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The Cultural and Communicative Dimensions of Ankiya Nat and Bhaona: A Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural and communicative dimensions of Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat and Bhaona, traditional Assamese theatrical forms. It moves beyond a purely religious analysis to explore the communication strategies embedded within these performances. Drawing upon the ancient Indian dramatic treatise, *Natyashastra*, particularly the concept of *Sadharanikaran* (shared understanding), the study analyzes how Sankaradeva effectively conveyed his messages to diverse audiences. It integrates modern communication theories, such as the Shannon-Weaver model and Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, to understand how Ankiya Nat functions as a form of cultural communication. The paper investigates the evolution of these dramatic forms, their fusion of folk traditions, and the use of theatrical elements like music, dance, costumes, and stagecraft. Furthermore, it analyzes the cultural characteristics of Ankiya Nat, highlighting its role in shaping Vaishnavite society in Assam. By applying the "seven C's" of communication and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study demonstrates how Ankiya Nat effectively engages audiences through both logical and emotional appeals, making it a powerful tool for cultural and spiritual communication.

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Introduction

Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat is a significant literary form that reflects the cultural and social context of its time. The dramatic performances were designed to effectively convey messages to a specific audience and now it spreads to mass audience. It is important to recognize that Sankaradeva drew inspiration from various literary and cultural sources in creating his works. While Ankiya Nat is often studied from a religious perspective; its communication elements remain largely unexplored. A deeper analysis of the play's communication strategies could offer valuable insights into its impact and effectiveness. So, these aspects will be explored in more detail in the following discussion.

Turning to another aspect, we can observe that the Indian folk drama tradition, dating back to ancient times, was primarily a chanting tradition, often referred to as the Narrative Tradition or Kathakata. The history of Indian drama has evolved over time, and a significant milestone in the Assamese context is the organized approach pioneered by Sankaradeva and his Ankiya Nat. Before Sankaradeva, the prevalent folk traditions of Assam, such as Ojapali, Deudhoni, puppetry, and Dhulia,

lacked a structured format. Sankaradeva's work can be seen as a crucial link in this evolutionary process, transforming these disparate traditions into a more organized and sophisticated dramatic form.

In essence, Sankaradeva's dramas were influenced by his extensive travels across India. He drew inspiration from the local folk traditions he witnessed, blending them with his own spiritual experiences to create a unique and innovative dramatic form. This fusion of traditional and personal elements resulted in a new and refined artistic expression. It is undoubtedly true that Sankaradeva's writings and dramatic performances, originating in Assam, served as a powerful tool to spread the message of Bhakti and establish the Vaishnavite movement. During a time of significant social upheaval and religious turmoil, Sankaradeva initiated the Chihnayatra, a precursor to the Ankiya Nat. This early form of theater likely involved pantomime and scenic elements to convey narratives.

Sankaradeva's innovative use of painted scenery in the 15th century marked a significant step in the evolution of Assamese theater. The subsequent development of the Ankiya

Nat, with its integration of music, dance, and dialogue, reflects the rich dramatic heritage of India. This tradition continues to hold significance in the context of the evolving Indian Knowledge System.

Besides, the shadow as well as gist of Natyashastra is a very important aspect in the Indian theatre as well as the entire dramaturgy. The Bhaona culture promoted by Sankaradeva is also not an exception in such context. Even the entire set of drama written by Sankaradeva, influence of Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy is perceptible to a great extent. Starting from the style i.e Nat or Natakas, Sutradhara, comedy role, use of Sanskrit Shloka etc. are the part of technicalities. Ankiya Nat follows Sanskrit dramatic composition to a certain extent. Although Purbaranga was mentioned originally in the Natyashastra, the Purbaranga in Bhaona Tradition and Ankiya Nat is the organized derivatives of the pre play of Sanskrit Drama with certain exception. It is the Nandi, Prarocana and Prastavana like the Sanskrit Plays. The derived form of language is another area of linguistic debate too. But apart from that we relook the entire things in the light of communication theories.

A key challenge in understanding the communication perspective of Sankaradeva's dramas (Ankiya Nat) and its performance, which is popular as Bhaona, lies in the concept of Sadharanikaran. Derived from the Sanskrit word Sadharan, this term has been variously translated as "generalized presentation," "simplification," and "universalization." At its core, Sadharanikaran involves creating a shared understanding, both within oneself (intrapersonal) and with others (interpersonal). This concept is central to dramatic performance. Actors must connect with the audience on a shared level to effectively convey meaning. This shared understanding, facilitated by Sadharanikaran, is rooted in the ancient Indian treatise, the Natyashastra. Bharat Muni, the author of the Natyashastra, codified the principles of human expression, including dance and drama, which emerge from this fundamental human capacity for shared communication. This intersection of Sadharanikaran and dramatic performance provides a fruitful avenue for further research.

Beyond the Indian tradition of communication, as outlined in the Natyashastra of Bharat Muni, numerous theories have emerged. One prominent example is the Shannon-Weaver model of communication, proposed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1948. This model simplifies the communication process into a linear sequence: a sender encodes a message and transmits it through a channel to a receiver, who decodes the message. Noise can interfere with this process. When analyzing Sankaradeva's dramas through the lens of contemporary communication theory, we can observe how he selected content and employed traditional communication techniques, including Sadharanikaran, to encode and convey his message to the audience.

Sankaradeva carefully considered his target audience, employing various rhetorical techniques to effectively communicate his message. The Indian tradition of storytelling, or Kathakata, is rich in cultural elements, as exemplified by folk traditions like Ojapali and puppetry. Sankaradeva's storytelling methods were both innovative and rooted in this rich tradition. His early work, the Chihnayatra, was a performance-based drama that incorporated music and visual elements. While this early form was somewhat limited, it laid the foundation for the more sophisticated Bhaona tradition, which developed over time and incorporated a wider range of dramatic elements.

As discussed previously, the Ojapali tradition is closely related to Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat and Bhaona performances. The term Bhaona refers to the enactment of a character's role. To effectively connect with his audience, Sankaradeva first analyzed their needs and preferences. In line with the Sadharanikaran model, his use of the Brajawali language [still a matter of debate persisted due to the use of the nomenclature i.e Brajawali to denote a derived language] was a strategic choice to reach the common people. While his work was influenced by Sanskrit drama, Sankaradeva simplified his approach through innovative techniques. These included the use of the easily understandable derived language, musical instruments, expressive gestures, masks, costumes and stagecraft. These elements enhanced the overall performance and facilitated effective communication with the audience.

We will now examine the seven C's of effective communication: clarity, credibility, content, context, continuity, capability, and channels. We will assess the extent to which these elements are present in Ankiya Nat performances. Ankiya Nat is a highly selective form of theater, with only six plays written by Sankaradeva to promote the Bhakti movement. The content of these plays is carefully chosen to resonate with the audience's interests and experiences, drawing on their everyday lives, social beliefs and mythological knowledge, and their desire for entertainment and emotional engagement.

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, a 20th-century theory rooted in ancient storytelling traditions, provides a framework for understanding how narratives can effectively communicate meaning. Storytelling, especially when presented in a dramatic format, can be more impactful than simple factual presentations. Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat effectively leverages this power of storytelling.

The plays are structured with a logical flow, from the Sutradhara to the main characters, employing both verbal and nonverbal elements. This clear and engaging narrative style keeps the audience's attention, a key aspect of effective communication. The style of performance is constantly evolving, with new elements being introduced to appeal to modern audiences. As a result, Sankaradeva's dramas continue to gain popularity today. While the core content remains the same, the demands of the audience have shifted over time. Despite these challenges, the Bhaona culture, particularly the performance of Ankiya Nat, remains a powerful and effective means of cultural and spiritual as well as religious communication.

While going through the communication elements of the Ankiya Nat, a flashback on the Mass Communication Research can be cited from the book, *The Media in your life – An Introduction to Mass Communication* by Zeam Folkerts and Stephen Lacy. Defining the mass communication research, the book indicates it as a systematic study of media content which forces to shape its creation. It enters in to the how and why for people to use media and its impact on individuals and society¹. The Ankiya Nat and Bhaona culture fall under the category of traditional media and entirely it is a form of cultural communication. This study explores the social and behavioral aspects of human interaction within society, aligning with a social science approach. Additionally, it examines the communication elements, content, and encoding techniques used in traditional media in a nutshell. The study of Ankiya Nat and Bhaona is fundamentally a study of human communication. It begins with interpersonal communication, as the creator, Sankaradeva, must have had

an innate understanding of how to connect with his audience. As a playwright, he encoded the themes of his plays using literary devices. While literary analysis focuses on the written text, a communication analysis considers the broader performance aspects, including verbal and nonverbal elements. The core elements of communication include the sender, the encoded message, the medium, the channel, the receiver, feedback, context, and noise. Sankaradeva innovatively employed these elements to create engaging and entertaining performances.

By understanding and effectively utilizing these communication principles, he ensured that his message was effectively conveyed to the audience. Sankaradeva first made the language of the drama to a smoother way. Then his idea was concentrated to the part of an environment creation. Starting from the Purbaranga (Prelims) to musical troupe, a clear cut method under the purview of Natyashastra principle was adopted. Apart from the literary resources of a drama, he added up the stage setting in convergence with the traditions. Under this stage setting, the Agnigarh is a religious mean cum reflection of nine devotions and the source of light. Entry of the actors in the corridor shaped stage at the Namghar gets a directly reachable to audience and also gives suitable interaction due to the setup of the stage. This unique form is predominately used by the Assamese Society to tell the story encoded. A drama is a step wise encoding of message to be delivered. As literature, the context content and its literary presentation is the main part. However, as a performing art with gestures, dialogue throwing, musical additives, costume, make up, mask or anything other relevant tools of performance are very important to make successful the communication. This entire set is again dependent on the capability of role play of the actors. This capability is also a course of action conceived by a person against the character he plays for. It has also some encoding paradigm. Sankaradeva, while not adhering to the traditional Sanskrit dramatic format, employed auspicious invocations to the deities Hari and Rama to spiritually prepare the audience. This practice served as a preliminary ritual i.e. Gayan Bayan or Purbaranga, which aimed to attract and engage the audience. Other pre-performance rituals, such as the Dhemali, further heightened anticipation.

Sankaradeva's innovative use of stage elements like the Agnigarh (fire stand), Aariya (lightener), and Mohota (lightener), first seen in the Chihnayatra, became integral to the Bhaona tradition. These elements, along with costumes, makeup, masks, and screens, enhanced the overall performance and contributed to the spiritual and cultural significance of the Bhaona.

Cultural Characteristics of Ankiya Nat

According to Bharat Muni, the act of Abhinaya is an act of carrying in forward direction (Natyashastra, chapter 8) which means the communication flow also. In another sense, it is a type of conveyance. In such conveyance, the act of encoding i.e. message is required. Encoding may be a symbol, style of presentation, language, tools, climax creation etc. Assemblage, speech, body spirit etc are environmental components in the process of encoding which is extraordinary in case of performance or presentation. In the process of encoding which later decodes to the recipient, the recipient perspective is a vital point. In case of an Ankiya Nat, we should go through the play in two type's i.e. Reading of a play and Performance of a play

A reader may have previous idea to recognize the relationship between the script and the performance. In an article by Tanaya Mathur in the book namely, Contemporary Indian Drama explains this vital point for generic use in case of interpretation of a play. The synthesis of something after getting a point is the crucial part of reading. The word culture is very much entangled with this synthesis process. Due to this, culture in the communication point of view has tremendous importance under which conveyance model can be postulated.

In the general sense, the word; culture represents the customs, social behavior, ideas with respect to a group of people or a particular person. Art and other humanly generated thoughts; intellectual enlightening is also a part of culture. The word Culture is used both for arts and scientific approaches. In the scientific approach, it denotes the maintenance of condition suitably for growth. This scientific approach tendered a very specific point of correlation in terms of reformation. It implies the suitable environment managed for a cause. If this thought is applied in case of a cultural product, we may get a roadmap of communication and the motto of culture. Culture is the suitable presentation. If this context is applied to Ankiya Nat, we may define that Sankaradeva created a suitable condition or presentation which has the fruitfulness towards conveyance of the message. The suitable condition may be medium also. Simply we can call it as a cultural medium.

Culture and Communication in Reference to Ankiya Nat

The climax of a drama is the communication of taste; under this purview we may see the abstract of communication element transverse in a cultural item. In case of Ankiya Nat, we may see the facts on two logical points

1. Viewer with a religious background
2. A common viewer having no special attachment to the culture.

The viewer with a religious background will have a persuasion with respect to their religion and belief. In case of another, the persuasion level will be basically logical. Apart from normal amusement, this argumentation is being provided. It is interestingly related with stimuli. As for example, the Assamese people now have an attachment with the Bhaona culture, in such case, the stimuli to get attached with a drama will be usually more. But when Sankaradeva started this theatrical form at his time, viewers had less particularity in attachment with the culture; however religious believes were entangled at that time also.

For a viewer who is not familiar with Bhaona culture will get amusement if the cultural medium carries some inputs to convey something new in flavor. It has been noticed that Ankiya Nat during performance convey to the fullest even though a viewer can not able to access the verbal communication. This is why Sankaradeva kept distinctively some elements like prelims, special kinds of gesture, use of mask, costume, makeup, high intensity light, provisions like Agnigarh (fire stand), Ariya, Mohota etc. This distinction can create good stimuli to stay tuned.

In relation to all this fact, a persuasion model namely Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory was studied. This theory was developed in the year 1970 by a social neuroscientist John Cacioppo and a psychology expert Richard Petty²; it explained the human process of stimuli. It dealt with motivation and ability. The model is basically based on Neuro stimuli, but it also has relevance with the social stimuli. They described about two paths: Central Path

and Peripheral Path. Central path basically covers logical thinking and the peripheral path covers aspirational or desired thinking. It implies when we are interested to something that is desired, it would have a fast stimuli. It deals also with genuine interest of the message receiver. If a message receiver has genuine interest, then the stimuli will be fast forward.

Cultural Communication dynamics and Ankiya Nat

With the above description of the theory, Cultural communication dynamics can be related. There will have -

1. Stimulating capacity of the cultural elements lies in the medium or channel
2. Viewer's perspectives, their persuasion factor towards reaching the message of the medium.

The stimulating capacity of the cultural elements in the Ankiya Nat is quite high. It depends on the framework of art. Cultural characteristics are also measurable from the view of aesthetics. An art carries much insight on the parlance of aesthetics. Dr Kapila Vatsyayan refers this point in the light of Bharata's concept. According to her statement Bharata conceived the theatrical spectacle as a total amalgam of all media and genres ranging from the spoken and to sound, music, vocal and instrumental, gestures, mime, decor and costumes and finally the inner state of being. He recognized the two levels of performance in the concept of naturalistic (Loka- real) and stylised convention (natya). Here the Ankiya Nat is a stylised convention. This style has the cultural characteristics as well as communication characteristics. In Ankiya Nat, after the Gayan-Bayan (Musical troupe) the drama style proceeds with the Prabesh nach (entry with dance steps) of Sutradhara. Sutradhara announces lyrically the sequence of the drama. He further announces the names of the approaching personages. The characters enter in the stage through Prabesh Nach. In this dance steps, the feelings and nature of the characters are reflected. It is also noteworthy that the present day Bhaona (excluding the drama by Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva), dance steps during entry to the stage become less. Moreover, in many cases the entry of the characters becomes very modernized by portraying the both heroic nature and demon character in different ways. It is the modification made after Sankaradeva which was originally may not exist. But basically in Ankiya Nat, the dance steps are the most aesthetic one. Drama runs with these presentational elements. Probably this dance drama style is a representation of the original Natyashastra as well as the Sanskrit drama. The shadow of Ojapali and other local traditions are also represented here in some cases. However, the dance steps observed in the present performance of Ankiya Nat are very innovative and eye catchy.

As a part of Mangalacharan stated in the Natyashastra, Ankiya Nat follows only the Gayana Bayana chapter which has a special component i.e; Jura or Ganika followed up with the movement of the musician troupe, dhemali, gesture etc. One of other characteristics feature is the Aar Kapur (Screen) especially to cover up the protagonist before entry to the stage. The characters enter with the music harmonized by the Gayan Bayan and director sit aside of the stage (this direction troupe [Duhar] usually take the position near to the main post of the Namghar, the religious institute where Bhaona staged. If the drama held somewhere in other location instead of Namghar, then a Thapana (an arrangement in the name of God, but not a statue, It is a symbol of holiness and spirituality) is temporarily installed in the place where the Bhaona is to be performed. It is like the preparation of a

temporary stage. The stage structure of Ankiya Nat and Bhaona is not like the western style. In some places, this western staging style has started, however it is still a few. Bhaona is basically performed at the Namghar by following the religious customs.

There are various lyrical parts along with significance of Tal-Maan- Loi (Rhythmic characteristics of music associated with Ankiya Nat and other Bhaona drama). For example in the song Jashowa Awe akuli shukefukare dukhini is played in Porital (A rhythm played with the Khol, the Assamese instrument used in Bhaona). Some dance steps play with Ektal also. Even there has some distinctive feature of act of the character like Krishna, Narad etc. The entry of these characters are very identical in comparison to some other characters.

There has also a distinctive feature to enact the war scene. Specific musical part is the characteristics feature of this war scene. The war scenes are very attractive which provides amusement to the audience. Victorious music rhythm in Khol like Rit Dhei Taak dhei dhei takhit tau is used which is very exciting kind of music. Weapons used by different characters of the Bhaona tradition are very attractive. Suppose Krishna or Bishnu character has weapons like Shankha, Chakra, Gada and Padma. Other examples are like Baloram held a Nangal (Plough), Parashuram held an axe, Rama and Lakshmana held Bow and Arrow etc. These are some specifications which have cultural value. This cultural value is enhanced through many songs available with the statement of these weapons hold by the characters.

In the modern Bhaona, some other distinctive features are found like, the character Shiva wear a costume similar to tiger skin, Ravana wear 10 faced mask, Brahma wear four faced mask. These kinds of feature are shown also in popular medium like mega serial Mahabharata, Ramayana, Sri Krishna etc broadcasted many years ago in Doordarshan.

In communication, framing is an interesting pattern. This frame is the way to organize social meaning. In case of Ankiya Nat, the cultural elements and its framing give raise a social meaning. This social meaning binds the Vaishnavite society of Assam. It is the most important aspect also.

The cultural communication elements of Ankiya Nat and Bhaona culture open a true sense of flexibility to equity of a society. The message and styles in it are diffusible to both literate and illiterate audience. There may have difference of persuasion to a literate or an illiterate but this does not signify any social imbalance.

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