Abstract
Music, dance and drama subsist under the wing of performing arts. In India the diversegeographical extent, legion of races, varied linguistic communication, concerned religious faith and practiced rituals have equally bestowed the societal construction in creating the unique panorama of performing arts. In the North-eastern zone of India, the Vaishnavite Monasteries or Satras of Assam are the preceded socio-cultural and religious constitution established in the 16th century by the Vaishnavite Saint Sankaradeva and the his fraternity. In Satras we discover the enhancece origin and development of the performing art derived from its forms and the disposition within the Indian culture. The performing arts of Satras known as Bhaona, has some specific representation and unparalleled unique areas to define and analyze. Bhaona is extraordinary in character, bold in appeal, and elegant representation in comparison with other states of the India. Bhaona stands as a critique to the norms of the so-called cultural stereotype and intolerant abstract religious practices and rituals by making the performance art beyond the structure of religion and enhance the act of benefaction towards humanism. In Bhaona the performers’ approaches provides an illusion, cabalistic suspense and empathy in the cognitive psychology state of the audience, with the use of appealing dialogue, dance, drama and music. The Bhaona and its various facets stimulate the socio-cultural and religious sphere and are worthy ancient cultural traditions which the people must practice and protect.

Keywords: bhaona, performance, religion, satras, vaishnavite

I INTRODUCTION
The Indian civilization is rooted on the diversegeographical extent, legion of races, varied linguistic communication, concerned religious faith and rituals that have elaborately accumulated the societal construction in creating the unique prospect of performing arts in miscellaneous forms. Assam is situated in the extreme frontier of North-eastern India. “It contains at present an area of 54,000 square miles, of which a little over 24,000 square miles constitute the plains districts, 19,500 the southern hill tracts and the rest the trail hill tracts to the north.” (Barua, 2011) Assam is rich in mineral resources, flora-fauna, red river, multifaceted culture and climatic conditions. Assam ambit is broadly divided into two valleys- the Brahmaputra valley or the Assam valley and the Surma valley or the Barak valley (Baruah, 2013). “Assam is a part of the country known in ancient times as Pragjyotisa. By this name the country was known in the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as in some of the principal Puranas.” (Barua, 2011). Since ancient times Assam has a distinct and independent political existence (Acharyya, 2003). Hinduism is the most prevalent religion of the state.”The three popular forms of Hinduism namely, Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism are prevalent here. Neo-Vaisnavite movement gained wonderful momentum in Assam in the 16th century.
under the leadership of Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. This new religion which drew its teaching from the Bhagawata Gita is called Bhagawati or Mahapurusia dharma. Satras or Vaisnava monastaries were established and a new orientation of Assamese socio-cultural-cum-intellectual life was set in following the examples of the preceptors, other disciples in their turn established Satras in different parts of the country and the new religion became the religion of the people. At present about 75 percent of the Assamese Hindu population are followers of this cult.” (Baruah, 2013) Neo-Vaishnavite moment in Assam is Olympian in nature surpassing the Vaishnavite cult persist and practiced across the country. The Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam acknowledged as Satra are the unique socio-religious and cultural organizations that are set up, intended at and conjugated for a certain decisive purpose for the social welfare of the state. The Satras institutions are constituted to transmit the Bhakti idealism to the people at large and they are the heritage institutions of the state. They form an extremist revolutionized force of evolution towards the social change and development of the state. This new religious cult “Ek-Saran-Hari_Naam Dharma” drew its teachings from the ancient Hindu Holy Scriptures focalize on Vaishnavism (Borkakoti, 2005). “The Vaishnava renaissance thus reached out in all fields of cultured and developed life in Assam, enriched them, and brought about altogether a unifying and glorifying vitality to this part of the great Bharatvarsha (India).” (Neog, 2008). The four elementary principles of Assam Vaishnavism are Deva (Deity), Nama (the prayers), Bhakats (the devotees) and Guru (the mentor). The Satras institution covers up the arena of multidisciplinary socio-religious, cultural activities. The Satras versatile visual contour, architectural configuration and performing arts has distinctive characteristics, specific organizational set up and ideological valor derived from the Bhakti movement. “Vaishnavism ordinarily relates to Lord Vishnu. Single-minded devotion to Lord Vishnu is the spirit of Vaishnavism. Lord Vishnu is the spirit of Vaishnavism. Devotion to the Lord may find expression in different forms. By and large there are nine ways of this devotional expression. They are sravana (hearing), kirtana (chanting), smarana (remembering), archana (prayer), padasevana (serving the golden feet of the Lord), dashya (sevility), sakhiyya (friendship), bandana (praising) and atmanivedana (total surrender of self to the Lord). These nine expressions are described as Nababidha Bhakti (i.e., nine categories of devotion or bhakti). Bhakti may express itself in any of the nine forms” (Pathak, 2012). In Assam the Vaishnavite cult has a unique domain, authenticity and existence. This Vaishnavite cult is a way of life towards the development of spiritual knowledge. The Satra and the fraternity believe of taking refuge with the Supreme god Visnu. The Satra organizations are accessible to all the people regarding: birth, sex, religion or caste. There are no abstract cognitive process, rigid practices and concrete theocratic norms followed by the Satra and its fraternity. There is no Idol worship and no sacrificial ritual in the Satra institutional domain (Neog, 1998). The Satras preaches the Vaishnavism, one of the Bhakti cults of India in terms of its specific and innovative character that shared values of fraternity, equality, humanism and democracy to create an egalitarian civil society. Assam Vaishnavism encourages its adherents to make poetry, painting, dance and drama (Neog, 2004).
“In fact, a very notable feature of the neo-Vaishnava movement in Assam was that it made the fullest use of the diverse types of creative and artistic media—literature, music, dance drama, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so on—and made them integral parts of the new faith and its order. And thus it is that some of the finest treasures of Assamese art and culture owe their efflorescence to this movement. To this day the influence of the movement pervades the entire field of traditional Assamese life and culture, even cutting across religion and sectarian beliefs and practices.” (Datta, 2012)

II EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PERFORMING ARTS IN THE SATRAS

In Medieval India the Vaishnavite cult introduced an immense measure of the twin performing arts—Dance and Drama. The dance and drama compiled to make a great combination of enlightening and remarkable display. The Rasadhari and Ramlila of the Northern zone, the Kathakali or Attakutha of Kerla, the Yakshagana of Karnataka, the Kuchipudi Bhagavata-mela of Andhra and other Bhagavat-mela of the deeper Southern zone are striking contemporary analogies of the Ankiya Bhaona, introduced in Assam by the Vaishnivite Saint, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva. (Neog, 2004) “It is not known what elements contributed to the evolution of the sattra style. The dances, in spite of all the neglect with which it is received by the moderns, still possess a number of hastas (hand gestures), intricate and developed choreographic patterns, distinctive costumes and a variety of masks. The music mostly depends upon the khol or mridanga (various forms of cymbals) supporting raga and other songs. No woman dancer or actress is allowed in this school, there being no order of nuns in the sattras.

Even in the village performances the women roles are played by boys.” (Neog, 2008)

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, eminent critic of India, delivering a lecture on ‘Tradition of classical and Dessi Dance forms’ once stated, “The Satriya vocabulary, repertoire, the grammar of nritya and all other related components are as strong as many other neo-classical dance form like Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi or Manipuri.” (Neog, 2004)

It is believed to the last decade of the fifteenth century the Vaishnavite Saint, Sankaradeva have organized a dramatic performance the Cihna-yatra, considered as first dramatic performance. It was a ‘dramatic representation with painting.’ Later in some of his biographers have provided with some details of the show and the preparation for it. Sankaradeva himself did some painted scenery on tulapat or cotton-made paper, representing the seven Celestial Abodes or Vaikunthas of God Narayana. The saint used different traditional musical instruments in the dramatic performance. So a number of mirdangas or clay-made drums and several varieties of cymbal were made to his order (Neog, 2008). “The whole show was divided into seven parts, following each other in quick succession, and with one Visnu and a Satradhara for each part. The same person played more than one role in some instances. One biography mentions that the performance continued for seven day-and-nights at a stretch.” (Neog, 2008)

For the immediate predecessor of the Vaishnavite theatre started by Sankaradeva, there seem to have been the chorus institution of Oja-pali. TheOja palis use to sing soulfully and dance to the lyrical-rhythmic kavyas of the early sixteenth century- the Giti-ramayana and the Manasa songs of the poets (Neog, 2008).
“Durgavara and Mankar- perhaps represent the most popular form of literature before neo-Vaisnavita influences pervaded the writings in the country.” (Neog, 2008). These lyrical kavyas are believed to be the direct resultant and the primary article for the intake of the institution of Oja-pali, the lyrical kavyas were invariably meant for singing by village choruses, each consisting of a group of singers of four to five individuals. The leader of the chorus is known as Oja or Ojha, which means ‘the master’ and in Sanskrit means “Upadhyaya”. (Neog, 2008). Along with the Oja, there are some other supported singers known as Palis, which means the assistants or supporters to the Oja. There is a chief among the Palis, and he is named as the Daina-pali. The word ‘daina’ denotes the right-hand-side and the Daina-pali is really the right-hand stronghold of the Oja, and is like a second leader of the chorus team. It’s the intended purpose of the Oja to lead the chorus team throughout the performance supported with soulful songs and lyrical-rhythmic dances. The Oja’s chorus is then repeated by the Palis with the marking and maintaining the time with their feet and with the carefully striking of cymbals with their hands. The Oja goes on singing and admiring the couplets of the main body of the kavya, which generally depicts the beautiful story of Rama or sometimes the serpent goddess Manasa. (Neog, 2008) He also makes graceful dancing movements with elegant gestures of hands. Among the various dance movements described in the ancient natya treatises are seen in the Oja-Pali style of dance. “As a saying goes among the Ojahs, the oja alone is good, who, with songs in his lips, gestures in his hands, and rhythm on his feet, goes round and round like the bird, Garuda mukhe gita, hatre mudra, pawed hare tal garunda sadrsa bhrame, sehi ojha bhjal.” (Neog, 2004)

IIIBHAONA: THE VAISNAVITE THEATER

The origin of the Vaishnavite dramas or Bhaona traces its roots since the creation of dramatic narratives of Deodhani Nrittya, Putala Nach and Oja-Pali in ancient Assam (Barua, 2009). Among them Oja-Pali was the most popular and even today it prevails in Assam. Oja-Pali is an ancient folk performance of Assam where the Oja is the leader that narrates and Palis are the assistants that assists him. This art form has many similarities with the Vaishnavite dramas or Bhaona. Oja-Palis performed with various narrative lyrical-rhythmic and dramatic interludes that depict the stories of the Vaishnavite Holy Scripture. “It is crystal clear that the major semi dramatic asset of Assamese folk culture which was taken by Sankardeva for the creation of his new theatre is the Oja-Pali function of Assam which was widely practiced during his time. It is once again repeated that this one is the main function through which the Saint got the inspiration for innovation of his theatre” (Bhuyan, 2014). Therefore the Vaishnavite Saint organized the dramatic performance known as Cihna-Yatra, which later on developed into lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama performance of Bhaona. He then transformed, metamorphosed and constituted this concept of Oja-Pali into an innovative and exquisite lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama form of visual narrative in the Bhaona. The plays of Bhaona are written with a mode of religious conduct and motive rather than secular entertainment. They are hosted in the prayer hall or the Namghar, facing the Manikut, where the main deity resides. The Bhaonas are held in auspicious occasions like Jamnastami, Rasa-purnima,
Dol-yatra, Nandotsava and also on Vaishnavite Saints divine accounts (Barua, 2009).

“Ankiya Naat is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaisnava faith” (Barua, 2009). The thematic review of Bhaona is mostly derived from the Holy Scripture. The characters in the performed in the Bhaona are limited; they are confined to certain limits. In Bhaona, the characters play at a rhythmic space from the very beginning to the end, with special mudra’s or gestures, following certain norms of appropriate dance step (Barua 2009). Another remarkable feature of Bhaona is the expressive lyrical nature that gives an overwhelming notion. “In these plays through a plethora of songs and verses the playwrights underline the message of the play with more of passion than of logic. Many situations and incidents are suggested by mere machinery of descriptive verses uttered by the Sutradhar instead of being represented through action and character” (Barua 2009).

In Bhaona the Vaishnavite Masks has a unique form, utility and an exquisite structural representation. The Mask, which is generally an elegant form of craft become an important object of art in narrating the ideas of visual performances of Bhaona. The three different categories of Masks are used in the performance. “To make them light in weight and make movements easy with them on, life-sizes or huge masks are made out of bamboo splinter-bars and cloth. The buffoons wear small masks prepared from clay, cloth, rough paper and bark of trees; bark of plaintain tree is also used to serve temporary purpose. Head-dress and upper masks, i.e. masks for head and face, are carved out of wood and of hard bark-sheet” (Barua, 2009).

Mask or Mukha metamorphosed itself into an object of utility, ethnicity, sociological as well as a psychological factor. “These are generally meant to represent such unusual appearances as the ten heads of Ravana, the four heads of Brahma, the bird-like face of Garuda, and so on. Ravana sometimes has to put on a large mask with ten heads and twenty or even a hundred hands. Other Raksasas, such as Subahu and Marica in the Rama-vijaya, put on similarly grotesque masks. In some monastic circles up till recent times, nobody without a masque could represent kings: and rows of ready-made masks with names attached to them were kept in store-rooms of Sattras” (Neog, 1998). The form and utility of masks reflect an immense reaction, emotion and presents idea to the spectators while visualizing it in the structural representation of Bhaona. It ensures the spectators of the reality of emotion. Masks in the Satras are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the Bhaona (when performed by wearing masks known as Mukha Bhaona). Masks are generally worn as a costume in the mask performance and the costume covers up the entire body of the performer. The Sutradhara’s is the principal role in the representation of ankiya naat. He is generally dressed in all white: a turban (ready-made of cloth, sometimes now-a-days paper and fitted with silvery ribbon strips in the Kamalabari Sattra performance) shaped sometimes like the headgear in Rajput-Mughal and Assamese painting, a long sleeved jama and a fluffy skirt (ghuri) tied on the waist and a waist-and with flower designs on it (rangali). For ornaments he puts on silver bangles (gamkharu) studded with stones, a lace with drum like golden bead in the middle (matamani) dangling ear ornaments of gold (uniti) and brass anklets (nepur). After a
short concert on khols and tals, and amidst peals of chanting of holy names and sound of big drum (daba) and pipes (kali or kaliyas), the Sutradhara appears from behind a screen held aloft by two men and sometimes an arch of torches (agnigar). And this would remind us of tiromukku or curtain look in kathakali. (Neog, 2004)

When the screen is taken off by a pull on one side, the Sutradhara is seen in, or takes a kneeling position with his head and hands up to the elbows touching the ground. He then slowly rises moving one limb and then another to the music of the orchestra and paying obeisance to the Supreme Deity, the religious head and the assembly, he starts dancing the initial portion of which is in slow tempo and is popularly called saru bhangi (the minor movements). He now recites the nandi sloka or slokas, and the dance begins to rise in tempo and becomes bright and move vigorous. This part again is popularly known as bar bhangi (the major movements). As the Sutradhara recites the initial bhatima, he exhibits different hastas to signify the subject matter of the verses. The dance is followed by the calling out of the so called slokas which are then played upon by the orchestra, the Sutradhara executing the same in appropriate dances, known in their turn as slokar nach. The actors then make their appearance to pravesa-nriitya, which exhibits different gaits for different types of roles. Yasoda and the gopis for example, would dance in on ektaI. Narada in thukani and demons in chuta tal. (Neog, 2004)

IVROLE OF TRADITIONAL SONGS AND MUSIC IN BHAONA

The Vaishnavite music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety. In the religious performance of Bhaona, immense music and drums are used. The cymbals play the leading role among instruments. In the ankar gita or songs of the dramas, they are same in musical execution of bargitas in except in that the former is always accompanied with rhythmic beats and is rarely or never executed without it. The tala of each ankar gita is, therefore, always indicated along with its raga (Neog, 1998).

“The performance of an ankar gita is not preceded by raga diya as in bargita. In content it differs from the latter in the same degree as ‘dramatic lyrics’ differ from lyrics in general, and for the fact that it is contained in the text of some drama……The ankar gita generally are performed in the course of dramatic representations which mark occasional monastic or village festivities. But some of these songs are used in the sattra ceremonials also, the beautiful lyrics of Sankara Keli-gopala being often selected for the purpose.” (Neog, 1998)

The Natyasastra of Bharata dictates the performance of a detailed series of preliminaries known as purva-ranga, before the beginning of the actual performance. There are three of these preliminaries prescribed in the Natyasastra. Nandi prarochana and prastavana. These preliminaries are unified by Sankaradeva in his AnkiyaBhaona. In Assam the Bhaonaperformance is followed by a day-long celebration of recitation of prayers to the Lord or nama-kirtana(Neog, 2008). In the Satras of Assam thetala plays the most vital role. All the instruments used in that circle are namely: the drums-mrdanga, khol and nagara, the tambourines or khanjaris, the cymbals – bar-tal, pati-tal, khuti-tal or manjira are played to create the lyrical-rhythm. The vayanas or drummers) and gayanas or cymbalists, literally the singers have to expertise in the various useful talas before the actual dramatic performance of Bhoana. (Neog, 1998)
“When the dhemalis are over, the Sutradhara makes his entrance (sutra-pravesa), which has also to be attended with the lighting of fire-works, the holding of the fire-arch and a screen. The lighting of fire-works in this case is done by the head of a sattra or his deputy (Deka) if either of them be present. The Sutradhara now performs dances, after which he sings the nandi (two slokas and a raga song, if any); announces the subject-matter, urging on the audience to lend their ears to it in the prarochana sloka; sings a bhatima-song in praise of the hero; again announces the main feature of the plot in Brajwali and performs the short introduction (prastavana). In between these acts he introduces brief dances. All these different dances today seem to be only nritta, based on rhythm (tala) alone (nrittam tala-layasrayam), and to have lost much of the significance of pantomime (bhavasrayam nrityam).” (Neog, 2008)

VCONCLUSION

The outcome of Vaishnavite renaissance on Assam was remarkable on the socio-cultural, spiritual, political and intellectual development. It has largely bestowed its blessing towards the prosperity of the Assamese culture and society. The art forms developed in the Satras are the significant prodigious force of socio-cultural and religious orbit that should be treasured. The Vaishnavite renaissance concealed the error in the socio-cultural as well as the religious domain. The Government must make a detailed review, take measures and overhaul on the preservation and protection of these ancient treasured domain. It must be secularized along with the other prevalent performing art forms of India evincing the visual narratives. The performing art forms are confined within the walls of Satra culture. They are not academically explored and there are lots of aesthetical, philosophical and analytical enhancive realms of these art forms that are yet to be assumed and explored. The Bhaona is generally performed in the Namghar or an arena resembling a stage. It is surrounded by the huge mass of audience almost from all the sides. It has a unique representation, character, appeal and exhilarate of a kind. At the stage the performers are transformed into divine dimensions in the cognitive psychological and imaginative process of the audience. The performer’s exquisite representation of costume and make-up with a special communicative language (Brajawali) spoken with other performers, effects the cognitive process of the audience. It provides the audience illusory ideas and exhilarate pictorial view of the performance. An emotional involvement and agitation is developed psychologically in the audience’s mind in the arena of the performance. The audiences are swayed emotionally by the evoked sentiments of the performers. Bhakti is reflected from the surrounded audiences that have experienced the historic as well as divine enlightenment. Above all, the visual narratives of Bhaona are based on elements of cultural aspects of the Satra institutions and therefore they should be preserved and protected.
REFERENCES:


