

## Nation-Building Project and Modern Assamese Theatre

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The nation-building process in Assam, a state located in the North-Eastern region of India has been a struggle for establishing the hegemony of the caste-Hindu, middle-class Assamese, and it engages in a type of politics that appeals to xenophobic tendencies and resists social integration of marginalised groups. The notion of an Assamese nation based on linguistic and cultural identity can be traced back to the nineteenth century colonial Assam. However, the idea got a new fillip with the onset of the Assam Movement (1979-1985). The Assam Movement was led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) to fight against illegal immigration of Bangladeshis. The caste-Hindu, middle-class Assamese-led civil society organisations like Asom Sahitya Sabha and AASU have attempted to give shape to an “imagined” Assamese nation by propagating linguistic and cultural homogeneity, and by taking recourse to a selective historiography. This paper attempts to explore how modern Assamese theatre has engaged with the nation-building project.

Though theatre through power of performance can become a site for resistance against the hegemonic discourses, theatre can also become a performance of power. This paper through an analysis of an Assamese play called, *Chinhajatra* (1999) will examine how the Assamese intelligentsia in the attempt to trace their lineage to an Indo-Aryan race and to establish their hegemony over the tribal people and minority groups has appropriated Sankardev, the sixteenth-century social and cultural icon of Assam within a Hindu, Brahmanical discourse, and how Assamese theatre, especially commercial touring repertory theatre, popularly called *bhramyaman* theatre has complemented the efforts of the intelligentsia by emerging as a suitable platform for dissemination of such hegemonic knowledge.

Assamese theatre from the 1960s has moved in two parallel directions i.e. theatre performed by amateur theatre groups and professional theatre of mobile theatre groups,

popularly known as *bhramyaman* theatre in Assam. It is *bhramyaman* theatre which has successfully caught the imagination of the theatre-going audience, whereas, amateur theatre has not been able to sustain and project itself as a parallel or alternative movement in Assam mainly due to financial constraints. Though *bhramyaman* theatre is primarily guided by commercial pursuits, and it intends to entertain audience through glamour artists and gimmick, it has also served its role as an ideological apparatus. *Bhramyaman* theatre's engagement with the idea of an Assamese national identity and its essentialization of "Assameseness" suggest its complicity in perpetuating the dominant discourse of the caste-Hindu Assamese middle-class.

*Chinhajatra*, performed by a *bhramyaman* theatre group, called Monalisha is based on the life of Sankardev (1449-1568), the sixteenth-century Bhakti saint, scholar, socio-religious reformer and more importantly, the social and cultural icon of Assam. The play traces almost the entire life of Sankardev from his birth in a *kayasth* family to the performance of *Chinhajatra*, his first dance drama. In a personal interview with the writer of this paper, the playwright has expressed that the significance of *Chinhajatra* lies in its appeal to the nationalistic sentiment of the Assamese people. From the late nineteenth century, efforts have been made to project Sankardev as Assam's cultural and spiritual icon, and Sankardev has been appropriated by the Assamese intelligentsia in particular ways so as to strengthen the Assamese nation-building project. Patgiri's play can be read as one such effort to project the idea of an Assamese nation through the appropriation of Sankardev within a Hindu Brahmanical discourse.

The first scene of *Chinhajatra* depicts the birth of Sankardev as an extraordinary event. Patgiri follows the footsteps of most of the biographers on Sankardev while projecting Sankardev as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and ascribing supernatural power to the saint-scholar. In the first scene of the play, it is shown how Sankardev is born on a stormy night. Incessant rain and frequent sounds of thunder create an atmosphere of terror. Suddenly, the cries of a new born baby are heard and an earthen lamp automatically gets lit on the stage. The sound of conch-shell and temple bell makes the entire atmosphere an auspicious one. When Sankardev's grandmother enters the stage, she witnesses an astonishing scene where the infant Sankardev is protected from rain by a giant snake. Patgiri during the interview recalls how the audience was moved by the first scene itself, and how many elderly audiences were seen folding their hands in veneration.

Sankardev led a reformist neo-Vaishnavite movement known as *Ekasaraniya Nama Dharma* and it began as an anti-Brahmanical crusade during the sixteenth-century (Deka 2005, 194). The movement saw the setting up of monasteries, popularly known as *sattras* across Assam and these monasteries became religio-cultural centres for conducting community prayers and for propagating religious discourses. The *sattras* also provided a platform for performance of indigenous art forms like *bargeet*, *ankia naat* and *shravana-kirtanas*. More importantly, the *sattras* evolved as centres of equality and syncretism as their sheer simplicity attracted people from all castes, religious and tribal groups (Misra 1999, 99). However, the first scene of *Chinhajatra* portrays the Vaishnava saint in a completely different light. The use of props like earthen lamp, conch shell and temple bell place Sankardev within a Hindu Brahmanical discourse, and this initial scene sets the tone for the entire play. Sankardev's Vaishnavism is against idol worship. However, in the play, Sankardev announces before his disciples that a temple of Vishnu is going to be built since an old idol of Vishnu has been found underneath the earth. Sankardev also invites the Brahmin *pandits* to take part in the ceremonial worship.

The play celebrates Sankardev as the torch bearer of the Assamese community for his selfless efforts to reform the Assamese society. The medieval Assamese society has been portrayed as one which is plagued by social and moral corruption. To suggest the pervasiveness of moral corruption in the society, the playwright shows in the tenth scene how a group of men and women are engaged in human sacrifice in the name of religion, and how these people indulge in all kinds of corrupt activities such as consumption of wine and sexual promiscuity. The portrayal of all the characters including women as half-naked, and the celebration of sexual pleasure make the entire scene very titillating. Sankardev is saddened by the state of affairs, and tries to regenerate the society through social, religious and cultural transformation. In the caste-driven, hierarchical society, only the upper-caste Hindus have access to the religious texts written in the Sanskrit language. Sankardev protests against this caste hegemony and says, "The sacred texts are for all ... everyone irrespective of his caste has the right to read and write the sacred texts since all human beings are creations of God only ... I want to create a classless and casteless society" (Scene XII). However, Sankardev is not portrayed as anti-Brahmin. He is only against those evils associated with Brahmanism that have adversely affected the Assamese Hindu society. In Scene XII, Sankardev tells his friend, Ramram, "I am not against Brahmanism. But my question is: why do some Hindus indulge in non-Hindu activities including human sacrifice

and sexual exploitation of women?” Interestingly, the scene which shows a group of people indulging in religious and moral corruption is set not within the mainstream society, but in an isolated forest-like place. It suggests that the evils are aberrations, not inherent in Brahmanism or Hinduism.

Sankardev is also projected as a torchbearer of Hinduism who successfully resisted Christian proselytisation among tribal people. This distorted reading of Sankardev’s practice is indeed problematic as *Ekasaraniya Nama Dharma* was an emblem of syncretism that had embraced even the tenets of Islam (Bhattacharjee 2016, 82). In *Chinhajatra*, Brahmaputra, the choric figure says, “With the aim to establish a new society, Sankardev converts Garo’s Govinda, Miri’s Paramananda ... Muslim’s Chandakha into Vaishnavism” (Scene XV). The celebration of Sankardev as someone who has the ability to unite all under a common identity can be read as an appeal for establishing a united Assam. However, this appeal in the contemporary context is not without its problematics. Protests have been heard from various quarters, especially the tribals and religious minorities that assimilation into the Assamese society and culture is more often than not a forceful one.

According to the playwright, *Chinhajatra* instils a sense of pride in the Assamese past among the common people. This attempt to instil a sense of pride in a glorious past is integral to the Assamese nation-building project, and it acts as an antidote against fears of minoritization among the Assamese. Though the Assam Movement against illegal immigration took place in the decade of the 1980s, the anxiety related to a loss of identity still lurks in the psyche of the common Assamese, and hence, attempts have been made time and time again to deal with that anxiety. Two key civil society and apparently non-political organizations i.e. Asom Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students Union (AASU) have played a significant role in mobilising Assamese national consciousness (Baruah 1999). The Asom Sahitya Sabha was formed in 1917 with the aim of all round development of Assamese literature, culture and the Assamese Nation in general. The Sabha adopted a policy of linguistic aggression. In *Chinhajatra*, Mahendra Kandali, the *guru* asks Sankardev and the other students to sharpen their skills in the mother tongue and asks them to write the sacred texts in the mother tongue only in order to enrich the Assamese language. By following the advice of the *guru*, Sankardev writes a number of sacred texts, devotional songs and plays in the vernacular in order to propagate Vaishnavism among the common people. Thus, the ideology of the Asom Sahitya Sabha gets reflected in the advocacy of

the Assamese language by Mahendra Kandali, and this is no coincidence since Patgiri, the playwright himself was actively associated with the Assam Movement and acted as the General Secretary of the Asom Sahitya Sabha for a brief period before relinquishing from the post in 2005.

The river Brahmaputra is also used as an important trope in the play. Brahmaputra is an integral part of the Assamese cultural imagination and hence, the image of the river has been very often used in Assamese literature to evoke emotional affinities with the Assamese homeland. Rivers have very often been appropriated as “symbols of national vitality” in the nation-building projects (Cusack 2007, 101). In *Chinhajatra*, Brahmaputra remains present throughout as a choric figure. The second scene in *Chinhajatra* is set in a serene, beautiful place on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. However, the playwright interestingly compares the place with Vrindavan. It implies the intention of the playwright to situate Sankardev within a pan-Indian Bhakti tradition. It also suggests the tendency of the caste-Hindu Assamese intelligentsia to trace their lineage to an Indo-Aryan race so as to assert their social and cultural superiority over the tribal communities and religious minorities.

Most of the caste-Hindu middle-class Assamese intellectuals have celebrated Sankardev as the fountainhead of Assam’s unique cultural, religious and literary traditions, but they have deliberately glossed over the fact that Sankardev actually wrote in Brajabuli, a language of the Mithila region of Bihar. Moreover, Sankardev used various dialects and local idioms to bring his ideas closer to the common people, and it was, actually, in sharp opposition to the Assamese intelligentsia’s propagation of a “standard” Assamese language (Sharma 2011, 172 – 176). The Assamese intelligentsia has recognised language as an important part in the process of “Assamese” identity formation. However, the Assamese middle class has never been able to resolve the contradiction between the polyethnic nature of the Assamese society and the rather obsessive quest for a unilingual identity (Misra 1999, 1265). Unlike Sankardev who tried to accommodate the ethnographic and linguistic diversity of Assam, the Assamese intelligentsia has very often uncritically projected “Assamese” as a primordial identity. Despite their eagerness to cast Sankardev as an important figure in the canon of Indic devotional religion, the Assamese intelligentsia has chosen to underplay his use of a transregional linguistic idiom. It is no surprise that all the dialogues in *Chinhajatra* are in the “standard” Assamese language, and a few are in the Sanskrit language.

Though the creation of many indigenous folk art forms of Assam is attributed to Sankardev, the playwright-director does not make extensive use of these forms in *Chinhajatra*. Rather, all the scenes in the play with the use of elaborate settings, sophisticated lighting and sound effects are woven into the fabric of a well-made play, a genre which is very popular among the audience of *bhramyaman* theatre. The *bhramyaman* theatre groups try to attract the audience through the innovative use of stage and advanced technologies. Hiring of Assamese film stars has only added to the glamour quotient of *bhramyaman* theatre in recent times. In *Chinhajatra*, a giant snake (*Kaal Naag*) is shown protecting the infant Sankardev from rain. In order to show Sankardev's valour, he is shown swimming on the flooded Brahmaputra in one scene, and in another scene, he is seen fighting with a bull. Dr. Patgiri told during the interview that the availability of two stages and advanced technology in *bhramyaman theatre* had helped him to project the larger-than-life story of Sankardev.

Unlike Sankardev's one-act dance dramas, known as *ankia naat*, *bhramyaman* theatre is known for commercialism and professionalism. *Ankia naat* is a community event in the sense that on most occasions, a few people with limited acting skills from the community itself perform, and there is a close proximity between the actors and the audience since these *naats* are usually performed in open spaces. On the other hand, the performance space of *bhramyaman* theatre is a closely regulated one. Though around 100 to 120 people are associated with one *bhramyaman* group, the producer of the group takes all the major decisions to safeguard his business interests. During a conversation, one of the erstwhile actors of *bhramyaman* theatre revealed that scope for artistic freedom is very restricted in *bhramyaman* theatre, and at best, the lead actors are allowed to do minor improvisation while delivering dialogues in the name of artistic freedom. Though Dr. Patgiri mentioned during our conversation that the producer of the theatre group did not interfere with his job as a writer and director, he also admitted that no creative feedback from the artists was taken at any stage.

Due to the prevailing star system in *bhramyaman* theatre, there are huge differences between the lead actors and the supporting actors and other artists in terms of salary and other privileges. Baharul Islam, the well-known theatre personality from Assam has told in an interview that people working as support staff in *bhramyaman* theatre groups should be treated as artists rather than cheap labours. Similar stratification can also be seen in the auditorium. In

the makeshift auditorium of *bhramyaman* theatre, around 2000 people can sit together and enjoy a play. The tickets for the first few rows are sold at a higher rate, and the rate goes down along with the increasing distance between the stages and the seat. The gallery audience who sits at the back pays the lowest price for the ticket and there is a distance of around 50 feet between the stages and the gallery audience. Sankardev through his writings and cultural institutions tried to establish an egalitarian society, but that free, democratic spirit gets undermined in the performance space of *bhramyaman theatre*. The highly regimented performance space of *bhramyaman* theatre is symptomatic of the Assamese nation itself which has been organized along class, caste and religious lines. These divisions have become more visible due to the recurring episodes of conflict and violence which started with the Assam Movement.

In his book, *A History of Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the People* (2012), Dr. Arjun Ghosh provides interesting insights into the performance practices followed by Jana Natya Manch, the Delhi-based political theatre group such as assigning importance to the group rather than individuals, scripting as a group activity, no repeating of heroes in a play and so on. On the other hand, *bhramyaman* theatre is hierarchy-ridden, and it runs like a profit-making capitalist enterprise. It certainly carries some of the key characteristics of “the culture industry”. Adorno and Max Horkheimer use the term “culture industry” to refer to the commodification of cultural forms. According to the two critical theorists, due to monopoly capitalism, culture loses its autonomous identity and gets transformed into an ideological medium of domination. The culture industry standardises the entire process of production and reception of popular cultural forms, and it thus prevents the audience from being critically engaged with relevant social and political issues. *Bhramyaman* theatre has hardly used the performance space as a space for critical debates, and with rare exceptions, it has deviated from the “standard” performance practices. The appropriation of Sankardev within a Hindu-Brahmanical discourse in *Chinhajatra* shows how *bhramyaman* theatre in its attempt to propagate a nationalistic ideology gets reduced to a site for exercise of power.

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