

## **Construction of Masculinism in ‘Ankia Naat’ (Drama) of Mahapurush Sri Sankardeva: A Sociological Perspective beyond Traditional Reading**

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### **Abstract:**

The display, representation and impact of the ideas and notions of masculinity/femininity through diverse mediums of art, culture, literature and several other forms of art and entertainment has a long-drawn history that has not only established milestones of development of new eras in their specific domains but are intrinsically connected to the conceptualization and social acceptance of the many works on gender that have marked their footsteps in the paths travelled through the history. Theatre or the domain of drama being a very evocative, appealing and persuasive medium of flow of information has extensive possibilities for enormous influence in stating the picture and understanding of the concepts and agendas of socio-cultural significance. Thus it also holds the capacity to influence the process and understanding of the boundaries of matters like gender, society and so on in a very rigid and more specific manner. The tradition and the concept of ankia-naat coined and propagated by Mahapurush Sankardeva as a pioneer vernacular Assamese dramatic medium which was highly celebrated, socially accepted and readily interpreted by the common people of the Assamese Society immensely flourished through the paths of history and have several facets for readings pertaining to the concepts relating to gender.

**Keywords:** Drama, Masculinity, Gender, Society, Culture.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The idea of masculinity has a long drawn tradition of proliferation in social implications as well as in historical discourse. It has exercised enormous critical observations in the field of literature too. In Greek literature, masculinity generates a major literary concern. In ancient Indian literature too, the craft and characterization of a male counterparts heavily

rely on this notion of patronization of masculinity. In its interest to eternally authorize male hegemony in social structure, masculinity has been constructed as the principal apparatus in literature and politics. Towards the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of masculinity receives a radical momentum and its genesis lies on gender studies and its cry for social equality. An enquiry onto its rise will show that primarily the social construction of gender-based hierarchical complex is central to this idea of masculinity. The social model of masculinity grows in a parallel proportion to the feminist movement over swaying at that time in the west. With the radical responses of pioneering feminists of the west like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf etc. who worked against all patriarchal assumptions, masculinity also emerges as a counter-reaction to this force. In other words, masculinity becomes a new social and cultural outlook and performs as a principal avenue for responding to those challenges. Exhibiting masculinity in a counter platform against the feminine aggression of the time, its emphasis was mainly directed to categorically prescribe a set of attributes and societal behaviour which will be associated with standard manhood or masculine self-assertion by a male in the society. In the feminist writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) who was even a great humanist of 19<sup>th</sup> century, she recreates the ideas of hegemonic masculinity and androcentrism. Simultaneously, an explicit discussion on masculine ideology had taken its form in the writings of Warren Farrell, Terry Doly, Ernest Belfort Bax etc.

Towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a multidimensional nature of masculinity comes to be visible in literary discourses which results in wide-ranging heterogeneous reflections in literary studies from varied thinkers and writers. In later ages, with the growing up of autonomous model of cultural tradition, each nation tries to secure the patriarchal system by developing unique versions of masculinity in society. For its structural enunciation in social landscape, masculinity paves its way as an organizational unit. Establishing schools exclusively for boys in different countries is a manifestation of masculine discourse in institutionalized level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study is mainly carried on with an analytical approach and in case of content analysis, a qualitative approach with a descriptive methodology has been followed. Moreover, certain research materials and information have been collected from field studies, texts, journal articles etc.

## **DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

Coming to the context of Indian literature, culture, and social structure, masculine consciousness has been flourished in different genres in their individual ways. Construction of masculinity in Indian society is an integral component of male-female identity politics and it is not oriented towards western dialogue on masculinity. Considering the literary history as well as the social, cultural, and historical conditions of masculine studies in India, validation to this fact can be granted. The common assumption of male intellectual superiority in society is further strengthened by establishing ashramas (ancient schools) in medieval India. The Vaishnavism Movement that swayed across India as a social revolution in the sixteenth century also added a remarkable standard for rising masculine consciousness, later as

masculinity. The dichotomous ideologies of gender also placed masculine against feminine, thereby establishing a sexual stereotype in the society for political and social control which employs masculinity as symbolic of manliness, rationality, courage and so on.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, an extraordinary personality of the Assamese culture who had commendable proficiency and enormous contributions in the field of Assamese Culture and literature. He was a poet, playwright, socio-religious reformer and a scholarly saint who laid foundational milestones in the history of the Assamese culture as well its religious backdrop. Srimanta Sankardeva was the pioneer and reformer who gave the Assamese culture and race a new beginning and paved a new pathway for a diverse cultural reformation. He was an extremely celebrated personality among the people of Assam and considered as a saintly figure by a section of the Assamese cultural society. He was the most celebrated personality in the Assamese Society as he was not only a socio-cultural reformer and a religious teacher but was also a very proficient administrator and a versatile genius with commendable expertise and constructive understanding in art, music, literature and several other socio-cultural aspects. He was a savior of the Assamese culture and society who pioneered the neo-Vaishnavism Movement in Assam and spread its teachings and created an unprecedented acceptance and zeal among the people through his many works in the form of teachings, music, literature, art and cultural mediums which encompassed the many aspects of the Bhakti Movement which reshaped the culture, faith, integrity and social structure of the Assamese society.

The core aim of the Bhakti Theory of Sankardeva was to replace Saktism with Vaishnavism. And through this theory Mahapurush Sankardeva tried to disseminate innumerable principles of Nava-Vaishnava religion among the people of Assam through the various literary works and innovative art forms and deliveries. Sankardeva's religion centered on the core values and teachings of the "Srimat Bhagavata and the Geeta" through which he propagated the teachings of the principle of a new religion which spoke about the existence and prosperity of the eternal truth based on love and humanity. The religious values and principles of Sankardeva were based on democracy and tolerance and promote the equality of all human beings irrespective of caste, creed, status, etc. which was a step taken towards the elimination of the vicious demonic practice of untouchability and discriminatory practices of the class based society. Mahapurush Sankardeva used the institutional setups of Naamghar and Satra to preach and deliver the teachings of his socio-cultural & religious movement which redefined these institutions as the cultural as well as religious hub for the people which inspired, promoted and paved the way to the development and propagation of innovative, intellectual and creative socio-cultural and religious restructuring of the Assamese culture and society.

Mahapurush Sankardeva was also a pioneer in the formal history of the Assamese Drama Culture through his innovation of the "Ankia-Naat" way back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when he started an organized and innovative medium in this domain and gave a new way of representation and delivery of the socio-cultural and religious messages through an engaging and entertaining medium of art form. He developed these "Ankia-Naat" with such innovative techniques and methodologies to deliver information, messages, teachings which aim at educating the people through simple

display of information which is easily acceptable and understandable by people who are illiterate or uneducated. This innovative form of art pioneered by Sankardeva in the Assamese Culture is an organized and appreciable mix of music, dance, drama, narration, direction and production which shapes up to form a commendable medium of delivery of information and teachings.

Sankardeva's theological, religious, social-cultural, literary, and artistic contributions to Assamese society is also supplemented by a spontaneous flow of masculine temperament in them which consciously or unconsciously sustains social order as a strategic device of political privileges. Masculinity carries with it severe political undertone in its attempt to restructure the society. (Choudhuri, 2005)

The genre of drama that was in vogue in medieval Assam got a new impulse with the new reformative idiom formed by Sankardeva who had to indigenize the Sanskrit drama for native tongues and also to inculcate the purifying effects of Bhakti in them. Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism movement was pillared on two mediums of aesthetic expression which had an immediate appeal towards the common mass. They are: dramatic art and folk dance which are two major constituents of his concept of performing arts. His dramatic output was considerable comprising six Ankia-naat and these dramas though are scripted, they were mainly meant for stage performance, not for mere reading. A gendered reading of these dramas will reveal the fact that these dramas inherently imbibe the spirit of masculinity. An unconventional reading of these dramas not as a codified genre but more as a performative genre can give ample evidences that the stage performances in the form of narrative and verbal lore not only enhance the aesthetic value of the written texts, but also shift an exclusive concern how these texts have constructed a formal pattern of masculinity. It means in evaluating its influence, we will grab the role of an audience more than a reader. (Barman, 2017)

Sankardeva's dramas are specifically termed as "Ankia-naat" and he has earned a poetic genius to create subtle pieces of genuine characterization. The construction of male characters is equally grand. The heroic authority has been sanctioned to a male character in all his plays. Maheswar Neog, an acclaimed vaishnavite scholar of Assam has commented in this regard: "Krishna is the hero in five of Sankara's dramas, and in the Sixth, Rama plays that role. The hero in Sankara is, therefore, divine (divya), and endowed with all good and great qualities, some of which are even supernatural". Neog (1998, 254)

The plot of the dramas is arranged as to glorify the hero, Krishna or Rama but they are not stereotypical projection, rather a simultaneous interplay between realism and supernaturalism are evoked in their characterization. The development of male character is endowed with all manly attributes as they are usual noble (dhira as he cites), man of steadfastness with all moral embodiments who can vanquish the evil. Sankardeva's dramas have expounded the requisite standards for creation of male characters unlike the female. The characterization of Krishna and Rama appears to meet the criteria of ideological and traditional masculinity owing to its adherence to traditional prescriptions of male prospection. Sankardeva represents the character of Krishna as a perfect epitome of manhood and heroic capability. In Indian literature and religious philosophy, Krishna is a complex character. Sometimes, he is projected with all divinities as a male protector, sometimes he is a merciful

lord with a calm posture. In his human incarnation, his nature is peculiar, from a prankster god-child to a model lover. Sankardeva has succeeded to a great extent to capture the characteristic features of Krishna in a realistic fabric. Mainly, in two of his principal dramas, the "Rukmini-harana-nata" and "Parijata-harana-nata", the central plot revolves around asaga of love where the personality of Krishna has an intermingling of a model lover who chases and woos his beloved with all his tricks. In both these plays, representation of Krishna has a parallel similarity with the present day hero in traditional dramas echoing mostly through Krishna's activities and dialogues who after confronting all vicissitudes, finally gets united with his beloved. At one point, Krishna has striking qualities of a lover and at another point, he is a man of political wisdom, far-sightedness and ideology. As a social being though godly, Krishna exercising a considerable authority in society conforms to the relative discourses influencing all social norms and values. It is in this context, Krishna's characterization has presented profound reflections on the exact nature of masculine culture that we commonly used to cherish. (Bordoloi, 1996)

The implied suggestiveness of the particular nomenclature of Rukmini-harana and Parijata-harana which means an act of abduction or seizing of Rukmini and Parijata respectively brings a striking image of female subordination to a male protector. A critical gendered observation will cast this evidence that how projection of this dramatic characterization wishes to naturalize the idea of male supremacy in the society. It has validated the unquestionable authority of male folk on overshadowing women's individual identity and the need for a male protector to secure their existence. Though there are heroic substances prevailing over these plays, yet with this act of taking away the woman stealthily (by force or by consent), an underlying presence of impediment to biological determinism can also be felt. In reference to other male characters like "Krishna", "Sishupaal", "Raam", "Ravana", this incongruity of their character gets somehow visible when through their rigorous activities, women's identity is stigmatized and denounced from consideration. This is where masculinist ideology strategically sidelines the feminist avenues for self-regulation. (Goswami, 1988)

French literary theorist Foucault's influential study on sexuality in The History of Sexuality (1976) has made body as the object of historical and cultural analysis. For Foucault, human body is constituted within the specific nexus of culture and power discourse. Encroachment of the female body is the most accessible point to perform and endorse male dominance. The individual differentiation of thinking and choices of mythical female characters like "Xatyabhama", "Rukmini", "Radha" and "Sita" are getting blurred by masculine hegemony overpowering the dramatic plot. The representational economy of dialogue and narrative concern for female characters in the plays further have disempowered the female characters from getting an equal equation to their male characters. The text in Sankardeva's drama is not complementary to liberal humanism from a gendered perspective and masculine propensity that is reflected in his dramas, is a reactionary to the liberal ethics. The subsequent importance on establishing a discourse of power is getting into prominence through its highest concentration directing upon masculine authorization of power and political control. The royal bred people including the kings, courtiers, ministers including the sages are mostly entrusted with enormous power and political privileges in the public domain that are

thought to be great decision makers and sublime with varied skills. There is no scenic appearance of women in the whole landscape. Replicating the traditional royal courtyard, the whole set-up in performance too is structurally arranged to give major attention to the activities of the powerful men in the country. Even in the dramatic performances, there is the presence of the gayanas and vayanas (musicians) consisting of male performers. Sankardeva's dialogue on masculinity that he expounded in his ankia-naat became mouthpiece of the contemporary social and cultural systems of the medieval Assam. Within the broad framework of drama, the patriarchal system of the society gets reflected as a "co-text" inside the circle. (Mahanta, 1982)

Sankardeva's dramatic output has established masculinity as the dominant discourse by following an ideological affiliation which is a production and reproduction of deep-structured patriarchal power relations. In representation of actors to the audience, the accessories of dramatic performances especially the costume attracts a strong impression of constructing masculinity in their nature and attributes. The kings and warriors have distinguished gaudy costume. In portrayal of male actors, the use of artificial moustache made of coloured jute or cotton fibre is noteworthy as it represents typical aspect of masculine behaviour (see Image 2). Bearded man is a symbol of assertive masculinity and in drama; it turns to be performative masculinity. Moustaches are associated with power and eighteenth century England saw an upper hand of bearded people in all political curriculum during those days. This self-fashioning of man in a particular normative way in the Renaissance ages also attached necessary status symbol. Thus, as a defining trait of "manly" image in its collective acceptance, moustache is subjected to views of taste or distaste in popular culture from a long historical time. Biological determinism is dispensed with through the variety of costume meant for male and female as the differentiation of the male/female behaviour has been controlled by the distinct affirmation of their physiology in relation to their attire. Another persistent feature of male dressing style is the use of turban (paguri in Assamese) and head-gear (mukut in Assamese) which also mirrors an image of masculinity. Costume is one of those prominent mediums to concentrate on the different structures which are categorically arranged for male/female classification in the performances. It became a testing ground for ideal manhood in the drama. Along with the attire, the application of cosmetics suggesting a degree of social idealism also proves this masculine propensity in the plays. Male and female roles are represented with different colours and body art for having differentiation of imagery effect through their marvelous personality. The transcendental form of Krishna is exhibited upon a material human body with all its glory and embellishments. And he is represented with a dark complexion yet as a symbol of blooming youth and contemplating a supreme level of ideal manhood. Endowing a form of animatism through such figural representation of supernatural human beings ultimately exercises certain amount of impersonal control on how we uphold the notion of "male" and "female" in society. Sankardeva's dramas are based on a particular framework of conceptualism which is essentially metaphysical. His perspective on metaphysics solely rests upon propagating the faith of Vaishnavism where composing ankia-naat places an intermediary connection of the common people to the supreme power. The dramatic performances cater to an identical affirmation of people in relation to their real existences in society though apparently it is quite comprehensible that male overpowers the

whole scenario of the performance. The women roles were assigned to the men and accordingly the dressing style of women were executed on a male persona. A feminist approach of this role negation to women shows that social platforms are often forbidden grounds for women at that time and femininity as a submissive force to be abided by. The connotative layer of characterization in the dramas is symbolic of masculine temperament. An actor, in Assamese, is vernacularly called as a “bhawariya” which has a predominating element of masculine sentiment init. Another class of greenroom property meant for facial appearance is “masks” (mukha in Assamese) which also carries forward masculinity as a cultural tradition. These masks are earthen models. The popular image of Ravana as a powerful and ruthless demon is represented by a similarly grotesque mask with ten heads (Ravana is also known as Dashanan i.e. ten-headed monster) in Rama-vijaya-naat that is symbolic of his unmitigated manly vigour and abundant courage. (See Image 3 & 4)

Undoubtedly, these material properties for artistic embellishments of the characters also recognize masculinity as the dominant mark of male identity formation. Moreover, the boastful speeches, triumphant expressions in the war, physical posture and the warrior’s fighting dances coupled with courageous looks all are subjected to the performances of a male actor.

## CONCLUSION

All these performative enunciations along with the inclusive structural elements which intrinsically complement the dramatic performances and delivery of information pose as a source of supportive evidence which shed light on the presence, role and extent of the existence and impact of the thought, mindset and paradigm of masculinism is in fact a result and impact of a socio-cultural construct. The history has recorded certain specifically significant ideals which may be displayed or portrayed as external to a male body yet in some way or the other functions in primary ways to materialize the concept of masculinity



**Figure 1: A scene from Bhauna (dramatic performance of Ankia-Naat), Karmakar (2019)**

The formation or development of this concept and thought process of masculinity in the context of the socio-cultural situations and redevelopment in the 16<sup>th</sup> century scenario of

Assam is very exclusive and specific to many external factors, demography and socio-cultural statutes of the land. Therefore it clearly cannot be overlapped or defined by the nature of development, growth and trend of the milestones and journey of the course of masculinity in the West. In England, the core explanation and development of masculinity lies at the heart of Renaissance art, culture, philosophy, and literature and in the similar manner and pertaining to similar prospects took birth in the Assam of medieval era which was visualized in the dramatic creations of the work and methods of Sankardeva. The creations of Sankardeva not only aimed at providing a new religious and socio-cultural understanding of a society of the new era but in the process also provided platforms to the people to display their multifaceted qualities and talents in creative ways through recreational mediums which could serve as a benchmark of excellence in the history of the land's socio-cultural history and could hold the place of a role model for all future generations to inspire and pave ways to new and creative ways of preservation, enlightenment and expansion of a the land's culture and understanding in an inclusive and innovative manner.



**Figure 2: Artificial Moustache as a part of facial make-up, Assam Tourism (2008)**



**Figure 3: Earthen Mask of Ravana, Skipp (2009)**





**Figure 4: Earthen Mask of Ravana (Heart for art)**

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