

Bhaona, the Traditional Theatre Form of Assam, as an Instrument for Developing Moral Values

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Abstract: *The Vaishnavite saint and leader, Srimanta Sankardeva started a religio-cultural movement in Assam. Sankardeva's bhakti movement brought various communities under one philosophy of life with a systematized code of conduct and religious practice. Two institutions established by him were the Satra and Namghar. The Satra is a Vaisnav monastery, while Namghar is a prayer house.*

Associated with Sankardeva, are Ankiya Naat and Bhaona. Ankiya Naat denotes one-act plays while Bhaona is the performance of these plays. These Ankiya Naat always carried a religious message and their enactment showed the victory of good over evil. It is a traditional theatre form which shows the victory of truth at the climax, generally using mythological figures drawn from the Bhagavata and the Ramayana.

Considering the apparent degradation of moral values in the present times an effort is made in this paper to analyze the contribution of Bhaona in building society in the past and how they may be conserved and popularized to contribute to the development of moral values in the present.

Key words: *Satra, Vaisnav, Namghar, Ankiya Naat, Bhaona, Moral Values*

I. Moral Values/Morality

Moral values or morality means those values, principles and beliefs on which a person's personal and social development depends. These are the rules by which an individual makes decisions about right and wrong, should and shouldn't, good and bad. Moral values are an essential aspect of an individual's personality.

Morality is defined as a complex system of general principles and particular judgments based on cultural, religious and philosophical concepts and beliefs. Cultures or groups regulate and generalize these concepts, thus regulating behavior and when someone conforms to the codification, generally the person is said to be moral.

Morality implies a capacity to (1) distinguish right from wrong, (2) act on this distinction and (3) experience pride in virtuous conduct and guilt or shame over acts that violate one's standard (Quin, Houts and Graesser, 1994; Shaffer, 1994).

These definitions are based on the idea that morally mature individuals do not submit to society's dictates because they expect tangible rewards for complying or fear punishments for transgressing. Rather, they eventually internalize moral principles that they have learned and conform to these ideals, even when authority figures are not present to enforce them.

II. Theories of Moral Development

Contemporary theorists consider internalization, the shift from externally controlled actions to conduct that is governed by internal standards and principles, to be the most crucial step to moral development and maturity.

The major theories of moral development conceptualize the child as moving through a series of stages as a result of the unfolding of the child's cognitive capacities, partly due to maturation or biological growth, and partly due to the kinds of experiences with the environment that normally accompany growing up.

According to Piaget (1932) moral development is a process where a series of transitions take place from a state of absolutism to a morality based upon reciprocal agreement. In the first stage, called the "stage of moral realism" or "morality by constraint", behaviours are totally right or wrong and rules are sacred and unalterable. The child believes in immanent justice.

In the more advanced state of reciprocity, rules are established through social agreement and may be modified for good reason. This second stage he called the "stage of autonomous morality" or "morality by cooperation or reciprocity". Diverse views of right and wrong are acknowledged, and a major consideration is whether the deed was performed intentionally or not.

Kohlberg (1958, 1969) worked upon and revised Piaget's theory to include three levels of moral development where each level includes two stages.

In level 1, “Pre-conventional Morality,” the child’s behavior is subject to external controls. In the first stage of this level the child is obedience- and punishment- oriented and the morality of an act is judged in terms of its physical consequences. In the second stage of this level, children conform to social expectations to gain rewards.

Level 2 is “Conventional Morality” or morality of conventional rules and conformity. In the first stage of this level, “Good Boy Morality,” the child conforms to rules to win approval of others and to maintain good relations with them. In the second stage of this level, children believe that if the social group accepts rules as appropriate for all group members, they should conform to them to avoid social disapproval and censure.

Level 3 Kohlberg has labeled “Post – conventional Morality,” or morality of self-accepted principles. In the first stage of this level, the child believes that there should be flexibility in moral beliefs that make it possible to modify and change moral standards if this will prove to be advantageous to group members as a whole. In the second stage of this level, people conform to both social standards and to internalized ideals to avoid guilt and self condemnation rather than to avoid social condemnation. It is a morality based on respect for others rather than on personal desires.

At any age, an individual may make a moral judgment falling into any one of these six stages. Kohlberg reasons that these stages are as distinct and successive as different patterns of moral thought.

III. Development of Moral Behaviour

Children can learn to behave in a socially approved manner through trial and error, through direct teaching, or through identification.

In trial and error learning children try out one behavior after the other to see which gains social approval for them. Eventually, after many trials, they hit upon a behaviour that gives them the desired approval. This type of learning is very time-consuming and the end result not very satisfactory.

In direct teaching, children learn to behave in socially approved manner in one situation and then transfer this learning to similar situations. However, if the objective aspects of the situation differ, they fail to see how their learnt behavior can apply to this other situation.

In identification, children identify with people they admire and imitate the pattern of behavior they observe in these people. This usually occurs unconsciously and without pressure from others. Identification as a source of learning moral behavior becomes increasingly important as children grow older.

Considering the progressive stages through which moral behavior develops and the significant importance of direct learning and identification in the development of morality, any event which leads the child to observe moral behavior and thereby internalize it would probably facilitate the development of moral values.

IV. Ankiya Naat and Bhaona

Stories, mythical tales and dramatic presentations have captured the attention of children from time immemorial. In every culture heroics of brave people have been narrated and passed on from one generation to another. In Assam stories from “Burhi Aeir Sadhu” by Lakhminath Bezbaruah have been the staple on which most children have grown up. The epics “Mahabharata” and “Ramayana” have also been told and retold across generations. The enactment of Ankiya Naat, in the form of Bhaona, was also popular. These have been the earliest introduction to morality in an Assamese child’s life.

The great Vaishnavite saint and leader, Srimanta Sankardeva started a religio-cultural movement in the 15th century, amidst the chaos and disintegration that marked Assamese society at that time. Sankardeva’s bhakti movement brought various communities within Assam under one philosophy of life with a systematized code of conduct and religious practice. Two distinctive institutions established by him were the Satra and Namghar. The Satra is a Vaisnav monastery and a Namghar is a prayer house.

The Satras developed into seats of culture imbibing the religious teachings of Sankardeva (Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nam Dharma) along with diverse art forms. Associated with Sankardeva, are Ankiya Naat and Bhaona. Ankiya Naat denotes one-act plays while Bhaona is the performance of these plays. These Ankiya Naat always carried a religious message and their enactment showed the victory of good over evil. It is a traditional theatre form which shows the victory of truth at the climax, generally using mythological figures drawn from the Bhagavata and the Ramayana.

The Bhaona became a very popular form of entertainment and they were usually staged in the precinct of Namghars, usually in open spaces. The staging of the Bhaona attracted people in large numbers and may have served as a vehicle for value education, which was imbibed by young and old, and helped form the moral fabric of society at that time.

V. Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat

The Ankiya Naat is a new genre of plays written in Sanskrit and a literary idiom called Brajabuli. These dramas were composed by Sankardev between 1518 and 1568. Five of them are drawn from the Bhāgavata Purāna and the sixth from the Rāmāyana. Although they were to familiarize people with the greatness and the antics of lord Krisna and to propagate Neo-Vaisnavism, deeper analysis reveals certain moral values imbedded in them. Their subject matter is given below along with a note of the values inherent in the plays.

(1)Kaliya-damana is set in Vrindavana. It tells the story of the child Krisna who killed the serpent Kaliyanaga who was poisoning the Jamuna River with his venom. As a result the cattle that came to drink water from the river were dying, thus threatening the livelihood of the pastoral Yadava community who grazed their cattle near the river. Hearing about the unnatural death of cattle from his playmates, the child Krisna enters the river and battles with the serpent. Getting news that the child Krisna had disappeared into the river mother Yashoda runs to the river and the other mothers from the neighborhood also follow her in concern. The earth experiences extreme disturbance in that interim, with earthquake and huge waves in the river. Krisna vanquishes the tormentor but spares his life at the request of the serpent's wives who pray to him. The people of Vrindavan are amazed at the sight of Krisna dancing on the hoods of Kāliyanāga, the first proof of the child Krisna's superior powers. Kaliyanaga agrees to leave the area along with his family. The story illustrates the early manifestations of Krisna's extraordinary exploits as well as the grace of the divine to those that repent and seek asylum at his feet (forgiveness). Another value reflected in the story is that destroyers of nature's glories cannot ever survive. The destroyers of nature will definitely be disarmed of their strengths and annihilated.

Values: forgiveness; protection and conservation of the environment, caring for fellow beings, concern of neighbors for each other

(2)VipraPatni-prasada narrates the tale of the Brahmanas (vipra) who fail to earn religious merit by the performance of elaborate sacrifices (yajna). Their wives (patni) are devoted to the child Krisna and through their love for him earn religious merit, succeeding where their husbands had failed. This drama thus highlights the power of love of the divine over mere sacrifice. It also dwells on the arrogance of the Brahmins because of their knowledge and thus their looking down upon children as mere brats. Since their yajna was to appease the Gods so they did not offer food to the children when they asked to be fed.

Values: denunciation of arrogance; support and sustenance of those in need; victory of the good and righteous over evil

(3)Keli-gopala portrays the dalliance of Krisna with the milkmaids (gopis) of Vrindavana and is also popularly known as Raslila. It narrates his love story with Radha and his amorous antics like teasing the milkmaids by hiding their clothes while they are bathing in the river, etc.

The gopis leave their households behind and come to Brindavan to frolic with Krisna as they gain dharma (religious performance), arath (material achievement), kama (all desires) and moksha (salvation or the meeting of atma and paratma) in his presence. He asks them to return but they weep in despair as they do not want to leave. He gives in to them and begins dancing with them. On being teased for his acceptance of their presence by the gopis, he turns invisible. The gopis then again start crying heart-broken at his disappearance. Seeing the intensity of their love for him, and their devotion, he becomes visible again and loses himself in dancing with joy with the gopis.

Taking advantage of Krisna's preoccupation with the gopis, the sinful rakshas, Sankhasura, filled with lust, comes to abduct the gopis but Krisna kills him.

Values: to give joy and happiness to those who love one; satisfy the desires of those who are loyal; protection of women.

(4)Rukmini-harana is the story of Krisna's abduction (harana) of Rukmini, princess of Vidarbha. Rukmini is the daughter of king Bhismaka who according to local (Assamese) legends ruled over Bhismakanagara or Kundilnagara situated in the Sadiya region. Her brother Rukma convinces their father Bhismaka to give Rukmini's hand in marriage to his friend Sisupala, king of Chedi. However, Rukmini falls in love with the Yadava Krisna after learning about his heroic deeds and secretly communicates with him, through Bedanidhi, to rescue her. Krisna comes all the way from Dwarka and spirits her away on his chariot, breaking all social norms, from under the noses of her brother and suitor Sisupala, to fulfill the desire of his devotee (Rukmini). A battle ensues in which Rukma and Sisupala are defeated and with the intercession of Krisna's elder brother Balarama peace is restored as Rukmini's parents too are partial to Krisna.

Values: loyalty to life partner; love of and devotion to the Almighty results in victory.

(5)Parijat- harana recounts how Krisna forcibly uproots the parijat tree from heaven and plants it in his kingdom at Dwarka. The sage Narada had come from heaven with some parijat flowers to Krisna's court and presented them to him saying that wherever the flower exists, there prosperity will remain forever as its fragrance remains for a long period and the woman who wears the parijat flower will earn luck and fortune, and her husband's supreme love. Chief queen, Rukmini, asks Krisna for the flower due to her foremost position among his consorts and he lovingly puts it in her hair. When his other queen Satyabhama learnt of it she became jealous and apprehensive of losing Krisna, whereupon Krisna promised to fetch some flowers from heaven for her. However, when Krisna requested Indra for some flowers, the latter was forced to turn down his request at the behest of his queen Sachi who claimed that the parijat flowers were not for mere mortals. To pacify Satyabhama Krisna waged war against Indra, uprooted the parijat tree and planted it in Satyabhama's courtyard. Values: love and devotion; ultimate power of the Almighty

(6)Rama-vijaya-nat is the tale of prince Rama of Ayodhya and is the only Ankiya Naat to be drawn from the Epic Ramayana. Rama here is regarded as an incarnation of Visnu. It retells a story from the Ramayana of the victory of good over evil as represented by Rama's victory over the brave raksasha, Parashuram, the disciple of lord Shiva.

When Rama won Sita, in her swayamvar, by lifting and breaking the haradhenu (the bow of lord Shiva), Parashuram wakes up and rushes in anger with his axe to behead the destroyer of the haradhenu. In the ensuing battle Rama defeats Parashuram.

The story reflects the might of Krisna's avatar, Rama, and the defeat of the weak. It highlights the devotion and loyalty of a disciple to his teacher too.

Values: devotion to one's teachers; might of the Almighty

Apart from the six Ankiyaa Naat discussed above, Sankardeva wrote three more plays which have not been found by scholars. These were Cihna Yatra, Janma-jatra and Kangsa-badha.

VI. Bhaona

Bhaona represents the applied aspect of plays written in the Ankiya Naat tradition. Bhaona are colourful presentations which have the quality of keeping the audience spell bound. The orchestra, comprising of Gaayan (singers) and Baayan (instrumentalists), is clad in pristine white and the demons and animals are in the form of fanciful effigies. The actors representing kings and queens wear elaborate glittering costumes.

Masks are an integral part of the performance of Bhaona. The performers wear large, colourful masks of gods, goddesses, demons and animals. These masks are huge in size, sometimes reaching to the waist of the actor. Some are up to 15 feet in height which gives a majestic look to the performance. These masks need several actors to manipulate them. The actors make appropriate movements of the masks, depicting their character, communicating their stance and stature, and having an immense effect on the audience.

The performers enter through an archway of lights which is known as "Agni Garh." There is also a "Sutradhar," who is the narrator and introduces the play along with the Gaayan-Baayan. The Sutradhar continues to explain the story along with the orchestra in between the play so that the audience understands the enactment. Thus, the Bhaona is the presentation of a mythological story interspersed with narration, songs, music, and dance. These, together, make a magnificent portrayal which holds the attention of the audience and immerses them in a sensory experience which also depicts stories with moral content.

These presentations, therefore, are worthy situations for direct learning and observation of moral behavior. Moral values may thus develop through identification with the Hero or the major good characters that vanquish evil and epitomize "goodness."

VII. Present Scenario

In recent times Assam has seen another form of popular entertainment in the guise of the mobile theatre. These are performed by popular modern-day theatre actors as well as cinema idols. These theatres move from place to place and cover almost the whole of Assam, presenting plays on modern themes, popular among the masses. Unlike the Bhaona, they rarely have a moral message or lesson but are based on literary sagas such as Othello, or blockbusters such as Titanic.

Although effort has been made by Sangeet Natak Akademi Sattriya Kendra Centre, Asom Satra Mahasabha and the Srimanta Sankar Foundation to popularize the traditional Ankiya Bhaona by organizing annual Bhaona festivals, this traditional form of Assamese theatre needs to be taken to every corner of the state, covering both urban and rural areas, as a means of propagating the values which are depicted in the tales of ancient scriptures.

VIII. Conservation of Ankiya Naat and Bhaona

Ankiya Naat and Bhaona seem to have served an important purpose in the past, apart from entertainment and propagation of the Vaisnavite religion, and that is to impact the moral fabric of Assamese society of the past by contributing to development of moral values.

In context to the present degradation of moral values and widespread dearth in suitable role models, an effort to conserve Ankiya Naat and Bhaona is important. However, stage performances in select towns and Guwahati is not likely to be meaningful. Like the popular mobile theater, Ankiya Bhaona needs to go to every corner of Assam, both rural and urban areas, enacting the stories in all its grandeur by including the Sutradhar, Gaayan, Baayan and the colourfully clad and masked actors.

Development in all forms is crucial and not necessarily bad. It makes a culture progressive and open to innovative ideas and reason. The Ankiya Naat may also then be innovated to have a new appearance, where the language used is modern Assamese instead of Brajabuli, the stories too may be taken from scriptures such as the Jataka Tales, Panchtantra, etc. whereby a tale of moral value is presented in the Bhaona style. Modern stories may also be penned which will impact the modern-day children and provide an opportunity to develop morality.

As in the past, these new Bhaonas may also be staged in the precinct of Naam Ghars, lending a festive and joyful environment, which will attract children to attend and imbibe the values depicted. Attending Bhaonas may also be encouraged by schools or even made a part of their curriculum. However, they must continue to remain a spiritual-cultural aspect of society. In such a way, with time and repeated exposure to such events, it is expected that a positive outlook and future Assamese society with a sound moral fabric may be built.

Along with the conservation of this traditional theater form the paraphernalia needed for staging the plays, such as the glittering costumes, colourful masks, etc. will also be conserved, thereby providing employment to the craftsmen.

The character of Sutradhar and Gaayan and Baayan will also continue in the newer appearance of Bhaona and provide the music and storytelling. The final product is expected to be as grand and colourful as the traditional Bhaona. As only then will it be attractive for the masses, especially young children, who will be the target for learning and imbibing moral values.

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion it may be stated that effort must be made to conserve the traditional form of Bhaona, which can be considered as a powerful tool for development of moral values of the masses, especially children.

Keeping in step with time, some progressive changes may be made in the stories so that some contemporary issues can also be addressed in the plays. However, the essence of performance, characteristic of the Ankiya Naat and Bhaona, must not be lost. These plays will then be events for children to experience and observe, and imbibe the moral values inherent in the stories enacted by the various characters with pomp and show.

If we are to go forward, we must go back and rediscover those precious values -- that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that all reality has spiritual control.

Martin Luther King, Jr. 1929-1968, Civil-rights leader in the USA

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