

**BHAONA: A HUB OF ASSAM'S INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE****Bhagyashree Das**

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**Abstract**

Indigenous knowledge is the one that holds the capacity to develop key aspects of one's personality. The traditional practices of medicine and agriculture, knowledge of language and literature, philosophies, skills, etc are not only essential element of a particular tribe or community, but also the key identifiers of that particular culture. But many of the local traditions, events, festivals, practices, etc are gradually vanishing, which are not only diminishing the identity of a community, but also cutting out some key elements which could have been wealth of knowledge. The local knowledge or indigenous knowledge should form an integral part of the school curriculum, so that students not only learn about their native knowledge but also about its preservation, which in turn enables transmission of that knowledge. This piece of writing showcases the traditional folk theatre of Assam, *Bhaona*, a synthesis of various forms of folk arts, and why it should be included in the school curriculum.

**[Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Bhaona, Theatre, Curriculum]**

**Introduction**

Indigenous knowledge can said to be home-grown knowledge or cultural practices of a particular society, which are transmitted from one generation to another. It includes lifestyle, skills, experiences, healthcare practices, traditional technologies, philosophies, cultural traditions, understandings, etc. of a particular community (Chutia, R., & Kalita, B., 2021, p. 2). As said by Emeagwali (2014) "*Indigenous knowledge are cumulative strategies, practices, techniques, tools, cultural beliefs, intellectual resources, values, and explanations of a group of people accumulated over time in a particular locality with less impositions and interference from external forces*".

The native people had a robust and vast set of knowledge, which were shrinking gradually due to modernization, and many of them are already vanished. The local practices are basically related to nature, which needs to be preserved for a sustainable lifestyle. Moreover the people are gradually forgetting their roots just because they were ignorant about their own culture, and because of which the transmission to the next generation is being hampered. So, the indigenous elements of a society should be preserved, so that it can be transmitted to the next generation without any hassle.

Assam is a state which is known for its diverse population and diverse culture (Asthana, n.d.). There are different tribes, and communities living in Assam and all of them are unique in terms of their cultural or traditional practices. But, there are some common practices, events or festivals, which are celebrated or organized, by most of the communities that keeps all the Assamese people under one roof. One of the examples is *Bhaona*, which is a theatre tradition, founded by Srimanta Sankardeva, the renaissance man of Assam.

***Bhaona: Folk Theatre Tradition of Assam***

*Bhaona*, a form of unique traditional theatre of Assam, striving across many generations, which is more than 500 years old (**Chakra, S., 2021 June 3**). Srimanta Snakardeva, who started the Neo- Vaishnavite movement in Assam, is the creator of *Bhaona*, which is now the soul of the Assamese culture and society (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588**). Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, the Great Sanskrit Scholar and Vaishnavite saint, travelled different parts of the country and made himself familiarize with the teaching and culture of different regions and with the knowledge and understanding he gained through his pilgrimage, contributed immensely towards the Assamese culture (**Chakra, S., 2021 June 3; The Ankiya Nat and Bhaona, 2015, December 1**). He transformed the Assamese society in variety of ways as a scholar, poet, playwright, by imbibing his knowledge into literatures, poems, music and instruments (**Chakra, S., 2021 June 3**).

Sankardeva's religious movement in the 15<sup>th</sup> century has helped to tie up various communities of Assam under one belief with certain religious practices. For the propagation of his Vaishnavite movement, he established two institutions, *Satras and Namghars*. The *Satras* which are now spread across different parts of Assam are the monasteries and the *Namghar* is the prayer house, which now can be found in almost every village of Assam. The *Satra* are the cultural hub where the religious teachings of Sankardeva are provided, including various art forms (**Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 2**). Among the various art forms *Borgeet* (songs), *Ankiya Nat* (one act play) & *Bhaona* (theatre), and *Satriya* (Assam's classical dance form) were his unique creation that added a distinct flavor to the culture of Assamese society. Madhavdeva, his disciple also made innumerable contributions and continued the legacy of his teacher. The contribution made by Sankardeva and his principal disciple Madhavdeva, transformed the culture of Assamese society (**Chakra, S., 2021, June 3**).

Sankardeva's excellence in *Natyashastra* and his deep knowledge about religious textures, led him to the unique creation of *Ankiya Nat and Bhaona*, which played a key role in propagating Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588; Chakra, S., 2021, June 3**). The first ever *Nat* (play) of Sankardeva was *Chinhayatra*, where *Chinha* means narration of the play through pictures and *yatra* means a kind of folk drama of that time (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588**). *Chinhayatra* was considered as the beginning of theatre tradition in Assam. However, the play was not performed by actors, but only narrated with the help of pictures. *Ankiya nats* were the subsequent plays that were scripted by Sankardeva and were performed by individuals; and the performance of the *Ankiya nats* came to be known as *Bhaona*. Ram Vijaya, Patni Prasad, Parijat Haran, Rukmini Haran, Keli Gopala & Kaliya Daman were six *Ankiya Nats* scripted by Sankardeva (**Chakra, S., 2021, June 3; Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588; Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 2**) and all were written in *Brajavali* language (a combination of Maithili, Hindi, Bhojपुरi, Assamese and Sanskrit (**Chakra, S., 2021, June 3**). The stories of the *Ankiya nats* revolve around the lives of Lord Krishna or Rama from The Bhagavata, The Mahabharata and The Ramayana. These plays when enacted carry a message of the victory of the good over evil (**Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 2**). These six *Ankiya nats* have been played over 500 years now, and still continue to fascinate the audiences (**Chakra, S., 2021, June 3**).

It is worth mentioning that the enacted form of the *Ankiya nats* i.e. *Bhaona*, did not remain confining to the story of the *nats*, but also performed on different mythological stories from religious textures like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, etc in the same way Sankardeva has shown. *Bhaona*'s usually take place in the Namghars, but now a day it is also staged in open places and even *Bhaona* competitions are also organized in various parts of Assam (**Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 2**). Gradually, Assamese language also found its place in many plays of *Bhaona* and many of them are translated in English language too (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588**). The uniqueness of *Bhaona* lies in its synthesis of classical and folk theatre traditions (**Chakra, S., 2021, June 3**). The alluring composition of drama, music, literature, dance, and the art of mask-making in *Bhaona* attract people in large numbers be it old or young. From the last five centuries, it has been serving as a catalyst for value education, binding up the people of Assam in one thread (**Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 2; Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 588**).

### **Bhaona: The Procedure and its Elements**

*Bhaona* starts with a *Purvaranga* (prelude), where a group of musicians called *Gayana-Bayana* (*Gayana* means singers and *Bayana* means who plays the instruments) with *Khol* (drum) and *Taal* (cymbal) sing and dance rhythmically. After their performance, the group sits in a defined position singing and playing the instruments during the entire *Bhaona*. Followed by the *Gayana-Bayana*, enters the *Sutradhara*, who is the narrator or anchor of the play. The *Sutradhara* is the integral part, who enters with a dance sequence, sings and explains the plot of the play. The *Sutradhara* is the one who recites and inculcate in the minds of the audience that we all should surrender to the supreme powerful, *Hari*. It is a character that was very carefully crafted to educate the masses about the Vaishnavite philosophy. Then the actors of the play or *Bhaorias* are introduced to the audience, who takes entry in the stage with a definite dancing pattern and also exit in the same way. Before their first entry, every character takes their position behind a cover called *Arkapur*, and the *Bhaorias* are welcomed with background music of the *Gayana-Bayana*. All the *Bhaorias* and *Gayana-Bayana* ends the play with *Mukti Mangala Bhatima* (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 589; Chakra, S., 2021, June 3; Borooah, I., & Begum, J., 2014, p. 3**).

The costume forms the integral part of the *Bhaona*. All the performers have their own set of costumes. The group of musicians i.e. the *Gayana-Bayana* wears complete white cloths from top to toe, with a white turban called *paguri*, dhoti-kurta, a white piece of cloth wrapped around the body called *seleng*. The *Sutradhar* wears a white long-sleeved coat, a piece of cloth hung from shoulders of both side and a skirt like bottom till toe length called *Ghuri*. All other actors wear fancy costumes that are available in the market. Earlier, the characters used to wear costumes which were available in the villages and also used naturally made make-up or paint. But now, fancy cloths and easily available make-up are used by the actors (**Hazarika, M., 2019, p. 590**). One most important jewel of *Bhaona* is the *Mukha* or Mask which are hand crafted and worn by the character during the performance. Even the *Bhaona* where these face masks are chiefly used are called *Mukha Bhaona* and *Mukha Bhaona* is performed in Majuli, the largest river island of the world (**IndiaNetzone, n.d.**). It is worthy to mention that the Samuguri Satra of Majuli is famous for *Mukha Shilpa*.

*Bhaona* has a systematic blend of almost all the art forms created by Sankardeva. A pure and a blissful composite of dance, music, religious teaching, mask-making, etc. where the God's divine sport is presented beautifully. From children to old, all the people get excited and fascinated with the characters, their make-up, dress, and dialogues. Sankardeva's unique creation of *Bhaona* was not only a vehicle to propagate Vaishnavism, but became a tool that united different communities living in Assam.

### **Why Bhaona should be incorporated in the school curriculum?**

*Bhaona* is one of the elements that make the Assamese culture unique. This theatre tradition started by Srimanta Sankardeva holds many of the cultural aspects of Assam altogether. Music, dance, drama, costumes, make-up, etc make *Bhaona*, a hub of indigenous knowledge. *Bhaona* could be one of the easiest means to inculcate in the minds of children about the importance of their culture. So that they will not only take pride of it, but also make an effort to preserve them and pass on to the next generation. The inclusion of *Bhaona* in the curriculum helps the students to gain knowledge in variety of ways. Some of them are highlighted below:

**Preservation and Transmission:** *Bhaona* is the unique representation of almost all the indigenous art forms of Assam. *Borgeet* (songs), *Bhatima* (Prayer), musical instruments such as *Khol* (drum), *Taal* (Cymbal), *Satriya*, *Brajavali* language, *Mukha Shilpa*, all are meticulously wrapped up together and presented with a moral lesson. In the present era, students are gradually inclining towards western culture and are ignorant about their roots. Thus, inclusion of *Bhaona* in school curriculum will help the students to not only learn about the richness of their culture but also can preserve them to pass on to next generation.

**Moral Education:** *Bhaona* always depicts a story where the good wins over the evil. Through various religious teachings, and God's divine sport, *Bhaona*, can impart knowledge of the righteousness.

**Creativity:** The students can develop creative talents, such as the art of making masks, singing, playing instruments, etc. While decorating the stage for *Bhaona*, making variety of props, making arrangement for the set up, seating arrangements, dressing, make-up, designing their own cloths, etc. not only excite the students, but also develop interest of the students towards their cultural heritage, and makes them better social organizer.

**Develop Potential:** Being a part of *Bhaona*, students get exposure to showcase their talents in variety of ways, be it singing, dressing, drama, or playing instruments, , which also develops their hidden potential. It can be a useful means of creative self-expression.

**Internalization of Values:** *Bhaona* with its attracting storyline and fascinating characters of God, demons, deity's etc can captivate its audiences. Not only the actors, but also the audience can connect to the divinely soul. All the students who are a part of *Bhaona*, as a character, musician or audience can internalize the moral values into their character.

**Language Development:** Dialogues of *Bhaona*, which are written in Assamese and *Brajavali*, help students not only to learn the language, but also to take a sense of pride in their native language.

**Collaborative learning:** Organizing the *Bhaona*, rehearsing, decoration, etc requires a lot of co-operation from every participant. So, *Bhaona* is a fun way of collaborative learning that teaches lessons of co-operation.

**Inclusive Learning:** It is a cultural event which is inclusive and all type of learners, slow, gifted or Children with Special Needs (CWSN) can participate equally as per their interest. Even as an audience, the students can participate and learn about their indigenous heritage from *Bhaona*.

## Conclusion

The above discussion on *Bhaona*, only tells us about a particular aspect of the Assamese culture. The different tribes have their own set of traditions and practices that needs to be acknowledged in the school curriculum. The right kind of attitude should be developed in the minds of the young, so as to make them stay connected to their roots. In this context, the State Education Department has the most important role to play.

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