

ATYANIRANJANA MAHA
ANIRANJANA MAHA

Ankiya Nat and Bhawana The Ancient Assamese Drama Tradition and Contribution of Sankaradeva

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Shri Sankaradeva, one of the greatest *vaiṣṇava* saints of neo-Vaiṣṇavism, played a significant role in ushering in a socio-cultural and religious movement in northeast India. In fact, Shri Sankaradeva is a celebrated name in this great religious movement of the late medieval India. Shri Sankaradeva was deeply learned and scholarly and his original works and translations are considered as the classics of Assamese language and literature. Like Kabir and Ramananda in northern India, Sri Chaitanya in Bengal, Namdeva in Maharashtra, Shri Sankaradeva propounded the philosophy and faith of neo-Vaiṣṇavism and, through his unique teachings, propagated it among the masses in Assam and northeastern region. In an age of social and political disintegration, Shri Sankaradeva became a beacon-light of religious reform and social regeneration and a cementing force of unity and integration.

...Sankaradeva did not confine himself only to preaching the Bhakti cult and upholding the ethical virtues but established at the same time a new social order in Assam by removing superstitions, corruption, ignorance, untouchability, inequalities between man and man, and other social evils. Not merely this, he gave the regenerated Assamese people literature, drama, poetry, songs, dance and music, which have attained the status of a distinct school, and entwined the community with unity and oneness (Barua 1960).

Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, as interpreted by Shri Sankaradeva, forms the background of his religious plays (*Bhawana*) and the other performing arts associated with propagation of neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. It is, therefore, necessary to have some understanding of the philosophy of the neo-Vaiṣṇavism as propagated and popularized by Shri Sankaradeva and Shri Madhavadeva, his great disciple, in

order to be able to appreciate his religious dramas (Bhawanas) or his religious poetry.

The religion of Vaiṣṇavism is based on the philosophy of Vedānta. The Upanisads, the *Bhagavad-gīta* and the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa Vyāsa constitute the three *prasthānas* forming the core of the Vedānta. Philosophers differed in their interpretation of these texts and thus arose the different schools of Vedānta. It was Sankarācārya who, by his rare genius, brought Vedānta to its present eminence. According to Sankara, the only reality is Brahman, which exists in itself and by itself as formless and contentless. The phenomenal world is unreal and is the result of Maya or Avidya. Maya is neither real nor unreal. Individual self or Atman is not different from Brahman. Isvara is only the illusory highest. When knowledge of the Brahman flashes in the mind of the individual, illusion disappears and the Atman realizes that he is Brahman and becomes *jīvanamukta*. When the body perishes, the Atman is completely merged in Brahman, and this is what is called *mukti* or liberation (Neog 1972; 186).

Despite the change of outlook, shifting of ideals and birth of new literary forms, the classics of neo-Vaiṣṇavite literature have come to stay with us as a standard and measure of great poetry in Assamese language. Shri Sankardeva's *Ankia Nats* (religious play) are presented in *satras* (Vaiṣṇava monasteries) and *namghars* (prayer hall) on various occasions. His *bargits*—spiritual songs—are sung and his other poetical works or *Kavyas* are read with enthusiasm. *Ankia Nats* and *bhawana* are in a true sense, a part of the national, cultural and spiritual heritage of Assam and the Indian people.

The genius of Shri Sankardeva finds the most natural expression in the sphere of drama. A much travelled man, he must have been familiar with the forms of dramatic presentations like the *Rāmlīlā*, *Rāsalīlā*, *Yātra*, *Kathaka*, *Yakshgāna*, *Bhāgaratam* and *Bhawai*, then popular in other parts of India. On the other hand, there were other typical dramatic forms of Assam such as *deodhani*, and *oja-pali* performances. Among these performing arts, *oja-pali* was extremely popular and it continues to be very popular till today in rural Assam. The *oja-pali* usually consists of four to five singers and is divided into two groups, each singing in chorus. The leader of the group is called *oja* and his companions are called *palis*. One of the *pali* is called *Dianapali*, the right hand companion. The leader extemporizes the story in a narrative form and recites the refrain, and the *palis* repeat the refrain by playing on cymbals and keeping in tune with movements of their feet. In interpreting the verse-narratives, the *oja* uses dramatic expressions, and movements. Occasionally, in the

middle of the performance, the *oja* pauses and converses with the *dainapali* by way of expounding the story in order to give the entertainment the appearance of a dramatic dialogue. Many of Shri Sankardeva's Kavyas were used in this pre-Vaiṣṇavite medium of dance recitals. It was Shri Sankardeva who realized that the main appeal of Kavya-s was oracular rather than visual. He transformed and elevated his poetry into a dramatic form built on the classical concept of the drama. His knowledge of Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy has also left a tremendous impact on this new genre of Assamese literature.

Thus, Shri Sankardeva organized his dramatic performance styled as *cihno-yatra* which literally stands for a 'pageant in painted scenes'. From the detailed descriptions available in the biographies, it appears that *cihna-yatra* was probably a pantomic show with a scenic background to emphasize the effects. The use of painted scenery as early as in the fifteenth century is of significance for it serves as a signpost for the question as to what extent drama had, till then, developed. This pageant show was later developed into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue style as *Ankia Nat*. Thus, a slender stream developed into a broad river; and Sankardeva, the Vaiṣṇavism saint of Assam, ushered in a turning point in the history of Assamese drama and stage.

Though this new genre is popularly known as *Ankia Nat*, it bears no resemblance to the *Ankia* type of *Rūpakas* of Sanskrit drama. *Ankiya Nat* is a generic term in Assamese language, and it means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the themes of *Vaiṣṇavism* faith. It should be borne in mind that Sankardeva himself called these dramatic compositions *nat* and *naṭaka* after the Sanskrit terminology. The other titles for this type of play as used by Vaiṣṇava poets are *yātra*, *nrita* and *anka*. In technique, these *Ankia Nats* follow, to a certain extent, the texts on Sanskrit dramatic theory, particularly in the use of Sanskrit verses and *nandi* introduction, along with the role of *sūtradhāra* and performance of the preliminaries (*purbaranga*). Unlike in Sanskrit plays, the *sūtradhāra* is an integral part of an *Ankia Nat*. While in Sanskrit dramas, the *sūtradhāra* disappears altogether after the invocation, but in the Assamese plays, he remains all along on the stage. Further, the *sūtradhāra* in an *Ankiya* drama combines the functions of the producer and then a commentator constantly as the plot unfolds. He dances with the orchestra, opens the play by reciting the *nandi* verse, introduces the characters, gives them directions, announces their exit and entrance on the stage, fills

up existing lacunae in the action of play by song, dance and speech, delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot.

Further, the *Ankiya* plays are not divided into different scenes and acts. As the events unfold, the change of scene is either announced by the *sūtradhāra* in his dialogue or by orchestral singing. The *Ankiya Nats* needed the services of the *sūtradhāra* to perform all these roles in order to heighten the effect of the *Bhawana* performance as the audience consisted mainly of unlettered villagers who, at very stage of the progress of the play, required explanations. The role of the *sūtradhāra* is, therefore, extremely important in an Assamese *Bhawana*, and even today, he is necessarily seen as a man of great talents. The *sūtradhāra* is an actor, a trained musician, and an accomplished dancer. Whenever possible, the most artistic-minded man of the village is chosen as the *sūtradhāra* to guide and conduct a play. A *sūtradhāra* is trained from his childhood in music, dancing and dramatic technique.

The songs and verses of the Sankardeva's plays have certain special characteristics, and these are called *ankargit* and *bhatima*. In some plays, *bargits* are also included. Each *ankiyagit* or dramatic song contains a *dhuwa* or refrain, as it bears a particular *raga* or melody. It also has *tala* or 'time measure' and *mana* or 'rhythm'. The melodies used in the plays consist of: Ahira, Asowari, Belowar, Bhupali, Dhansiri Gauri, Gandhara, Deva Gandhara, Kan, Kalyana, Kanada, Kamada, Kedāra, Lalitā, Mallāra, Maura or Mahura-dhanasiri, Nāta, Nat-Mallada, Puravi, Rāmagiri, Syāmā, Syāmagada, Sri Sri Gauri, Sri Gandhara, Sindhura, Suhai, Tuda, Tuda Bhathiyali, Tuda-Vasanta, Varari and Vasanta. The *bhatimas* of the plays serve mainly as epilogues and prologues.

Like in the Sanskrit drama, most of the *Ankiya* plays open with preliminaries prescribed in the orthodox Nāṭyaśāstra, namely, *nandi*, *prarocana* and *prastāvana*. Usually, two *nandis* with eight or twelve verses or *caraṇa* are encountered in earlier Assamese plays. But, some of the later plays have totally discarded the *nandi* verse in Sanskrit and in its place introduced a benedictory poem in Assamese. In Sanskrit drama, the reciter of *nandi* cannot be distinctly identified for the general stage direction. The expression *nandyānte sūtradhāra* in it places the *sūtradhāra* after the *nandi*, and it implies that the *nandi* was not recited by the *sūtradhāra*. But in the *Ankiya Nats*, the *nandi* recital is a specific function of the *sūtradhāra*.

The *nandi* being over, the *sūtradhāra* announces the subject matter of the play in a Sanskrit verse. This is invariably accompanied by a long poem in Assamese, called *bhatima*. Then follows the *prastāvana*. The *sūtradhāra* hears a celestial sound. On this point, a discussion arises, and as it progresses, the *sūtradhāra* announces the names of the approaching personages. At the end of this discussion, the companion (*sangi*) retires from the stage. Apart from the *sūtradhāra*, there appear two other additional characters in an Assamese play, namely the *duta* and *bahuwa*. They are, however, outside the category of dramatic personnel and are introduced in actual performances of the play to serve as a herald and provide comic relief. The *duta* and *bahuwa* appear on the stage to explain the reasons for eventual interruptions in the progress of the play. They also announce the change of scene and the entrance of new characters on the stage. The *bahuwa* has other duties too; besides filling up all the gaps in the narration, he is to relieve the monotony and amuse the audience as best as he can by his skits and jokes which he himself invents, of course, in rigid conformity and traditional practices. He is however, never allowed to interfere with the organic part of the play.

The subject matter of the *Ankiya* plays is mostly drawn from the *Purāṇas*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* also provided material for one of Sankardeva's drama namely, '*Rāma-Vijaya*'. Although the themes of the *Ankiya* plays are borrowed from the *Purāṇas* and the epics, and no change was admitted in developing the major incidents and in delineating the principal characters, yet the authors had a free hand in minor details. The playwright was very considerate in his selection of the materials, the incidents, and in the manner of presenting them to create the desired effect on his audience. Besides, the play being a short performance (like a one-act play), he had to concentrate his entire attention upon the most important situations, and display them to the best advantage. In a small compass, he had little opportunity to develop situations or depict characters on many aspects. Yet, he was well aware that without appropriate characterization—which is the essential feature of a drama—the mere incidents and narrations would not make an impact. There were limitations no doubt, but the dramatist endeavoured to make the best use of all of them to be able to succeed. Thus, brevity became the main feature of his play, and with a few master strokes he created his characters, and flashed them before the audience like figures on the screen.

The *Ankiya Nats* were written to further the cause of Vaiṣṇavism and they, therefore, mainly aimed at creating devotional sentiments in the hearts of the audience. A committed effort is made in them to arouse a sense of devotion not only by narration and characterization but also through songs, dance and dialogues. Keeping this ideal in view, the dramatists employed in their plays those sentiments which have direct bearings in eliciting devotion. The dominant sentiments of Sankardeva's plays are love, heroics and filial values. There is however, an undercurrent of minor sentiments too in them, which are skillfully displayed to produce the single result, namely devotion.

The prose and literary style of Shri Sankardeva's plays and of those of the succeeding *Vaiṣṇava* dramatists like Madhabadeva and Gopal Deva is an artificial direction; it is mixed with Maithili. It is difficult to guess why Sankardeva should have chosen this mixed language as a medium for his plays. He was very well versed in Sanskrit and wrote books in that language and had, no doubt, previously come across the classical Sanskrit plays. He wrote his plays in a mixed language. His sudden departure into this mixed language is almost an enigma. Is it because he thought it was more easily understood than Sanskrit? Assamese would have served his purpose better. Or was it because it had in it both the elements of dignity and general intelligibility? Here also, he was influenced by the classical tradition. In Sanskrit plays, it was customary for the chief actors to speak in Sanskrit, while the minor and female characters spoke in Prakrit. Sankardeva carried out a great innovation. He followed the middle course, rendering the entire plays in a mixed language—Maithili-mixed Assamese—whereby the dignity of his characters was eminently preserved.

During the medieval times, a common language was formed at Mithila which grew up as a strong centre of the neo-Vaiṣṇavism. Maithili, the language of Mithila, soon became the language of a definite literature. Through his emotional and lyrical songs, Vidyapati became the foremost of the *Vaiṣṇava* poets, and a true exponent of the cult. He made the Maithili language an eminently suitable and exclusive vehicle of expression for the *Vaiṣṇava* poets of his time. Soon after, a host of eminent poets, scholars and preachers from different parts of India, thronged round him. The process led to the growth of a new dialect, namely the *Brajabuli*, the speech of *Vraja*, commonly used in the writings of the *Vaiṣṇava* poets of Assam and Bengal. Sankardeva probably witnessed some of the plays of the Maithili poets and was influenced by them. For instance, he might

have watched the *Parijat Harana* play by Umapati, when he was in Bihar in the heydays of Vidyapati's fame. He imbibed the experience and came up with his own plays, which made a great impact. The *Ankia Nats* were composed for common people in a simple language which is a mixture of Maithili and Assamese, interspersed with Sanskrit (Vatsyayana 1976: 121-4; Deshpande 1973).

The plays of Sankardeva are interspersed with beautiful Sanskrit verses composed in diverse metres. Each *śloka* introduces a particular scene in an effective style or unfolds an incident of the play. The *ślokas* are remarkable for their delicacy and charm and they may be regarded as the cream of the play. The most striking feature in an Assamese *Bhawana* lies in the coordination and harmony of the four elements—song, rhythmic representation by dance, melody emanating from appropriate instruments, and dialogue. We have already referred to the lyrical nature of the *Ankiya Nat*, which abounds in songs and verses of varied forms.

In *Ankiya Nat* and *Bhawanas*, the *sūtradhāra* plays the role of the main dancer. After the recitation of the *nandi*, the *sūtradhāra* interprets the story and sentiments embodied in the *śloka* with the help of a popular dance. This is done by the *sūtradhāra* all through the play. The three major dance forms of an *Ankiya Bhawana* are: *sūtradhāra-nac* (dance form of *sūtradhāra*) *Kṛṣṇa-nac* (dance form of Kṛṣṇa) and *Gopi-nac* (dance form of the milkmaids). The other forms of dances are *Rāsa-nac* and *Natuwa* or *Calī-nac*. All these forms are more or less adopted from classical texts on dancing.

As the *Ankiya Nats* were written more with a religious motive than for secular enjoyment, they were staged in the village *namghar*, the Prayer-Hall, on occasions like *Janmāṣṭami*, *Nandotsava*, *Dotyatṛā*, *Rāsa puṇimā* and on the saints' days. Later on, they came to be staged on festive occasions, as on full moon nights, during the time of sowing seeds and harvesting; in fact, whenever the villagers were free from agricultural pursuits. Sometimes, special houses and temporary sheds or *rabhas* are constructed for such kind of dramatic performance. Madhatodeva is said to have set up a big hall called *barghara* or *Rangial ghavra* at Barpeta to stage his plays: *Bhojana Vihārā* and *Dadhi Mathana*.

In Assamese, the general term for actors is *bhāwariyā* (Skt: *bhavāta*), i.e., one who produces *bhāva* or emotion in the mind of the audience. Those who enact the dance roles are called *narataka*, *natuwa* or *nata* (as they represent the action of others). Those who form the orchestra are called *gayān* (singers) and *bayān* (musicians)

who play on the musical instruments). As in earlier Sanskrit theatre, the reputation of actors of an Assamese *Bhāwana* was never low or dishonourable. Even men of erudition or of artistic attainments, high social, religious and political status performed roles in an Assamese *bhawana* without loss of prestige and honour.

The actors of the *Ankiya Nats* have special sets of dresses. These are preserved in the house of the village *Khanikar*, a painter and maker of wooden and earthen images by profession. His services are indispensable to the actors. He makes the image of the god for worship, prepares the *cho* (effigies) and *mukha* (masks), makes arrangement for necessary costumes required in different performances, constructs weapons of battle, such as swords, shields, bows and arrows, discus, clubs etc. The *Khanikar* helps in the general make-up of the actors in the greenroom and has to provide *ariya* and *nata* i.e., the torches, when the performance takes place at night. The *Khanikar* or the maker of the masks is a man of many attainments and his services are used mainly as prerequisites outside the stage. *Khanikar* has derived his inspiration and perfected his skill in the arts from an accumulated fund of hereditary knowledge. He not only has imagination and ability required to make lifesize grotesque and fantastic masks, but also has the skill to execute them properly, besides the knowledge of human physiognomy, the nature of the animal world, and above all, a full acquaintance with the dramatic requirements.

For their make-up, the actors use paints befitting their roles. The conspicuous paints are generally prepared by mixing *hangul*, cinnabar, and *haital*, yellow-ointment. The different colours, whether used singly or in combination, have traditional significance. For example, Kṛṣṇa, with his long head-dress called *kṛiti*, is painted in *śyāma*, 'blue black', a Brahman or mendicant in white, a violent and brutal man in red, the *derits* in black.

Masks that cover the head and the face are generally used. But for many performances, elaborate lifesize effigies are indispensable, particularly in *Ravaṇa-badha*, *Kāliyā-damana*, and in *Syāmanta haraṇa*. To make them light in weight and ease movements, lifesize 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; the bark of plantain tree is also used to serve a temporary purpose. Head-dress and upper masks, i.e. masks for head and face, are carved out of wood or hard bark-sheet.

In most of the cases, the time of performance of *Bhāwana* is held in the evening and continues all through the night. Sometimes, it starts in the afternoon and then goes on till late at night. The presentation of smaller plays such as Madhadeva's *Chardhara*, or *Pimpara Gucuwa* takes a shorter duration and ends before nightfall. No play is, however, presented in early hours of the morning. On occasions, several villagers assemble together and present different plays continuously through the day and night, for several days. Such plays are called *Bara Kheliya Bhāwana*, i.e. *Bhāwana* performed by several *Khels* or guilds.

It has been seen that the Sankardeva's Bhakti movement greatly contributed to the growth and development of art and literature in Assam. *Bhāwana*, the religious spectacle, was one of its main offshoots, and it grew up in the mould of the spiritual tradition, and the particular sentiment and temperament of the Assamese people. 'Thus in an age, when literacy was confined to the privileged, and learning was essentially aristocratic, the *Bhāwana* served as a powerful agency for disseminating religious and ethical ideas to the masses as it is in itself the greatest achievement of Sankardeva's dramatic representation' (Barua 1960: 85).

Sankardeva composed his first drama *Kāliya-daman* at the instance of Jagatananda, his cousin, probably at Barda around 1518 AD. His next drama was the *Patni-pasada* written probably at Dhuahata in 1531 AD. This play was staged at Baradi (near Barpet) during the *srāddha* ceremony of Madhavadeva's mother who died at Kapala on their way from Dhuahata to Barpeta. Later, at Patbausi, Sankardeva composed *Keli-Gopāla* around 1540 AD. This was followed first by *Rukmini-harana* and then by *Pārijat-harana*. It is difficult to give exact dates of their composition. Sankardeva's last drama, *Rama Vijaya* was composed at Cooch Bihar at the request of Cilarai about a year before his demise. The date of composition of this drama is mentioned by the author himself as 1490 Saka (1568 AD.), in its colophon. This was his last literary work. In old collections of manuscripts also, those dramas are found arranged in this order.

It appears that the Sankarite movement produced, in an unbroken stream, a galaxy of eminent saints, poets, preachers, philosophers and leaders. Sankardeva himself made a significant contribution towards intellectual awakening, social consciousness and regeneration of the country. Sankardeva conceived of India as our mother country five centuries ago. He wanted the people to feel proud of being born in *Bhāratavarsha*, as he thought that this holy

country provided immense opportunity for development of man's moral and spiritual potentialities.

A thematic outline of the plays composed by Shri Sankardeva is given below.

KĀLIYĀ-DAMANA

The story of this play occurs in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (V.7), *Harivaṃśa* (chap. 67) and *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* (X.15-17). Sankardeva follows the last. The plot may briefly be described as thus:

One day, Kṛṣṇa along with his companions of cowherd boys happened to come with their cattle to the bank of the Kālindi. Kālā Nāga, a highly venomous snake, lived there and rendered its water poisonous. The cowherds—the boys and their cattle—pinched with thirst, drank this water and they all died. Kṛṣṇa at first bewailed their loss, but eventually restored them to life. He also made a resolve to punish the snake and with that object in view, he climbed up the Kadama tree on the bank and, from its top, jumped into the pool. He began to stir and agitate its water violently. This attracted the enraged snake to the surface. Kāliya bit Kṛṣṇa in anger and held him in a firm grip of the coil of his tail. Kṛṣṇa lay there motionless, as if dead. The news of this soon reached Gokula and Kṛṣṇa's parents, the cowherds and others hurried to the spot, crying. After a while, Kṛṣṇa extricated himself with a violent jerk and standing on the expanded hoods of Kāliya, began a cosmic dance. Kāliya, bleeding through mouth and nose, was overpowered in a moment. Then his wives and children appeared and prayed for mercy. Kāliya himself bowed down at Kṛṣṇa's feet and began to pray. Kṛṣṇa, thereupon, left him and directed him to leave the pool and proceed to Ramanaka island. After this, Kṛṣṇa joined his parents and others on the banks of the river. As evening approached they all decided to pass the night in the forest of Brindavana. But at the dead of night, a forest fire raged and spread round them. To save his parents and others, Kṛṣṇa swallowed the fire and then everyone returned home safe.

The dominant sentiments in the entire story are the sentiments of the terrible (*bhayānaka*), pathos (*karuṇa*) and marvellous (*adbhut*).

PATNI-PRASĀDA

The story is told in the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* (X.23). One day, Kṛṣṇa and his cowherd companions, while tending cattle, rested for a while

under an Asoka tree on the bank of the Kalindi. The boys, pinched with hunger, asked Kṛṣṇa to arrange food. The latter sent them to a hermitage close by where the Brahmins were performing a sacrifice. The boys went and begged food of the Brahmins, who, proud as they were of their learning and efficacy of sacrifice, refused to give any and dismissed them saying they were gods of the earth and Kṛṣṇa was nobody. The boys returned and reported this to Kṛṣṇa who then sent them for food to the Brahmins' wives in the settlement. The pious consorts of the Brahmins, on hearing of the arrival of Kṛṣṇa, went out to see him carrying presents of sweets and other delicacies in hand. They saw Kṛṣṇa, the object of their devotion, and paid homage to him from a distance. The Brahmins at first resisted this. But eventually, they too espoused *Bhakti* to the lord in preference to learning, rituals and sacrifice. The prevailing sentiment in this play is marvellous (*adbhuta*).

KELI-GOPĀLA

The story occurs with slight modification in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (V. 33), *Harivaṃśa* (Chap. 76) and the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* (X.29-35). A point of some importance calls for scrutiny. In *śloka* 12 of the work, Rādhā figures in three of the manuscripts consulted. Her name also occurs in six other places of the prose portion in vernacular following that verse although in seven others, in place of Rādhā, the words that occur are Gopī, Bālā or Strī. In the succeeding songs also, the word Gopī, not Rādhā, appears, with no hint of the former, signifying Rādhā. It appears that the reading in the prose portion might have been changed, but its occurrence in the *śloka* portion is significant. The word Rādhā in these places appears to an interpolation for, in the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa*, the source of this drama, the word Rādhā is absent. Rādhā does not find a mention anywhere in the vast collection of literary works of Sankardeva even as the Keli-Gopāla story occurs in his *Kīrtana* and *Dasama* too. Dual worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is against his tenets. It may be assumed in the circumstances that Sankardeva, in fact, felt no necessity to introduce Rādhā's name in his drama. So, in all probability, the text of the *śloka* should have been as follows:

Gopīm vidhaya hṛdaye tatyaja Brajayositāh !

This reconstruction of the verse replaces *Rādhām* by *Gopīm* without detriment to metre and meaning. That the word *Rādhām* in this verse

is an interpolation is also borne out by the succeeding *śloka* (no. 16) which runs thus:

Kṛṣṇaena saha sa yati gopi tanmanadarpita !

Here, one would expect the word *Rādhā* in the place of *Gopi*, had the reading of *śloka* No. 12 been genuine. It is thus very probable that the word *Rādhā*- in *śloka* no. 12 was an interpolation.

The plot of the play runs thus: Sitting on a sand bank of the Yamuna, one moonlit night in autumn, Kṛṣṇa sang an enchanting and amorous song. This attracted the cowherd maids to the spot and they joined Kṛṣṇa there in a *Rasa* (sportive dance). This enchanted and exhilarated them so much that they forgot themselves and began to show disrespect to Kṛṣṇa. To punish them for their arrogance, Kṛṣṇa took one maiden from among them and slipped away. The milkmaids, thus deserted, suffered extreme pangs of separation and began to search for him in the jungle. Later, Kṛṣṇa left the maiden with whom he had eloped, alone as well for a similar fault and reappeared among the maidens he had left behind. Then these maids began a *Rasamandala* dance (i.e. dance in a circle). After this, they waded together into the Yamuna and danced there too. On hearing the first cock crow out, heralding the dawn, Kṛṣṇa sent them home. One night, a *Yakṣa* named Samkhacuda molested one of the dancing girls. Kṛṣṇa pursued and killed him.

This attachment of the cowherd maids was ecstatic but selfish. They, in joy, forgot themselves. They had worshipped the goddess *Kātyāyāni* for obtaining Kṛṣṇa as their husband for earthly pleasure and they got the desired object but no salvation. Later, they longed and prayed for joining their soul with the supreme soul which Kṛṣṇa embodied. This they achieved by selfless devotion at Kurukshetra.

The dominant sentiment in this drama is erotic (*śṛṅgāra*).

RUKMINI-HARAṆA

The story is told in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (V. 26), the *Harivaṃśa* (Chap. 116) and the *Bhagavat Purāṇa* (X. 52-54). Sankardeva follows the *Harivaṃśa* account, but inserts a few points. He also elaborates and develops the episode of the *Bhātas* and gives a name (*Vedanidhi*) to the confidential messenger of Rukmini to Kṛṣṇa. The plot follows, in brief:

A *bhattima* recited by a wandering minstrel, named Surabhi, in praise of the beauty and refinement of Rukmini, daughter of King

Bhismaka of Kundina, moved Kṛṣṇa and he intended to make her his wife. Another minstrel recited before Rukmini a similar *bhattima* in praise of Kṛṣṇa. She fell in love with Kṛṣṇa and chose him for her marriage. But her brother, Rukma, persuaded their parents, instead, to give her in marriage to prince Sisupāla. On the information duly conveyed, Sisupala came to Kundina with many other princes for marriage. When news of this reached Rukmini's ears, she sent her trusted priest, Vedanidhi, with a letter to Kṛṣṇa at Dwaraka, requesting him to come over and save her. Kṛṣṇa accordingly hastened to Kundina and saw Sisupala and others gathered on a reception ground. Then, as Rukmini returned from the temple of the goddess Bhavani after finishing her *puja* and appeared before the assembled guests, Kṛṣṇa caught her by hands, put her into his chariot and drove away. Sisupāla and other princes, in anger, pursued them and gave Kṛṣṇa a fight, but they were all humbled. Later, on the way, Rukmi also attacked Kṛṣṇa, who defeated him but spared his life at the entreaties of Rukmini. The marriage was later solemnized at Dwaraka.

The prevailing sentiments are erotic and heroic (*śṛṅgāra* and *vira*).

PARIJATA-HARAṆA

The story occurs in the *Bhagavat Purāna* (X.59), *Harivaṁśa* (chap. 120-133) and the *Viṣṇu Purāna* (V. 29-31). Sankardeva follows the *Viṣṇu Purāna* account but adds the episode of Satyabhama's wrath from the *Harivaṁśa*. In the *Harivaṁśa*, Sage Narada appears only as Kṛṣṇa's messenger to Indra.

One day Sage Narada came with Indra to Kṛṣṇa at Dwarka and presented him with a heavenly flower of Parijata. Kṛṣṇa, with tenderness and care, put the flower on the head of his wife Rukmini who happened to be present there at the time. Narada reported this to Kṛṣṇa's wife Satyabhama and thereby excited her jealousy and anger. In the meantime, Indra prayed for Kṛṣṇa's help for recovery of the earrings of Aditi, the umbrella of Varuṇa, the Mani Parvata and the heavenly maidens forcibly taken possession of by King Narakāsura of Pragiyotisapura. Kṛṣṇa promised help. Then Narada returned and reported Satyabhāmā's jealousy and anger to Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa rushed to meet Satyabhāmā and attempted to console her. But she was in a violent temper and could not be appeased. Eventually, Kṛṣṇa promised to fetch the Parijata tree itself from Indra's Amravati and then only she was pacified. Kṛṣṇa then, riding on Garuda with Satyabhāmā, flew to Pragjyotishpura and killed Naraka in a fierce

battle. He recovered the earrings of Aditi and other things and returned them to their respective owners at Amaravati and sent the maidens kept confined in the Naraka's harem to Dwaraka. Satyabhāmā saw, at the Nandan forest, a Parijata tree and wanted to have its flowers. Accordingly, Kṛṣṇa sent Narada to Indra to ask for the same. But Indra would not allow a heavenly flower to be taken for a woman of the earth. This led Kṛṣṇa to uproot the Parijata tree, put it on Garuda's back and resume the journey. Indra came and offered resistance. A fight followed in which Indra was worsted. In his defeat, Indra accepted Kṛṣṇa to be the lord of the universe and as one who was above both the *devas* and men. Kṛṣṇa then returned home and planted the Parijata tree just in front of Satyabhāmā's residence.

The dominant sentiment is heroic (*Vira*). The beauty of this play is marred to some extent by the vulgar quarrel and exchange of coarse and undignified language between Saci and Satyabhāmā.

RĀMA-VIJAYA

The story is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I. 18-77) and *Agni Purāṇa* (Chapter V). One day, the Sage Visvamitra came to King Dasaratha at Ayodhya and, with the latter's permission, took away his sons, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to his hermitage for protection of his sacrifice from depredations of demons (*Rākṣasas*). After their arrival at the hermitage, two demons, Marica and Subahu, appeared and began to rain blood. Rāma, with his arrows, drove them off and the sage completed his sacrifice safely. After this, Visvamitra took the two princes to Mithila, where the princes from far and wide had assembled for the *svayamvara* of Sītā, the daughter of King Janaka. According to a voice in the sky, Sītā had been destined to be the consort of one who could skillfully manipulate the gigantic *ajagava* bow of Śiva and properly put an arrow to it. None of the assembled princes could move or bend the bow. But Rāma dexterously put an arrow on it and, in bending the bow to shoot it, broke the bow into two pieces. Thereupon, Sītā advanced slowly and garlanded Rāma, acknowledging him as her husband. Seeing this, the assembled princes rose in a body and attacked Rāma. A battle followed in which they were all defeated and turned out of the palace. The marriage was then solemnized after which the party set out for Ayodhya. On the way, however, Parasurāma intercepted them and attempted to attack Rāma with his axe for having broken his master's bow. A

fight ensued in which Parasurāma was badly defeated and his way to heaven was blocked forever with Rāma's arrow.

In this play, Sankardeva deviated from the original text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmiki in several particulars. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra is said to have taken Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to the sacrifice of King Janaka at Mithila with a view to show them the Ajaḡava bow of Śiva. There was no *svayamvara*, nor any assembly of princes. When Rāma was shown the bow, he out of curiosity, took it out of the box and broke it in two. There was no voice from the sky about the selection of Sītā's groom. Janaka himself had made a vow to give Sītā in marriage only to one, who could break the bow. Again, according to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra never accompanied Rāma and his party to Ayodhya, nor did he fight with Paraśurāma on the way. There is also a slight variation from the original text in the episode of Maṛica and Subāhu. It may be added that the ludicrous scene about the assembled princes' amorous exclamations at the sight of Sītā and their humiliating punishment at the hand of the maids have marred, to a certain extent, the artistic beauty of the play.

It is said that this play was hurriedly composed in course of a night at the instance of Cilarai.

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