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## **Ramayana Based Dramas Written by Satradhikaras of Narowa Balisatra of Assam in Medieval Period of Assamese Literature: An Analysis**

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**Abstract:** Ramayana, the epic written by Valmiki has its great impact on the entire literary genres of Indian literature. From the time of its origin, popularity of the epic attracts various writers to represent the Ramayana in their creative writings. Like all other states of India, Assamese literature also creates a trend of Ramayana based literature. In the medieval period of Assamese literature, Madhava Kandali translated the Ramayana firstly into Assamese. After him, Sankardeva introduced the epic to the genre of drama. The dramas of Sankardeva and his period are called 'Ankia Nat'. Gradually, it grows a great trend of Ramayana based dramas in Medieval Assamese literature that the era of approx. 1300 AD to 1826. The performing form of Ankia Nat is called Bhaona which is a form of entertainment prevalent in Assam from the time of Sankardeva. The Bhaonas are generally staged at Satras and Namghars in Assam. Satras are institutional centers associated with the Ekasaran (believing in one god) tradition and of the place of worship of Neo-Vaishnavism. The head of this religious institution is called Satradhikar. Sankardeva was the founder of this institution and the first satra established by him was in Bardowa. Narowa Balisatra was established by "Narowa Goshai", that is Damodar Deva. The Satra is in Bali near Bardowa Ghat. By the name of the founder it popularized as Narowa BaliSatra. Like other Satras of Assam, the Satradhikaras of this satra and few other vakat also engaged in writing of dramas. The present study is based on analytical and historical analysis of the trend of Ramayana based dramas written by the Satradhikars of Narowa Balisatra in the medieval period of Assamese literature.

**Index Terms:** Ankia Nat, Medieval Assamese literature, Narowa Bali Satra, Ramayana based dramas, Satradhikar.

### **1.INTRODUCTION**

Ramayana is a Sanskrit epic written by Valmiki in around 500 BCE to 100 BCE which narrates the life of Rama, the legendry prince of the Kosala Kingdom. It consists of 24000 verses (Slukas), seven Kandas and 500 sargas. The seven kandas of Ramayana are- Adi(bala) Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda, Aranya Kanda, Kishkindha Kanda, Sundara Kanda, Lanka Kanda and Uttara Kanda. Though the original language of epic is Sanskrit, it was translated to various Indian languages too. From the time to its origin, it has played a profound role in the life, thought process and culture of Indian nation. Besides the translated version, there is a great tradition of Ramayana based literature. Like other states of India, Ramayana is a very popular epic in Assam also. From the time of MadhavaKandali, who translates Ramayana to Assamese verse first, the Ramayana appeared in various forms; in verse, prose, poetry, songs, dramas etc. Ramayana was first dramatized by Sankardeva, a Vaishnavite saint of Assam, which is called 'Ankia Nat'. The term 'Ankia Nat' was not used by Sankardeva himself. He called these dramatic compositions as 'Nat', 'Yatra' and 'Nataka'. After him it becomes popular as Ankia Nat. The name of the single play of Sankardeva is 'Ramvijoy' which is based on Ramayana. After Sankardeva, it grows a great tradition of Ramayana based dramas

in Medieval Assamese literature and modern era too. Sometimes it is the retold of the story, representation of the characters of the epic in present day context. It can be summarized that, the elements of Ramayana in Assamese drama are varied.

The literary heritage of the Assamese language can be traced back to the 9- 10<sup>th</sup> century in the 'Charyapada'. For presenting the discussion of the literary history of Assamese, various scholars propose several division of it. All of these, the one identified by SatyendraNathSarmah (2009) has been accepted by all. He periodised the entire Assamese literary history, into three main ages-

- a. Ancient Age (950AD-1300AD)
- b. Medieval Age (1300AD-1826AD)
- c. Modern Age (1826-Present)

Here, we accepted the division of this prominent literary historian of Assamese Literature.

The performing form of Ankia Nat is called Bhaona which is a form of entertainment prevalent in Assam from the time of Sankardeva. The Bhaonas are generally staged at Satras and Namghars in Assam. Satras are institutional centres associated with the Ekasaran (believing in one god) tradition and of the place of worship of Neo Vaishnavism. The head of this religious institution is called Satradhikar. Sankardeva was the founder of this institution and the first satra established by him was in Bardowa, his birth place. In his life time, it was known as 'Than'. Gradually it becomes popular as Satra. The word Satra originates in the Bhagawata Purana in Sanskrit. During the Medieval period of Assamese literature, many Satras were established all over Assam. Satras are the combination of Kirtan ghar(prayer house), Manikut( alter of God was placed in manikuta with Bhagawat Purana) and Hati( living houses of the Vakats). It consists with the following members- Satradhikars( Chief of a Satra), Dekha-Satradhikar( Assistant of Satradhikar), Bhakat(Devotees staying in the Satra premises) and Sisya( lay disciples).

Narowa Balisatra is situated In Bali of Bardowa Ghat that is in the district of Nagaon, Assam. . Narowa Balisatra was established by "Narowa Goshai", that is Damodar Deva. By the name of the founder, it popularized as Narowa BaliSatra. Like other Satras of Assam, the Satradhikaras of this Satra and few other Bhakat also engaged in writing of dramas. After Damodar Deva, the headship of this Satra was handed over to his son Ramakanta then after his son Ramachandra and so. Though the Ahom Kingdom who ruled in Assam for 600 years, initially opposed the ingress of religious preceptors, but finally they endorsed the Satras enabling them to establish themselves on sound economics, make themselves attractive to the lay people and spread the Ekasarana religion. By the time of Sargadeo Ramadhvaj Singha and Shiva Singha, the name and frame of this Satra was increased. But gradually at 19<sup>th</sup> century it lost its popularity and now a day the condition of this Satra is not so satisfactory.

## 2. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The sources of primary data are 'Ramayana' translated by KabichandraMahanta, in Assamese and published by Gauhati University Press as well as the dramas of various Satradhikars of Narowa Balisatra of the medieval period of Assamese Literature. Secondary data has been collected from various literary history books of Assamese, books related to Ramayana and articles of journals and from internet also.

From the largest list of the Ramayana based plays of Assamese literature of medieval period, only the published dramas written by the Satradhikars of Narowa Balisatra are selected for the present study. At the same time, only the literary texts of these dramas are subject to study rather than the audio-visual performances of these dramas. The present study has been conducted by using the analytical and historical method.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the present study are-

- I. To find out the characteristics of Ramayana based dramas of Medieval Period of Assamese Literature.
- II. To analyze the elements of Ramayana in the plays written by the Satradhikars of Narowa Balisatra of Medieval period of Assamese Literature.

## 4. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

Sankardeva was the first Assamese dramatists and he is the founder of the trend of Ramayana based drama. The name of his play was 'Rama Vijaya'. Sankardeva used the medium of play for his proselytizing works. Sankardeva was a cultural maestro too. After Sankardeva, various dramatists follow the trend of Sankardeva and it can be told that these were the imitation of the Saint Sankardeva. As we know, the dramatic pattern introduced by Sankardeva and the entire period of medieval Assamese literature is called 'Ankia Nat'. The dramas written by the Satradhikars of this particular Satra also includes this trend of Ankia Nat. To analyze the dramas of this Satradhikars, it is necessary to analyze the trend of Ankia Nats. Sankardeva has drawn his inspiration from classic Sanskrit theatre, folk traditional performing art forms of India as well as Assam viz. Ramlila, Rashlila, Yakshyagan, Putolanach, Ojapali etc. It can be summarized that the AnkiaNats are structurally a beautiful synthesis of classical and folk tradition of the region. It is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaishnava faith. Some characteristics of these dramas are –

- a. Sutradhara: Sutradhara is the main element of these plays. The Sutradhara keeps on explaining the story as well as its spiritual impact from time to time. He remains all along on the stage from beginning to ending by participating in acting, singing and playing on the instruments like drum and he links the scenes using music, dance and words.
- b. The language of these dramas is Vrajawali, which is a combination of Sanskrit, Maithili, Assamese, Bhojpuri, Hindi etc. Sankardeva wants to convey religious messages to villagers of Assam as well as the whole North India. So, in spite of using Assamese, he created the artificial language Vrajawali and used it in his plays.
- c. The narratives of the plays are lyrical.

- d. Uses of songs and music are very important in these plays. It is a beautiful mixture of Slukas (in Sanskrit), songs with 'ragas', music and dialogue. The songs of these dramas can be divided into three parts, that are –'Vatima' (Pray to God, pray to King and pray to 'Nat'), Dramatic song and the melodious 'Chapay'. The drama ends with MuktiMongalVatima.
- e. Uses of Slukas also very important for these dramas. The first Sluka is called Nandi. The Slukas were used as the description of the dramatical story, dialogue of characters as well as Sutradhara. One can realized all the dramatical sequence only through these Slukas.

.The performance of an Ankia Nat starts with benediction in Sanskrit followed by eulogy to God in Vrajawali. The play usually starts with the prelude called Dhemali. Then, Sutradhara enters to the stage and he continued all the play. It ends with 'Mukti-MongalVatima' sung by Sutradhara.

There are a large number of dramas written by the Satradhikars of this Balisatra at this particular era, which are based on Mahavarata and other Puranas. Most of these dramas are unpublished and not even properly collected. Some of these dramas are- 'Shyamanta Haran', 'Kansha Badha', 'Kumar Haran', 'Hara-Mohan', Balisalan, Karna Parva etc. The dramas based on Ramayana are very few. From these trend of Ramayana based dramas, in this research paper it has been included only the published dramas for analysis. These are-

#### 4.1 SitaHarana

The drama 'SitaHarana' was written by Vadradeva whice is based on 'Aranya Kanda' of Valmiki's Ramayana and the Kandali version of Ramayana. The story of the play is-

In fourteen years exile of Rama accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana, they lived in Dandakararya for several years. One day they confronted with a demon (Rakshasa) named 'Viradh'. He attracts Rama and Lakshmana and defeated by Rama. In this forest, there lived 'Surpanakha', the sister of Ravana with her brother Khara and Dushana and their armies. One day, she saw Rama and enamored of Rama. Rama rejected her and tells her to marry Lakshmana. He also flouts her and she becomes angry and tries to kill Sita. By order of Rama, Lakshmana wounded her and she went to her brother Khara and reported him and asked to avenge her. Khara's army marches to Rama and they face bad-omens. Then Khara and Dushana with armies march to Rama and follow an epic battle between the two parties. However, Khara and his armies are defeated by Rama and Lakshmana. Then Surpanakha reported to King Ravana and she also describe a plan to abduct Sita after hearing about the incomparable beauty. He sent one of his demons named Marich, disguised as a magical golden deer to entice Sita. To please her, Rama and Lakshmana went to hunt the deer down. At the moment Ravana comes to Sita and kidnapped her and taking her away to Lanka. As he carries off the kidnapped Sita, he fights with Jatayu, an old friend of King Dasharatha and defeated him.

Rama and Lakshmana travel for and wide in searching for Sita but to no avail. Finally, they meet the Jatayu and he told the message of Sita and died. In searching of Sita, they entered to the deep forest and confronted with the demon 'Kavandha'. He told them to go to the mountain of 'Rishamuk' and to make friendship with Sugriva and his armies' of vanaras (monkey). Kavandha was killed by Rama. After that, they went to Sugriva and sought the help to find Sita.

In the play, the writer follows the way of MadhavaKandali to describe. The dialogue of the drama is in Vrajawali and the songs are in Assamese. There are 26 songs including 4 vatimas and 25 Siukas in the drama. Some of the dialogues of this drama also are in lyrics and the language is Assamese. Other dialogues are in Vrajawali and the language of the songs is in Assamese rather than Vrajawali. The play of Vadradeva was firstly edited by KeshavanandaDevagoswami in his edited book 'Narowa Ata HakalarNirbachita Nat' and published by the managing committee of Naroa Bali Satra, Nagaon, Assam.

Vadradeva was born in 1761 at Rampur Satra. Later he came to Balisatra and became the Satradhikar of the Satra. The name of his father was Ramadeva. He was died in 1822. Another name of Vadradeva was Jadudeva. In the drama, he used both the name. In spite of these, the name of Lakshminath, the son of him is there in the drama. It can be decided that, the drama was stated by Vadradeva and ended by his son Lakshminath or Lakshmidewa.

#### **4.2 RavanaBadha**

The writer of the play was Lakshmidewa, the son of Vadradeva and his wife Bhavani Devi. He was born at 1796 and the early stage of his life, he was in Rampur Satra and later, he shifted to Bali Satra. He was a great singer, musician, dance creator and dancer, song writer and composer, dramatists as well as actor. The RavanaBadha was a popular drama staged in all over Assam in this special era of medieval period. The songs of the drama were very popular and valuable in literary sense too. He passed away in 1858 at Bali Satra.

The play was based on Lanka Kanda of Ramayana. The story of the play is-

Rama, Lakshmana and all vanar armies build a causeway to Lanka and reached there. The surrounded the Lanka and ready for the battle with Ravana. Angada has sent to Ravana as a messenger of Rama. In the assembly of Ravana, Angada was insulted by Ravana, ordered to punish him. Angada saved his life and went to Rama to describe the situation. There was an epic battle follows between armies of Rama and Ravana. Ravana was finally killed by Rama and Sita was freed. Vibhishana has made the king of Lanka. After proved her purity by Agnipariksha, Rama accepted Sita and they returned to Ayodhya.

The scope of the drama is very wide because of the elaboration of every leader of armies and their fighting. There are 32 songs and 19ragas, 33 Slukas in the play. The language of the play is Varjawali and the songs are basically in Assamese.

#### **4.3DurbasaVojan**

The writer of the play 'DurbasaVojan' is Harendra Narayan. When his father was died, he was a little child and became the Satradhikars of this Balisatra. Later he lost this Satra and became the Satradhikar of Vetiwani Satra, near Bardowa. The name of his father was Damdeva, who was the son of Lakshmidewa.

The drama was firstly edited by KeshavandaDevagoswami in his collected book of AnkiaNats named 'Naroa Ata HakalarNirbachita Nat'.The drama is based on 'Uttara Kanda' of Ramayana. The story is-

Rama governed Ayodhya after killing Ravana for several thousand years. After the disappearance of Sita inside the earth, Rama becomes heavy-hearted and he orders his brother to give up their reigned to their sons. They all follow his order. Once came a Yogi, who called himself as Kala (time) and told Rama that Rama was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and that the time has come for his return to heaven. Rama accepted his advice. Kala requested

to keep the meeting confidential and also asked that anyone who tried to enter the room or hear their conversation was to be executed. Rama gave his word to Kala that he will be done. He called Lakshmana and told him about Kala and his orders, asking him to guard the gate. Lakshmana follows his order. So when, Durbasa come to the door to meet Rama and demanded entry. Lakshmana politely refused and asking the sage to wait a while until Rama finished his meeting. Durbasa was in famous for his extremely short temper. The enraged sage threatened Lakshmana that he would curse all of Ayodhya if the message of his arrival did not immediately inform to Rama. Knowing the nature of the sage, rather than risk the whole of Ayodhya falling into ruin, Lakshmana decided to inform and disobey Rama and he interrupted Rama and told him what was happening outside. Rama immediately concluded his meeting and received the sage with due respect. Durbasa told him that he was hungry and wished to be fed. Rama quickly fulfills his guest's request but he had to execute his beloved brother Lakshmana. The play ends with the sorrow of two brothers.

There are six songs and six ragas in this play. There are- Saranga, Asuwari, Kanari, Turvatiwali, Dhanashri and Supayar. There are 13 Slukas in this play. There is no 'Mukti Mangal Vatima'. The language of the play is Vrajawali as well as Assamese.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the number of published plays written by the Satradhikars of Narowa Balisatra, in the era of medieval period of Assamese literature are very poor. Although, it was bound to write a drama to become Satradhikars, the writers selected the Mahavarata and Puranas for their dramas as source. All of the dramas are not valuable as a literary text but the historical value of these dramas are very important that these preserve the culture, rituals and the entire Assamese society in heart. Among these three dramas, the Ravana Badha was very popular and staged in all over Assam. It can be concluded that a large portion of the dramas are in darkness. Researchers and government should take necessary action for extracting and preserving these plays.

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