations about women which is clear from his own statement made before king Naranarayana, who wanted to get his initiation. Shankardeva replied that he never wanted to be guru of the ‘Brahmanas’, the ‘Kings’ and the ‘Women’. Lalit Sonowal also stated that after the establishment of the *Naam Ghar* women used to attend prayers there regularly and participated in the religious discourses. They also witnessed the *Bhaona* or religious theatrical performances to get religious instruction through them. Such popular media moulded the temperament and outlook of the people for spiritual enlightenment. Furthermore, Upendrachandra Lekharu’s “Katha-Guru-Charita” (1952), states that Shankardeva stressed upon the chastity of women.

In an interview with one of the finest performer of Shankari-Sattriya art form, Mrs. Rubi Borah Bordoloi, who has been performing and teaching these art forms to her later generations since more than two decades has disclosed how the participation of women was never questioned in the Assamese Vaishnavite society. Although there are evidences of the patriarchal dominance but that never gave a way to the women folk to be the silent observers. It was the later successors of the Vaishnavite community who have raised an issue of gender in the Assamese society. The misinterpretation of the earlier teachings is believed to be the core reason of the pre modern era's rise of patriarchy. Language barriers primarily the 'Sanskrit' or 'Brajavali' *slokas* were misinterpreted by the later descendants without much knowledge about it. There are evidences of it regarding the same. Furthermore, she stated how *Shankari* culture is a progressive culture which was given to the Assamese society by Srimanta Shankardeva.

Ankita Dutta's examination of *Ankiya Naats* and *Bhaonas* underscores the dynamic evolution of these performance traditions within the Vaishnavite parampara (tradition) of Assam. In her work, *Role of State and Traditional Institution in Identity Formation* (2017), she examines "how the dramatic and musical forms have undergone significant transformation through fusion, expansion, and evolution, leading to the development of various musical genres".(46) This ongoing evolution is influenced by factors such as mass ignorance and the rapid urbanization or modernization of Assamese Vaishnavite society. Additionally, this modernization also gave a way to the female performers to get a stage or platform to showcase their culture.

### **Female Perspective and the representation of women**

Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism had a profound impact on the religious and cultural life of the people in the Assamese society. It led to a spiritual renaissance, dismantled caste barriers, encouraged social harmony and nurtured a rich literary, musical and artistic heritage that still has an impact on the Assamese culture and society in the present times. In the earlier times, a woman's role was limited to the domestic sphere. The roots of feminist thought can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the Enlightenment period when ideas about individual rights and equality began to flourish. But several centuries before all the western conceptions of feminism emerged, Sankardeva

developed the idea of female subjectivity around the back of 15<sup>th</sup> century. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti stated in his article "*Srimanta Sankardeva: the pioneer of feminism*" that although John Locke introduced the concept of feminism in 1689 AD. Locke opposed patriarchal rule and the God-given right of kings. But his theories did not extend to the sphere of home. He believed that women were naturally and voluntarily subservient to their respective fathers and husbands. Although we cannot consider Locke a feminist in the modern sense, but we can say that he was a significant pioneer in the development of feminism. In later period, different authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Simone-De-Beauvoir, John Survey etc took up this subject in their writings. But Borkakoti asserts that many people do not know that Srimanta Shankardeva had introduced the concept of feminism way back in the fifteenth century itself, before the advent of all the above-mentioned proponents of feminism. He further explains that Srimanta Shankardeva was not merely a religious preacher, but also a prolific litterateur. Some people seek to compare his primary feminism with the developed concept of feminism of today. As a result, they get confused and they surmise that Srimanta Shankardeva was not a feminist at all. Moreover, those people, who equate feminism with sexual liberation, cannot grasp the subtle feminist concept of Srimanta Shankardeva.

In her work "*Representation of Women in Srimanta Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat: An Analytical Study of Patni-Prasad, Kaliya-Daman, Keli-Gopal and Ram-Bijay*", Ranjana Bhattacharyya stated, "Shankardeva was, in a sense, a pioneer in challenging the notion of women's traditional role of fulfilling the needs of their husbands and children only".(41) In almost all *Ankiya Naats* women's representation from the stand points of feminist theory is clearly discernible. It is observable that in his *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*, Srimanta Shankardeva included many women devotees and advised the married couples to offer *bhakti* to God together. Women were not lagging in religious matters. His second wife Kalindi took up his mission of *dharma prachara* after his passing away. This exemplifies the equal status of women in Sankardeva's social philosophy.

The progressive and liberal perspective of Shankardeva is reflected in most of all his works. Srimanta Shankardeva wrote six *Ankiya Naat* namely *Patni-Prasad, Kaliya-Daman, Keli-Gopal, Rukmini-Haran and Ram-Bijay*. Taking a few excerpts from these *Ankiya Naats*, Ranjana Bhattacharyya portrayed the progressive outlook of Srimanta

Shankardeva. She stated that, in *Patni-Prasad*, the play itself is a strong discourse on the domination of the males on the females in the name of father, brother, husband and son :

Pitri putrabhatri sabe bishedhabolaya  
 Hari bhakti rase aakulahuya  
 Tarasabesunayenahi (Ankawali, 39)

Further she added that, the wives themselves were in a dilemma about their roles at home, their whims and wishes and their decision-making power. Having the view of lord Krishna, they couldn't but express their uncertainty about how they would be treated by their husbands and sons:

Sohi patiputrasaba: Haamaaka thana  
 naahidwewaba :  
 haamu grihe kosone banchaba? (44)

Their doubts and fears are the outcome of the treatment they experienced in their society by their male counterparts. The husbands dominating attitude to the wives are expressed in the following speech:

Ohi brahmani saba soucharahina:  
 bedasashtrajanayenahi  
 Guru sewa parama dharma borjita  
 Aara sabar srikrisnato param prema  
 bhakati bhela  
 Aah sanu saba stritto adhama bhelo (46)

The play can therefore be viewed as being centered on women, with a strong emphasis on the female characters and a realistic portrayal of their mental suffering as victims of social setup and patriarchy, as well as their subjection at the hands of patriarchal thinking.

The *Kaliya-Daman* focuses on the duties and obligation of women. In the *Keli Gopal*, the wives are shown as challenging their household duties rushed to get in touch with Sri Krishna, their idol. In the play *Ram-Bijay* too, Sankardeva depicted the situation of women in a male-dominated society.

Shankardeva's approach to women was notably inclusive and egalitarian, which contrasted with the prevailing norms of the time. He promoted women's active involvement in religious activities, including

as singing devotional songs like Borgeet and taking part in the theatrical productions (*Ankiya Naat*) that were central to his religious beliefs. Women's roles were restricted by many contemporary religious traditions; however, Shankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism gave them a more prominent and acknowledged social standing within the spiritual community. Dhurjjati Sarma, in his paper, "Plural Embodiments: The Performative World of Sankari Vaishnavism in Assam" said that in recent years, a number of all-women *bhaona* groups have emerged at many places across the state. It can be argued that, along with a host of other equally significant factors, the increasing participation of women in the traditionally male-dominated ritual art form of the *Ankiya bhaona* has liberated it from the sectarian confines of the monastic space. It has also added to its acceptance within the secular space of the proscenium stage, without compromising with its inherent ritual and aesthetic components.

### **Contemporaneity in *Ankiya Naat* Performances and Participatory Practices**

Contemporaneity in *Ankiya Naat* performances and participations refers to the ways in which artistic and cultural practices engages with the present moment, often reflecting or responding to current social, political, and technological contexts in Assamese Vaishnavite community. It involves the integration of contemporary themes, methods, and media in performances, as well as the active participation of audiences and the entire community in the creation or experience of the *Shankari* art forms around the state.

*Ankiya Naat* and its associated sacred rituals continue to hold significant relevance in contemporary Assamese Vaishnavite society. However, modern performances of these plays have undergone certain transformations in terms of adherence to traditional rituals and customs. In contemporary times, *Ankiya Naat* has transitioned from being performed exclusively in *Naam Ghars* to taking place on stages and in modern-day auditoriums. Indeed, the customs surrounding women's participation in these traditions and rituals have also experienced numerous transformations.

In his work, *Plural Embodiments: The Performative World of Sankari Vaishnavism in Assam* (2023), Dhurjjati Sarma critically examines the evolving role of women in *Ankiya Bhaonas*, traditionally dominated by male actors. He highlights that, while historically men performed all

the roles, there has been a significant shift in recent years. Contemporary performances, especially those held outside the traditional *Sattras*, increasingly feature women actors. Furthermore, Sarma notes the emergence of numerous all-women *Bhaona* groups throughout the state, signifying a broader acceptance and integration of women in this cultural practice. This development underscores a progressive transformation in the cultural landscape, challenging long-standing gender norms within this traditional art form.

Furthermore, the music and traditional masks have also experienced a gradual shift away from their conventional forms due to generational changes. Notably, the use of exotic Western instruments has become more prevalent in place of traditional folk instruments. This shift can be attributed to the younger generation's diminishing familiarity with traditional folk instruments and their growing fascination with Western musical styles.

### **Conclusion**

*Ankiya Naat* relates to the plays and dramas by Srimanta Shankardeva. But these were used by Srimanta Shankardeva as a literary tool to educate the common masses about the atrocities and marginalization faced by the people of Assamese society during that period of time. Through his work Srimanta Sankardeva was able to solidify and unify the common masses by educating them through *Ankiya Naats*, isn't just a literary piece but a hybridization of media. This liberal perspective was derived from the more egalitarian ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism, which aimed to create a more inclusive society based on the worship of a single, all-encompassing deity by overcoming societal divisions based on caste, gender, and class. Shankardeva's liberal views on women, which are mirrored in Neo-Vaishnavism, are essentially a part of his larger vision for a more just and equal society in which everyone, regardless of gender or social status, can practice devotion to God. This progressive attitude added to the movement's wide appeal and lasting impact in the local community, while also giving women more spiritual agency.

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