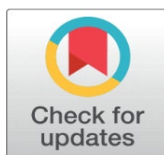


THEATRICAL DEVOTION: UNVEILING THE SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS OF ANKIYA BHAONA WITHIN BHAKTI

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ABSTRACT

Ankiya Bhaona, through its founder, the 15th Century Vaishnavite saint Sankaradeva (1449-1568), presents a unique theatrical tradition of Assam, India. This paper explores the spiritual dynamics of Ankiya Bhaona to highlight its place in the Bhakti movement. The study examines the historical development, cultural influences, and devotional elements that define Ankiya Bhaona. Originating from Sankaradeva's classic "Cihna Yatra," (Pageant on Painted Scenes) Ankiya Bhaona blends Sanskrit drama with Assamese folk traditions, creating a powerful medium for spiritual expression. These narratives, primarily regarding the lives and deeds of Krishna and Rama, are performed in Namghars (prayer halls), reinforcing community engagement and devotion. The paper portrays the unique features of Ankiya Bhaona through a comparative analysis with other Bhakti performances, emphasizing its use of indigenous cultural elements and its roles as religious and social gatherings. This study also considers the symbolism and metaphors employed in the performances, showing their part in deepening the audience's spiritual experience. This paper underlines that Ankiya Bhaona is essential not only in the community's life but also as a guarantor of cultural continuity, making it an integral part of Assamese cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ankiya Bhaona, Bhakti Movement, Sankaradeva, Assamese Theatre, Devotional Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

A unique form of theatre, *Ankiya Bhaona* occupies a significant place in the cultural and religious heritage of Assam. This dramatic tradition began in the 15th Century with the Vaishnavite saint Sankaradeva, who used it as a medium to spread the principles of Bhakti. *Ankiya Bhaona* combines lyrical drama, music, dance, and elaborate costumes, appealing to both the aesthetic senses and spiritual aspirations of the audience (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965; Mahanta, 2007; Mahanta, 1999; Baruah, 1996; Bhattacharya, 1988). Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli stated in their *Indian Theatre - Tradition and Performance* (1993) that *Ankiya Bhaona* was the first examples of marginal language theatre in India during the Middle Ages. In contrast, only Sanskrit drama was performed in India during this time. Even in Europe, morality, interludes, and comedy plays flourished during that period (Richmond, Swann, & Zarrilli, 1993, pp. 14-15).

According to Richmond (1974) "of the various means used to propagate this new faith among the masses of India's village theatre became one of the most successful, owing in no small measure to its ability to draw large audiences together to watch entertaining stories with didactic messages" (p. 145). These performances typically take place in *Namghars*, community prayer halls, enhancing communal worship and devotion. The term "bhaona" generally means

“the act of pretending.” It describes the performance of an *Ankiya Naat* by Sankaradeva, who used various terms like “naat” (Sohi Patniprasad Naam Naat), “natak” (Rukmini Haranam Naam Natkang), “yatra” (Sriparijat-Haran-Yatrang), and “nritya” (Sri Rama Vijaya Sitavividh Bihar Nritya) to refer to his plays (Barua, 2012, p. 170, 58, 27, 132). There is no direct evidence that Sankaradeva used the term “bhaona.” The earliest recorded use is found in Ramcharan Thakur’s hagiography (“Bhaona karihe Krishna pujibe lagay”- bhaona is the only way to worship Krishna), suggesting the term was already in oral tradition before entering written texts (Duttabaruah, 1996, p. 681).

The prefix “ankiya” was later added to “naat” and “bhaona,” creating the term “*Ankiya Bhaona*” to specifically refer to plays written by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and those following their style (Sharma, 1965). Various styles of plays emerged over time, leading to the specific use of “*Ankiya Bhaona*” to distinguish these performances. Keshabananda Devgoswami notes that currently, “bhaona” refers to performance, while “naat-kata” or “nat lekha” refers to writing plays (Deva Goswami, 1986, p. 41). During Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva’s time, these dramas were categorized into full and miniature forms, with the miniature section known as “Din Bhaona,” examples of which are found in Madhavadeva’s plays (Deva Goswami, 2015; Deva Goswami, 2000).

1.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORIGINS

Ankiya Bhaona originated from Sankaradeva’s first major dramatic presentation, “*Cihna Yatra*,” or “Pageant on Painted Scenes.” This pioneering event is considered the prelude to modern Assamese theatre. Sankaradeva’s innovative approach integrated elements from Sanskrit drama with local folk traditions, creating a form that resonated deeply with the local populace (Kakati, 1959; Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965; Richmond, 1974; Barua, 1998; Mahanta, 2007; Goswami, 1984). His disciple, Madhavadeva, continued to develop and popularize *Ankiya Bhaona*, ensuring its enduring legacy in Assamese culture.

There is no detailed written account of the performance of Sankaradeva’s plays during his time. Two hagiographies, the *Guru-Charit-Katha* or *Katha-Gurucharit* (Hagiography of the Gurus in prose. Same hagiography edited by different scholar in two different name) and the *Bardowa Gurucharit* (Hagiography of Bardowa), contain descriptions of “*Cihna Yatra*” and mention the staging of several plays (Neog, 1977; Neog, 1987; Lekharu, 1987). Sankaradeva primarily used this art form to spread his religious thoughts, which might explain the lack of detailed performative documentation. Various types of bhaonas have been transmitted through oral tradition and socio-cultural memory, which are dominant sources of knowledge today, inevitably influenced by time (Mahanta, 2020).

This study aims to explore the spiritual dynamics inherent in *Ankiya Bhaona*, focusing on how this theatrical form embodies and propagates the principles of the Bhakti movement. By examining the historical context, performance structure, and devotional elements, the research seeks to uncover how *Ankiya Bhaona* serves as a medium for spiritual expression.

1.2. RELATION TO BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The Bhakti movement, emphasizing personal devotion and direct connection to the divine, played a crucial role in shaping *Ankiya Bhaona*. This movement sought to democratize religious practice, making it accessible to all social strata through vernacular languages and local cultural forms (Goswami, 1984). *Ankiya Bhaona*, with its focus on narratives from the lives of Krishna and Rama, promotes devotional fervour and reinforces Bhakti ideals of surrender, devotion, and communal worship. According to Maheswar Neog:

Plot, characterization, and dialogue are all subordinated to the dramatist’s main purpose of instilling into the hearts of the audience the message of ‘bhakti’... ..The dramatist’s energy is directed towards evoking a devotional fervor in the audience... ..The plot is so arranged as to glorify the hero, Krsna or Rāma. (Neog, 1965, p. 246)

Richmond (1974) noted that India’s village theatre, including *Ankiya Bhaona*, successfully propagated this new faith among the masses by drawing large audiences to watch entertaining stories with didactic messages. Even today, Assamese society believes that participating in a bhaona earns more piety than many other forms of service, essentially making bhaona a ritual performance.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the spiritual elements of *Ankiya Bhaona*?

How does *Ankiya Bhaona* reflect the principles of Bhakti?

These questions guide the study, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of *Ankiya Bhaona*'s role in fostering spiritual devotion and community cohesion within the framework of the Bhakti movement.

BACKGROUND OF ANKIYA BHAONA

Ankiya Bhaona surfaced as an essential cultural and religious practice during the Bhakti movement that swept across India between the 15th and 17th Centuries. This movement involved straightforward devotion toward only one deity, thus often bypassing orthodox structures in established religions.

The Bhakti movement in Assam mainly got a fillip through the efforts of Sankaradeva, a Vaishnavite saint. He created a new form of performance *Ankiya Bhaona* to promote his thoughts. His dramatic works, "*Cihna Yatra*," and an assorted set of such plays carried religious narratives and devotional messages to the masses through local folklore and the classical Sanskrit elements he used in them (Hazarika, 1995; Richmond, 1974; Hazarika, 2003). The key figures behind the development of *Ankiya Bhaona* were Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva laid the founding stone of this literary and performance practice in the mid-15th century. His works were charged with devotional fervour and didactic in nature and meant to inculcate a deep sense of Bhakti in the minds of the Assamese people. The works of the late 15th–early 16th-Century scholar Madhavadeva, who succeeded his master Sankaradeva, imitated and further developed the repertory of *Ankiya Bhaona*. Very significantly, he institutionalized these performances in the Assamese Vaishnavite community and ensured their legacy was continued.

The regional culture and traditions of Assam profoundly influenced the evolution of *Ankiya Bhaona*. The integration of local folk elements into the classical structure of Sanskrit drama made *Ankiya Bhaona* a unique theatrical form. This fusion of styles not only made the performances look beautiful but also carried and conveyed religious messages so the local audience would be able to relate to them. Thus, the use of the *Brajawali* language, new music inspired by traditional tunes, and the creation of a new dance form based on classical Indian and Assamese folk dances firmly roots the *Ankiya Bhaona* tradition in the cultural fabric of Assam (Sarma & Dutta, 2009; Gogoi, 2013; Saikia, & Bordoloi, 2007).

What set *Ankiya Bhaona* apart are the religious stories and themes within the Krishna and Rama overt life-focused stories taken from the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana*, respectively. These stories are neither re-narrations nor recitals but emotively dramatized to portray the moral and spiritual lessons that they contain within their folds for humanity. The performances are rich in didactic dialogues, lyrical songs, and elaborate dances, all attempting to strike a sense of devotion and enunciate the tenets of "Bhakti". In the process, they awaken the audience from the ordinary and lull them into the religious way of teaching, hence acting as a form of religious education or, better still, a pedagogical tool for spiritual upliftment (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965; Richmond, 1974; Sarma & Dutta, 2009).

2. THE SPIRITUAL FRAMEWORK OF BHAKTI

Bhakti, the sublime second current in Hindu religious practice, is based on devotion and personal relationship with one supreme deity. Such spiritual practice preaches self-surrender, love, and unflinching devotion toward God. The core tenets of Bhakti include:

- **Sharanagati (Surrender):** A feeling of severe surrender to God is the basis for Bhakti. By surrendering all personal desires and the ego, the devotee looks forward to divine grace, through which they may attain liberation (moksha) (Hawley, 2011).
- **Prem (Love):** The most passionate, selfless love for God is a fundamental principle. This love is beyond the bounds of all material bondage and is very often expressed by singing, dancing, and dramatization with narrations of religious stories (Kinsley, 1979).
- **Satsang (Community Worship):** Bhakti regards group worship and the community gathering of devotees to chant, sing, and celebrate the glories of God with importance. Such a form of prayer in communion strengthens the bonds of community and reinforces the spiritual teachings (Kinsley, 1979).

3. BHAKTI IN INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS

Bhakti has deeply influenced Indian performing arts, infusing them with themes of devotion and spirituality. Classical forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi use dance as a medium to express divine love and convey moral and spiritual lessons through stories from Hindu epics. Similarly, Carnatic and Hindustani classical music often features devotional compositions, known as bhajans or kirtans, sung in praise of deities (Hawley, 2011; Venkataraman, 2015; Gaston, 1996; Kothari, 1989).

In folk traditions, Bhakti is equally prevalent. Performances like *Ramlila*, which dramatizes the life of Lord Rama, and *Krishna Lila*, depicting the exploits of Lord Krishna, are deeply rooted in Bhakti. These performances serve not only as entertainment but also as a means to educate the masses about religious stories and principles (Richmond, 1974). Apart from *Ankiya Bhaona*, several other theatrical forms embody the essence of Bhakti:

- **Ramlila:** This enactment of the *Ramayana* is performed annually across North India, particularly during the festival of *Dussehra*, reinforcing values of righteousness and devotion exemplified by Lord Rama (Richmond, 1974; Schechner, 2010).
- **Jatra:** *Jatra's* roots can be traced back to the 16th Century during the Bhakti movement. It began as a religious performance to disseminate the teachings of Lord Krishna, significantly influenced by the Vaishnava saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, during his travels across rural Bengal, used *Jatra* as a medium to spread devotional messages and engage the masses in spiritual practices (Bhatia, 1996; Chatterjee, 2007).
- **Krishna Lila:** *Krishna Lila*, also called *Krishna Leela*, is like a lively theatre in India showing the life of Lord Krishna. Many people love this kind of show in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. It tells about Krishna's life, from when he was a playful kid to when he did brave and godly things. It is based on old writings like the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Mahabharata*. The show has bright clothes, fancy makeup, happy music, and strong dance, making Krishna's stories real. The heart of Bhakti, or love, is a big part because the goal is to make people feel love and respect for Krishna (Kinsley, 1979).

Like *Ankiya Bhaona*, these forms use drama, music, and dance to engage audiences and impart spiritual teachings, making Bhakti an integral part of cultural and religious life in India.

4. ANKIYA BHAONA: FORM AND STRUCTURE

Ankiya Bhaona, introduced by Sankaradeva, is characterized by its unique scripts and storylines, typically written in the lyrical-dramatic form known as "Ankiya Naat." These scripts are composed in *Brajawali*, a literary language combining elements of Maithili and Assamese (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965, Sarma, 2002). The narratives revolve around the lives and exploits of Hindu deities, primarily Krishna and Rama, derived from texts like the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana*. These stories are designed to communicate moral and spiritual lessons, making them accessible and engaging to the common people.

Music and dance play crucial roles in *Ankiya Bhaona*, enhancing its aesthetic and emotional appeal. The musical compositions, known as "Bhatima" "Naatr Geet" and "Payar," were created by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. These devotional songs are integral to the performance, often used to convey the emotional states of characters and advance the storyline (Sarma, 1965, Neog, 1965). Dance in *Ankiya Bhaona* blends classical and folk elements, reflecting Assam's rich cultural heritage. Performers use intricate hand gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions (*bhavas*), and body movements to depict various characters and emotions. The *Sutradhara*, or narrator, plays a central role, guiding the audience through the performance with commentary and song, ensuring that the spiritual and didactic messages are conveyed (Sarma & Dutta, 2009). Traditionally, *Ankiya Bhaona* is staged in *Namghars*, community prayer halls, which provide a sacred and communal setting for the performances. Elaborate costumes, masks, and props add to the visual spectacle, making the performances both entertaining and spiritually enriching (Richmond, 1974).

The core themes of *Ankiya Bhaona* are deeply rooted in Bhakti, emphasizing devotion and surrender to a singular deity. The plays often depict unwavering devotion towards Krishna or Rama, illustrating virtues of faith, loyalty, and humility. This portrayal is designed to inspire the audience to cultivate similar virtues in their spiritual practices. The narratives frequently highlight the concept of *Sharanagati* or complete surrender to the divine will. Characters in the plays often face moral dilemmas and challenges, ultimately overcoming them through steadfast devotion and trust in

God's grace. This theme resonates deeply with the principles of the Bhakti movement, reinforcing the idea that true liberation and spiritual fulfilment can only be achieved through total devotion and surrender (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965).

Divine characters in *Ankiya Bhaona* are portrayed with great reverence, reflecting their exalted status in Hindu mythology. Krishna is often depicted in various roles—as a playful child, a compassionate lover, and a wise deity. Similarly, Rama embodies righteousness and virtue, representing ideals of dharma and kingship (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965). The representation of these divine characters serves a didactic purpose. Through their actions and dialogues, these characters impart essential spiritual and moral lessons to the audience. Elaborate costumes and masks help create a vivid and engaging portrayal, making the divine presence palpable to viewers. This visual and auditory engagement reinforces the devotional themes and enhances the overall spiritual experience of the performance (Sarma & Dutta, 2009).

4.1. SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS IN ANKIYA BHAONA

The performers of *Ankiya Bhaona* are not merely actors but devotees who engage deeply with the spiritual content of the plays. Their performances are considered an act of worship and are often preceded by rituals such as fasting and prayer, which help them attain a state of spiritual purity and readiness. The Sutradhara, or narrator, plays a crucial role in maintaining the devotional atmosphere, guiding both the performers and the audience through the spiritual journey depicted in the play (Goswami, 2017). The intense spiritual engagement of the performers enhances the authenticity of their portrayal, allowing them to convey the devotional fervour inherent in the narratives.

The audience's experience of *Ankiya Bhaona* is deeply immersive and devotional. The performances are held in *Namghars*, which are considered sacred spaces, thus creating an environment conducive to spiritual reflection and communal worship. The audience participates actively through collective chanting, singing, and responding to the performances, making the experience a form of communal worship. This participatory nature of *Ankiya Bhaona* fosters a strong sense of community and shared devotion among the spectators (Goswami, 2017).

The narratives and characters depicted in *Ankiya Bhaona* often resonate deeply with the audience's own spiritual beliefs and experiences. The portrayal of divine episodes and moral lessons from the lives of Krishna and Rama serves to reinforce the audience's faith and inspire them to emulate the virtues displayed by these deities. The emotional and spiritual impact of these performances can lead to moments of personal introspection and spiritual awakening, enhancing the overall devotional experience (Richmond, 1974). *Ankiya Bhaona* is rich in symbolism and metaphors, which are used to convey deeper spiritual messages. The use of masks, costumes, and props is not merely for visual appeal but serves to symbolize various attributes and qualities of the divine characters. For instance, the flute of Krishna symbolizes divine music and joy, while the bow of Rama represents strength and righteousness (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965). These symbols help in creating a visual language that communicates complex spiritual concepts in an accessible and engaging manner.

The performances often employ metaphors to illustrate spiritual truths and moral lessons. For example, the battles between divine and demonic characters symbolize the eternal struggle between good and evil, urging the audience to strive for virtue and righteousness in their own lives. The depiction of divine play (Lila) is used as a metaphor for the divine will and the unfolding of cosmic events, suggesting that all worldly happenings are manifestations of divine play (Neog, s.n; Medhi, 1953). The spiritual messages conveyed through *Ankiya Bhaona* are multi-layered and open to interpretation, allowing the audience to derive personal meanings and insights. The narratives often emphasize themes such as devotion, surrender, and divine grace, encouraging the audience to cultivate these qualities in their spiritual practice. The use of allegorical storytelling helps in illustrating complex philosophical ideas in a simple and relatable manner, making the spiritual teachings accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds (Richmond, 1974).

The performances also serve as a form of moral education, highlighting the importance of virtues such as truth, compassion, and humility. Through the portrayal of divine characters and their actions, *Ankiya Bhaona* provides a model for ethical and righteous living, reinforcing the moral and spiritual values espoused by the Bhakti movement (Goswami, 2017).

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH OTHER BHAKTI PERFORMANCES

5.1. SIMILARITIES

- *Ankiya Bhaona* shares many spiritual themes with other Bhakti performances across India. Central to these performances is the theme of intense devotion and unconditional love for a singular deity, typically Vishnu in his various incarnations such as Krishna and Rama. This theme of Bhakti is expressed through narratives that highlight the virtues of devotion, humility, and surrender to the divine will. For instance, just as *Ankiya Bhaona* depicts the divine play (Lila) of Krishna, performances like *Ramlila* and *Krishna Lila* in North India also portray the divine exploits of these deities, emphasizing their miraculous deeds and moral teachings (Richmond, 1974).
- In terms of performance practices, *Ankiya Bhaona* and other Bhakti performances utilize a combination of music, dance, and dramatic storytelling to convey their messages. These elements are integral to the overall spiritual and aesthetic experience of the performances. For example, *Ramlila*, which re-enacts the life of Lord Rama, employs elaborate costumes, music, and choreographed movements similar to those seen in *Ankiya Bhaona*. Additionally, the use of community spaces such as village squares or temple grounds for staging these performances is a common practice, facilitating communal participation and collective worship.
- Both *Ankiya Bhaona* and other Bhakti performances rely on the involvement of the community, not just as spectators but as active participants. The ritualistic aspects, including prayers and devotional songs sung by the audience, create a shared spiritual atmosphere. This participatory nature helps reinforce the communal bonds and collective spiritual identity among the devotees (Sarma & Dutta, 2009).

5.2. DIFFERENCES

- One of the unique aspects of *Ankiya Bhaona* is its specific incorporation of Assamese cultural elements into the Bhakti narrative. While the themes are universal within the Bhakti tradition, the presentation and stylistic elements are distinctly Assamese. This includes the use of the *Brajawali* language, which combines elements of Maithili and Assamese, and traditional Assamese musical instruments such as the khol (drum) and taal (cymbals) (Goswami, 2017).
- Furthermore, the structure of *Ankiya Bhaona* often involves a single narrator, the *Sutradhara*, who guides the performance with commentary and song, a practice that distinguishes it from other Bhakti performances which might use multiple narrators or no narrator at all. The *Sutradhara*'s role is crucial in linking the narrative to the spiritual messages, ensuring that the audience grasps the deeper meanings behind the dramatic enactments (Sarma, 2002).
- The regional influences on *Ankiya Bhaona* are evident in its visual and performance aesthetics, which differ from other regional Bhakti performances. For example, the masks used in *Ankiya Bhaona* are tailored to represent Assamese traditions and folklore, setting them apart from the attire seen in *Ramlila* or *Krishna Lila*'s performances in North India. The influence of local festivals and rituals also permeates *Ankiya Bhaona*, reflecting the integration of Bhakti themes with regional cultural practices (Neog, n.d).
- Another distinctive feature is the setting of the performances in *Namghars*, which are specific to Assamese Vaishnavism. These community prayer halls serve as both religious and social centers, highlighting the integration of spiritual and communal life in Assam. This setting contrasts with the more open-air or temple-ground performances of other Bhakti traditions, emphasizing a closer, more intimate communal worship experience in *Ankiya Bhaona* (Richmond, 1974).

6. IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Ankiya Bhaona has played a pivotal role in promoting the principles of Bhakti in Assam. By dramatizing the lives and deeds of deities like Krishna and Rama, it has made the abstract concepts of devotion, surrender, and divine love accessible and tangible to the common people. The narratives of *Ankiya Bhaona* emphasize the core tenets of Bhakti—selfless love, devotion, and complete surrender to God—thereby reinforcing these values in the collective consciousness of the audience. The use of local language and cultural idioms in these performances has ensured that the spiritual messages resonate deeply with the Assamese populace, making Bhakti a lived and practiced faith.

Ankiya Bhaona has significantly influenced regional culture and arts in Assam. It has contributed to the preservation and propagation of Assamese music, dance, and theatrical traditions. The integration of traditional musical instruments, folk dance forms, and other local elements into the performances has enriched the cultural tapestry of Assam. Moreover, the *Namghars*, where these performances are held, have become centres of cultural activity, fostering a sense of community and continuity of tradition (Neog, 2004). The impact of *Ankiya Bhaona* extends beyond the realm of religious practice into the broader cultural milieu. It has inspired various art forms, including painting, sculpture, and literature, that draw upon the themes and aesthetics of the performances. This cross-pollination of artistic expressions has helped to create a vibrant cultural ecosystem where religious devotion and artistic creativity coexist and complement each other (Sarma & Dutta, 2009).

6.1. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Technological advancements have also played a role in the contemporary staging of *Ankiya Bhaona*. The use of modern lighting, sound, and stage design has enhanced the visual and auditory experience, making the performances more engaging for younger audiences. Additionally, the digitization of scripts and music has facilitated the preservation and wider dissemination of this cultural heritage (Gogoi & Goswami, 2012).

Despite the changes and adaptations, the spiritual and cultural significance of *Ankiya Bhaona* remains undiminished. It continues to be a vital means of fostering devotion and spiritual growth among the Assamese people. The performances provide a communal space for reflection, worship, and cultural exchange, thereby strengthening the social fabric of the community. The enduring popularity of *Ankiya Bhaona* attests to its relevance in contemporary Assamese society. It serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a tool for moral and spiritual education. The values and lessons imparted through these performances continue to inspire and guide individuals in their personal and communal lives, ensuring that the principles of Bhakti remain a living and dynamic force in Assam (Richmond, 1974).

7. CONCLUSION

Ankiya Bhaona, as an integral part of Assamese cultural and religious life, exemplifies the profound spiritual dynamics of the Bhakti movement. The performances are not merely theatrical displays but are acts of devotion that engage both performers and audiences in deep spiritual reflection and communal worship. The narratives, derived from sacred texts, are imbued with themes of devotion, surrender, and divine play, reinforcing the principles of Bhakti. The use of music, dance, and dramatic storytelling creates an immersive experience that enhances the devotional atmosphere and facilitates a deeper connection with the divine (Goswami, 2017; Richmond, 1974).

Ankiya Bhaona is intrinsically linked to the Bhakti movement, which emphasized direct, personal devotion to God, bypassing traditional ritualistic practices. This theatrical form, initiated by Sankaradeva, was designed to make the teachings of Bhakti accessible to the common people through engaging and relatable narratives. The performances promote the core tenets of Bhakti, such as selfless love, surrender, and community worship, thereby fostering a collective spiritual consciousness and reinforcing the social and religious fabric of Assamese society (Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1965).

Future research on *Ankiya Bhaona* can explore several areas to enhance understanding and appreciation of this unique art form. Potential areas for further study include:

- **Comparative Analysis:** Conduct comparative studies between *Ankiya Bhaona* and other regional Bhakti performances to identify unique features and shared elements, thereby gaining a broader understanding of the diversity within Bhakti traditions.
- **Cultural Transmission:** Examining the role of *Namghars* and other community institutions in preserving and transmitting *Ankiya Bhaona* to future generations, including the impact of digitization and educational programs.

Studying *Ankiya Bhaona* offers valuable insights into the broader context of devotional arts. It highlights how religious narratives and cultural expressions can be intertwined to create powerful mediums for spiritual and moral education. Understanding the dynamics of *Ankiya Bhaona* can provide a framework for analysing other devotional art forms, contributing to a richer appreciation of the role of arts in fostering religious and cultural identities. Additionally, it underscores the importance of preserving traditional art forms in the face of modern challenges, ensuring their relevance and vitality for future generations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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