



Women in popular media : a study of medieval vaishnavite play reconstructing gender ideology in Assam.

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Abstract

The Vaishnavite Movement of Assam which began in the 15th century under the leadership of Srimanta Sankaradeva was heralded as a revolutionary movement undermining Brahmanical priesthood and ritualism and establishing a more egalitarian social order. However, ironically, the movement also led to the establishment of a more rigid and stereotypical patriarchal socio-cultural ideal. As we all know in the medieval period the realm of media comprised of diverse communicative means such as music, play, literature, visual arts etc. Many of these means were utilized by Sankardeva in order to communicate his idea of bhakti far and wide, of which his plays called *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona* proved to be the most popular. In these plays, women were excluded from performing and roles of women were played by men. It is also seen that in the music of these plays, *raginis* or ‘female melodies’ are absent. The roles assigned to female characters were often simplistic, submissive and secondary to their male counterparts. Thus, a gradual crystallization of stereotypical gender imagery in conformity with Brahmanical culture took place, undermining the image prevalent in co-existing relatively egalitarian tribal matrilineal communities, ultimately resulting in a lower status for women in the society. What this study attempts to achieve is to undertake a critical appraisal of these plays and to see how this form of media portrays gender imagery in the society during the period under review. The aim would be to find out what implications the growth of the popular media had for reconstituting gender ideology in the region.

Keywords: Ankiya Nat and Bhaona, Brahmanical, Eka Sarana Nama Dharma , Namghar, Sattra, Vaishnavite Movement.

1. Introduction

In the fifteenth century Assam witnessed the emergence of a new socio-religious movement, the Neo-Vaishnava movement, under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva. This movement brought about important changes in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of medieval Assam. It has been called a revolutionary movement as it undermined the Brahmanical priesthood and ritualism and established a more egalitarian social order. The movement was against the caste and hierarchy, Brahmanical rituals, social divisions, sacrifices etc. While one cannot deny

the importance of the movement in improving the lot of the common masses, the situation is more complex than has been usually portrayed by scholars. One of the most important dimensions in which scholars have failed to make an appraisal of the movement is on lines of gender. No satisfactory critical evaluation of the *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*¹ has been so far made to see what implications the movement had for reconstructing gender identities. Studies focusing on the status of women within the movement have been either totally ignored or at best carried on conventional lines. The critical evaluation of the literary sources of

the period is largely lacking.

Sankardeva has been subjected to criticism for not giving womenfolk an equal footing with men. Women were not fully accepted within the fold of his faith '*Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*', though they had been initiated. It is generally said that he has given the womenfolk a subordinate position and he has not done much to uplift their status. In this paper we will see the portrayal of gender imagery through the lens of one of the most popular media of the time - *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona*.

In the medieval period the popular media had an immensely important role in a region where majority of the people were illiterate. The people of the Brahmaputra valley consisted of a large number of tribal communities such as Ahom, Chutiya, Moran, Barahi, Miri, Mising, Karbi, Boro, Kachari, Garo etc. along with the caste Hindus viz. Kalita, Brahmana, Kayastha, Kaivarta etc. Among them the majority of the people were illiterate. There Sankardeva used various popular media to pass his messages to the people of the valley of which *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona* proved to be the most popular. It is true that these plays played a crucial role in improving the status of the masses but at the same time it also led to the establishment of a more rigid and stereotypical patriarchal socio-cultural ideal.

Sankardeva has six *Ankiya Nat* to his credit. They are "*Patni-Prasada*", "*Kalia-Damana*", "*Keli-Gopala*", "*Rukmini-Harana*", "*Prijat-Harana*" and "*Rama-Vijaya*". He has written one more play called "*Chihnatyatra*" which has been lost. Sometimes the term *Bhaona* is also used as a synonym for the term *Ankiya Nat* but there is a difference between the two terms. The plays are called *Ankiya Nat* and the staging of these plays are called *Bhaona*. Sankardeva took the stories of these plays from Bhagavata Purana with a little modification according to the needs of the then Assamese society. The first play *Patni-Prasada* is about the refusal of the Brahmanas to give food to the hungry cowherd friends of Lord Krishna and devotion of Brahmana wives towards him. The *Kalia-Damana* play is about Krishna's heroic defeat of the Kali Naga. The play *Keli-Gopala* is all about the sportive dance of Krishna and *gopis*². *Rukmini-Harana* play portrays how Rukmini was abducted by Krishna and was saved from a forceful marriage. The *Prijat-Harana* play is about the stealing of *Prijat* tree from Indra's garden by lord Krishna for his wife Satyabhama. In the *Rama-Vijaya* play Sankardeva showed the victory of Rama

in Sita's *swayambar* and how he defeated all the other powerful kings assembled there.

If we analyze the content of these plays the women were given a subordinate position compared to their male counterparts. The plays portrayed the role of a woman as a chaste, faithful but dependent wife. Krishna was given all the limelight but his female consort, Radha, was just given a secondary position. If we see the plays *Rukmini-Harana* and *Prijat-Harana* we can see that the female characters were shown as very weak and dependent on their husband. In the play *Rukmini Harana* the leading female character Rukmini was pining for her chosen husband Krishna when she was forced by her parents to get married to Shisupala.³ Later Krishna comes and saves her from this situation.⁴ Here we can see a patriarchal mindset where Sankardeva portrays even the leading female character as weak and dependent on male power. He introduces Rukmini as a traditional love lorn woman who sees her beloved as the lord and the master. She swoons, cries, blushes and displays all conventional womanly characteristics. Krishna's longing for Rukmini is stated but not as vividly described and stressed upon as Rukmini's pangs of desire for Krishna. This gave the society a message that females are subordinate to men and they would always be saved by their husbands. In another play called *Prijat-Harana*, Satyabhama and Sasi, wives of Krishna and Indra respectively, were depicted as jealous wives and they fought with each other using unpleasant words to get their husbands' approval.⁵ All the three women were shown as bickering for their husband's favour which gives the message that a woman's life is worthless without a man and his favour. Satyabhama's hatred for her co-wife Rukmini is an important aspect of this play as it shows that there was no bar to the number of wives a man may have. It pointed out to the fact that the practice of polygamy in the society was very much acceptable even to the 'reformative' Vaishnava movement.

Another important play which throws light on the gender imagery is the play *Keli-Gopala* which is about the sportive dance of Krishna and *gopis*. In this play it is shown that the *gopis* ran out of their home leaving behind all their works just to have a glance of Krishna.⁶ In another play *Patni-Prasada*, the wives of Brahmins ran out of their respective houses to see Krishna despite the attempts of the Brahmins to stop them.⁷ They were shown as neglecting their worldly affairs viz. house, children, family etc., just to worship Krishna and to fall at his feet. This was contradictory to the

depiction of the ideal woman as loyal, devoted and chaste. Even if we try to see this behavior of the *gopis* and the wives of the Brahmins as an expression of religious freedom enjoyed by the women, the same freedom isn't seen in Sankardeva's concept of Vaishnava bhakti. If we assume that Sankardeva tried to depict a positive aspect of gender by showing greater religious freedom to women who could leave all their worldly affairs and could concentrate on their spiritual development, it is contradictory to the real practice within the Vaishnava faith where in the initial phase, women were not even initiated. However, in its later phase though women were being initiated, the process of initiation was carried out by putting a curtain between the woman and the celibate who initiated her. Even the initiated women were not allowed to enter the main *namghar*⁸ within the *sattra* premises.⁹ Women thus had minimum religious and spiritual freedom.

The relationship between Krishna and his wives viz. Rukmini, Satyabhama etc. was not shown as a husband and wife relation rather they were shown as lord and devotee. The portrayal of Krishna as the master of the whole world could be a means to spread the Vaishnava bhakti among the masses but it also reflects the patriarchal mindset of Sankardeva and other Vaishnava saints. The plays portrayed Krishna as the Supreme lord and master performing various acts which are transcendent and beyond earthly norms. The devotee is more than often a female character who places her unfettered and unconditional devotion at the feet of Krishna, her lord and master. Many scholars argued that in his plays Sankardeva showed Krishna as the master of the world and did not recognize the female consort of Krishna because of the *Dasya* aspect of his bhakti which is different from the bhakti movement of Bengal or other parts of India. Here Krishna was considered as master and the devotee as a servant. But then the question arises as to why this form of bhakti was chosen. It somewhere points to the movement's conservative attitude towards women.

Coming to the technicalities of *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona*, women were not allowed to play any role in them. The roles of the women were played by men. Secondly, if we analyze the dialogues of the actors carefully, we can clearly see that the dialogues of women were very simple and not bold enough and this reflects the submissive nature of women in the society.

In one play, '*Parijat-Harana*', two leading women characters, Satyabhama and Sasi, exchange coarse and undignified language which reflects the low standard of women and their state of illiteracy.¹⁰ The dialogues of male characters were very strong and dominating which reflect their heroic and dominating nature.¹¹ It is also seen that in the music of these plays, *raginis* or 'female melodies' are absent. The roles assigned to female characters were often simplistic, submissive and secondary to their male counterparts.

Now coming to next aspect of our enquiry, we need to see the composition of the people within the fold of bhakti movement. In this period Assam was inhabited mainly by the caste Hindus and various tribal communities. Although the Hindu communities were there from the early period but after the emergence of bhakti movement the process of Hinduization started rapidly. The Vaishnava movement of Assam brought about diverse ethnic groups living in Brahmaputra valley viz. Chutiya, Moran, Ahom, Deori, Mishing and the caste Hindus including the Brahmins into its fold. Naturally, the tribes got lower rank within the fourfold Varna system of caste Hindus after converting to Hinduism, but Vaishnavism gave them the opportunity of upward social mobility. The social status of the backward section improved to a large extent except the womenfolk.

2. Conclusion

We all know that there is a relationship between the popular media and the society. The popular media generally reflects different aspects of society and sometimes it influences and controls the social life. As far as the *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhaona* in Assam are concerned they have played all these roles. By seeing the content of these plays one can clearly say that it was basically designed by the saint to shape or influence society and also to reflect various social aspects. Along with the other factors it tried to shape the gender imagery in the society. It tried to show how a woman should live her life. It somehow intended to control the lives of the women who were mostly illiterate by depicting the lives of Gods and Goddesses where the Goddesses were always given a subordinate position. This would have greatly influenced the worldview prevalent at the time allocating women an inferior position in the social hierarchy.

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Foot notes

1. *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* means devotion towards a single God being Krishna.
2. The *Gopis* are the cow-herd-girls.
3. B.K. Barua, *Ankiya Nat*, Guwahati, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1983, pp. 70-72
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88
5. *Ibid*, pp. 157-159
6. B.K. Barua, *Ankiya Nat*, pp. 103-104
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-175
8. *Namghar* or *Kirtanghar* is a congregational prayer hall. *Satra* is an institution which propagated Vaishnava movement far and wide along with other socio-cultural and religious functions.
9. These practices were in vogue only from the seventeenth onwards. In the early phase, when Sankardeva has written these plays, the women were not even allowed to enter into the *satra* premises and they were not permitted to be initiated into the fold.
10. B.K. Barua, *Ankiya Nat*, pp. 157-158
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12, 14, 46, 152, 179

