



***Ankīyā Nāṭas* – Tales of Gender(ed) Performance: A Study on *Bhāonā* presentations in *Satras* of Majuli in Assam, India**

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Abstract

Folklore is embedded with conventional symbolic acts providing “inter-subjective frames of reference” pertaining to cultural spaces; it manifests the worldview and ethos of the society. Along with other societal forces, structuring of folklore is conditioned by gender ideology. The idea of gender is considered as a socio-culturally constructed “matter of culture” that acts as an ‘institution’ to regulate social processes encompassing everyday life. It is a “learned conduct” that is being continually manifested and appropriated through various social institutions existing in a particular society. The present qualitative study delves into the plays of *Ankīyā Nāṭas* written by the medieval polymath –Srimanta Sankaradeva and explores subsequent *Bhāonā* presentations held within the *Satras* of Majuli district in Assam, to analyze the narratives of the plays and subsequent performances of the ritualistic theatre of Assam through the lens of gender. Performance ethnography conducted in *Satras* (Sri Sri Auniati *Satra*, Sri Sri Natun Samaguri *Satra*, Sri Sri Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* and Sri Sri Ahatguri Bor *Satra*) of Majuli district in Assam analyzes *Bhāonā* as a gendered performance that excludes women’s participation and provides exclusive space to male *bhakats* in order to propagate the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism. The textual analysis of the narratives of *Ankīyā Nāṭas* under four themes – Masculinity, Hyper Masculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity, Femininity, and Othering and Denial of Agency to women, elaborates *Ankīyā Nāṭas* as tales of gender performances. The findings of the study critique how *Ankīyā Nāṭas* and *Bhāonās* as religio-cultural ‘spectacle’ shape gender imagery, idealize gender performance and legitimize gender relations within institutionalized gendered

spaces of *Satras*, in order to maintain social order in neo-Vaishnavite society.

Keywords: *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas*, *Bhāonā*, Gender Performance, Neo-Vaishnavism, *Satra*

Introduction of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam: An Overview

During the 13th to 15th centuries, the region now demarcated as the Northeast Indian state of Assam was not under the dominion of a single dynasty but was reigned by several kings and tribal chieftains like Koch, Ahom, Chutia, Cachari, etc. who had distinctive worldviews and socio-religio-cultural ethos. Every tribal group had own sets of rites and ritual practices (Patnaik). Over time, certain ritual practices adhering to animism and occultism gained prominence. Saktism being one of the predominant religious cults of the region exercised larger impact on people (Guha; Neog; Sarma). Worshiping of several deities and sacrificial practices encompassed the religious milieu. Animosity amongst tribes and communities, feudalism inflicted atrocities and caste based social stratification resulted in conflicts.

Owing to social disorder, the medieval social reformer – Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449 AD – 1568 AD) took pragmatic approach to propagate the ideals of Bhakti movement to synthesize the stratified society through fraternity and acculturation of different ethnic groups (Barman). The phase known as neo-Vaishnavite period, started around late 15th century and gained prominence during the 16th and 17th centuries (Datta). The neo-Vaishnavite movement is revered as the Renaissance of Assam, which proliferated not only as a religious faith but also as a way of life (Borkakoti) that leads to the ‘awakening in religion, literary and social spheres’ (Sarma).

Establishment of *Nāmghars* (prayer halls) and creation of performing art forms (like music, dance, drama, musical instruments etc.) to propagate Vaishnava philosophies lead to congregation of people belonging to different stratum of the caste society. Eventually, sacrificial rites were replaced with

preaching devotion mainly through *Kīrtana*, *Śravaṇa* and *Dasya*. The existing dogma of polytheism was replaced with *Eka Śaraṇ Nāma Dharma*, which belief in only one form of God, i.e., Kṛṣṇa and his incarnation Rāma. However, the existence of female deities (as either consort or attributes of the Supreme Being) that were prevalent in Saktism and Tantrism was completely replaced by a male deity. This makes it strikingly different from the Vaishnavite cults prevalent in other parts of India (Borkakoti).

With the passage of time the neo-Vaishnavite movement got institutionalized with the formation of *Satras* (Vaishnavite monasteries) all over Assam that serve as the chief custodian of the religio-cultural practices necessary to sustain Bhakti tradition as propounded by Sankaradeva.

***Satra*: A Gendered Space**

The ideals of post-Vedic Hinduism influenced neo-Vaishnavism in terms of problematizing woman as agent of material pleasures. In several passages of *Kīrtana Ghōṣā*– the Vaishnava text, Sankaradeva had described evil influences of women and wealth that devotees must avoid to ensure blissful life (Sarma). As celibacy became the most revered institutionalized means to attain Vaishnavism, *Satras* fenced the world between two binary oppositions – the ‘man’ and the ‘woman’ in order to appropriate the norms of neo-Vaishnavism. Although non-celibate monastic tradition (known as *Grihasti*) exists all over Assam, celibate monastic tradition (known as *Udasin*) is highly revered. The Vaishnavite *Satras* exclusively institutionalize male devotion through ordination of male devotees as *bhakats* (disciple) and initiation of males as *Satradhikar* (head of *Satra*). Any female can become a *sisḥya* (disciple) and participate in certain rituals but the paucity of her presence within the *Satra* is prescribed and dictated by religious norms. While every ‘man’ gets an equal opportunity for delving into the higher realms of devotion and spirituality, every ‘woman’ is tied to domestic realms.

Satras not only institutionalized religious expressions but also re-structured the course of knowledge system thereby influencing various cultural manifestations. Within the *Satras* only the male *bhakats* receive liturgical training on distinctive art forms of *Sankari* culture through *guru-sishya parampara*. As such performing arts are symbolic modes for articulating devotion and propagation of the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism, the active participation of only male disciples and absence or restricted presence of female devotees make *Satras* highly gendered space.

Aṅkīyā Nāṭas and Bhāonā

During the 13th to 15th centuries, the region now demarcated as Assam already had indigenous dance and dramatic forms like *Dhulia*, *Deodhani*, *Ojapali*, and *Putulanach* (puppetry). Enriched with these experiences and also other dramatic presentations like *Ramlila*, *Yakshgana* and *Yatra* (popular in different parts of India), Sankaradeva could fathom the influence of performing art forms to propagate the ideals of Vaishnava cult in a stratified society. Eventually, he developed a new form of dramatic performance through one act play called *Cihna Yatra* (literal meaning ‘pageant in painted scenes’) in 1468 AD.

During the late 15th century, Sankaradeva’s pageant shows developed into *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* with all elements of dramatic unity like music, song, dance, dialogue, costume, masks, make up, etc. The dramatic compositions are known as *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* (as they are single act play) and staging of the *nāṭas* are known as *Bhāonā*. Srimanta Sankaradeva had written six *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* namely, *Kāli Damana*, *Patnī Prasāda*, *Keli Gopāla*, *Rukmīnī Harāṇa*, *Pārijāta Harāṇa* and *Śrī Rāma Bijaya* in *Brajāvalī* language, depicting interpretative stories from *Purānas* like *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Agni Purāṇa*, *Harivāmsa* and epic like *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Brajāvalī*, an artificial language of the Kṛṣṇa cult was prevalent mainly in Northern and Eastern India, and has elements of Avadhi, old Assamese, Brajabhasa and Maithili. Traditionally, *Bhāonā* performances that are held within the confines of *Satras* or *Nāmghars* on

religio-ritualistic purposes begin after dusk and continue until dawn.

The qualitative research delves into the plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* written by Srimanta Sankaradeva and explores subsequent institutionalized *Bhāonā* presentations held within the *Satras* of Majuli district in Assam, to analyze the narratives of the plays and subsequent performances through the lens of gender. The theme-wise textual analysis of the scripts of six *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* (*Kāli Damana*, *Patnī Prasāda*, *Keli Gopāla*, *Rukmīnī Harāṇa*, *Pārijāta Harāṇa* and *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*), and performance ethnography conducted in *Satras* (*Kamalabari Satra*, *Auniati Satra*, *Natun Samaguri Satra* and *Garmur Satra*) of Majuli in Assam explore the narratives' structures and performance dynamics of the ritualistic dramas. The analysis in this article is divided into two sections. The first section explores *Bhāonā* (through ethnographic study in Majuli) as gendered performance that excludes women's participation and provides exclusive space to male *bhakats* to propagate the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism. The second section elaborates on the narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* as tales of gender performance, through theme-wise textual analysis like Masculinity, Hyper Masculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity, Femininity, and Othering and Denial of Agency to Women. The transliterated texts of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* and the English translation mentioned in this research are quoted from Yashodhara Medhi's book *The Plays of Śaṅkaradeva* (2017).

***Bhāonā*: A Gendered Performance**

The plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* that staged as *Bhāonā* within the *Satras* of Majuli district in Assam are performed exclusively by male *bhakats* of the *Satras* and also enthusiast male laities residing in nearby villages. The actors of *Bhāonā* (known as *bhaworiya*) are selected keeping in mind the artistic prowess and physical resemblance with the characters to be enacted. The male characters are dressed in *paguri*, *joilchola*, *dhuti*, *chollgachapkon*, *brekuchola*, *choukon*, *ghuri*, *tangali*, *nepur*, *kanchi*, and take weapons like *gada*, *chakra*, *torowal*, *dhal*,

jathi, *dhenu*, etc. depending upon the nature and mood of the characters being portrayed in the plays. The characters like Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are portrayed with their bodies painted blue in colour, wear yellow coloured *dhuti* and put peacock's feathers on their heads. The *Sutradhar* wears *chapon*, *ghuri* and *mogholpag*. *Gayan* and *Bayan*, the male musicians are dressed in white *dhuti*, *Punjabi* and *pag*.

Although participation of women in staging of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* (either as actors or singers) is strictly prohibited within the *Satras*, the plays are not devoid of female characters. The feminine forms within the narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* are impersonated in male gendered bodies through 'stylisation of the body' (Butler 519) like facial expressions, gestures, gait, voice intonation, clothing, extravagant make-up, etc. *Bhakats* chosen for performing feminine forms not only maintain particular diet to look more convincing as women but also undertake certain psycho-physical training to internalize the socially constructed mannerisms of represented female characters. The *Khanikar* (make-up artist) puts special effort to meticulously reproduce a female on a male body by decking the characters with *mekhela-chador*, *riha*, *cheleng* and ornaments like *golpata*, *nupur*, *kharu*, etc. Thus, the physicality of women is absent in *Bhāonā* performances but there is strong presence of institutionalized concept of women which get reproduced and reinforced during the performances through stereotypical elements representing femininity.

Bhāonā performances begin with *Dhemali* in which two male performers carry the *agni-garh* (arch of lights made up of bamboo sticks) to the acting arena followed by the performance of *Gayan Bayan* who play musical instruments like *khol* and *bor-taal*, sing verses of *ghosa* and dance with rhythmic stepping for almost three hours. It is followed by benediction known as *Nandi* in which the male singers melodiously recite the verses in praise of the Supreme Being (i.e. Kṛṣṇa). It is followed by staging of the play and *Prarochana* (laudation or propitiation) in between anchored by *Sutradhar*.

***Aṅkīyā Nāṭas*: Tales of Gender Performance**

Masculinity

Looking at gender as ‘performance’ (Butler), masculinity can be defined as a ‘gender identity and not a natural attribute. It is socially constructed and fluid. There is no one universal masculinity but many forms of masculinities’ (Morrell) which are acquired by individuals over time through socialization, and exercised in varied degrees under different social circumstances. Masculinities are ‘not fixed character types but configuration of practices generated in a particular situation in a changing structure of relationships’ (Connell *Masculinities*).

The plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* portray multiple facets of masculinities through the male protagonists -- Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. The quintessential example of normative masculinity is challenged and negated by fluid masculinities of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, whose tranquility impart compassion in the ‘good’, and valor instill fear in the ‘evil’. Kṛṣṇa’s masculinity is not in quest for gaudy display of ‘manliness’ rather his masculinity is in nurturing a generous ‘man’ within himself. His masculine identity is in playing *benu* (flute) with calm eyes, adorning himself with *kodombomala* (garland made of *Kadam* flower), carrying himself with a slightly bend spine (denoting humbleness) and always wearing an eloquent smile. Rāma has similar demeanor as the play *Śrī Rāma Bijaya* describes him as ‘*paṅkajanayanabayanamandahasā*’ [the eyes are lotus like and a slight smile appeared on his face] and ‘*herimūrutī mana manamathabhule*’ [Looking at His form, the mind forgets the beauty of Manamatha]. The narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* emphasize that although Kṛṣṇa and Rāma have effeminate aura, they are virile ‘men’ shouldering their sole responsibility of protecting ‘feeble’ womenfolk and the macrocosm. They are the romantic lovers and/or husbands until the space in which their masculinities are being performed compel them to put on aggression to slay hegemonic forces. The narratives overtly highlight that Kṛṣṇa’s and Rāma’s self-image as a ‘man’ is not validated only through vanquishing demons but are also

gratified through *karuna* (compassion) that dawn upon them after conquering evil forces.

The play *Kāli Damana* celebrates Kṛṣṇa's intrepidity as he playfully vanquishes the venomous serpent Kāli Nāga who had poisoned the river - Kālindī, on the other hand the narrative also portrays Kṛṣṇa as a compassionate man who spares Kāli Nāga's life at the request of the serpent's wives. While dancing with Satyabhāmā and Rukmīṇī in the play *Pārijāta Harāna*, Kṛṣṇa's countenance and demeanor resembles his female counterparts – the 'effeminate' aura is his masculinity in that particular space and time. Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as a sensible husband who understands his wife - Satyabhāmā's distress for not having the *Pārijāta* flower and says, '*pryākadukhadekhinasaheśarira*' [My body cannot bear to see the suffering of my beloved]. Eventually, he is manipulated to steal the *Pārijāta* tree from Indra's *Amaravati* to pacify his grieving wife. The domitable husband who silently steals the *Pārijāta* tree, transforms into an indomitable combatant to slay the demons Narakāsura and Mura with utmost ease and the text narrates,

harītaṅkāvalaśāraṅgabhīdi |

barīsilabānadaityakāhōpīdi ||

kāṭalakāhukandhakaraśira |

māralaharisabadānavabīra ||

[Bending and twanging the bow Śāraṅga, Hari showered the demons with arrows pressing them. Cut the shoulder, hands and head of some and killed all the great warrior demons.]

Similarly, in the play *Keli Gopāla*, Kṛṣṇa's effeminate aura is just like the *Gopis* – the cowherd women of Vraja while dancing with them in the moonlit night at Ṛndāvana but he transforms into a dauntless 'man' to kill the demon Śaṅkhacūḍa who came to abduct the *Gopis* being filled with lust. In the play *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*, Rāma is the invincible combatant who defeats demons like Tāḍakā, Mārīca and Subāhu, and fights against

Paraśurāma who epitomizes the ego of hegemonic masculinity. He is also portrayed as the affectionate husband of Sītā whose involvement in familial pleasure is described in the narrative as,

aicanaparamakāmaratnakeli kaya: sītākamanorathapuri:

rāmacandraanudine: ānandamandirerahala ||

[In this way, playing amorous sports and fulfilling the wishes of Sītā, Rāmachandra remained in the palace of happiness day after day.]

Ṛṣṇa's masculinity does not prevent him from expressing 'vulnerable' emotions. In the play *Rukmīnī Harāna*, Ṛṣṇa never hides his 'weakness' to perform as a stereotypical 'man' who eschews emotions; he laments by crying profusely for his lover Rukmīnī in front of Vedanidhi saying, '*se pryākadukhasunīe: prānarahayenāhi ||*' [Knowing about the plight of my beloved I cannot live any more]. Ṛṣṇa's masculinity is in exercising his brain over brawn. Despite possessing physical strength to mount an attack, Ṛṣṇa chose to sneak in Rukmīnī's *svayamvara* to elope with her in order to get married. He does not wage war against Rukma (Rukmīnī's brother) and Śīsupāla (Rukmīnī's prospective groom) until such hegemonic forces compel him to fight. Although Ṛṣṇa defeated Rukma and Śīsupāla as they were '*jaicesimhakaāguksudraharīna*' [as if a little deer in front of a lion], he spared their lives at the entreaties of Rukmīnī.

Hyper Masculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity

In any culture the exemplar of masculinity that exaggerates 'manly' performances and either negates or subdues socially perceived feminine traits is known as hyper-masculinity. A hyper-masculine man is characterized by the idealization of stereotypical masculine traits such as virility, dominance, competitiveness, aggression, and rejection of feminine traits such as compassion or emotional expressions which are perceived as antithetical and even inferior to machismo (Zaitchick and Mosher; Scharrer). Donald L. Mosher and Mark

Sirkim operationally defined hyper-masculinity as comprising of three variables – callous sexual attitude toward women, belief in violence and experience danger as exciting.

Hegemonic masculinity is the socio-culturally constructed dominant form of masculinity that is ‘culturally exalted above other expressions of masculinity as well as femininity’ (Connell *Gender and Power*); it acts as normative forces to which ‘men’ are held accountable. Hegemonic masculinity is ‘a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimize and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance’ (Carrigan, Connell and Lee). Although hegemonic masculinity benefits specific men by exercising control over women, it differs from other forms of masculinity as it wants to have control over other men too for ‘universal social advancement’. It is ‘dominant culture’s superficial and inauthentic definitions of manhood and masculinity resulting in a lack of tolerance, respect or acceptance of difference’ existing in any society (Toombs).

In the plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* hyper as well as hegemonic masculinities are manifested and appropriated by characters like the Brāhṃaṇas in *Patnī Prasāda*, Rukma and Śiśupāla in *Rukṃiṇī Harāṇa*, Nārada and Śaci in *Pārijāta Harāṇa*, Śaṅkhacūḍa in *Keli Gopāla* and Paraśurāma in *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*. According to the concept of hegemony as proposed by Antonio Gramsci, these characters in the narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* are the ‘weavers of the fabric of hegemony’ acting towards perpetuation of hegemonic-masculine ideology within social hierarchy. Juxtaposed to the effeminate aura of Ṛṣṇa and Rāma are the hyper masculine arrogance endorsed during *Bhāonā* performances through erect spine, broad chest, tightly stretched shoulders, brisk and wide strides, widely opened eyes and uncontrolled movements.

The sinful demon-Śaṅkhacūḍa’s hegemonic masculinity is portrayed in *Keli Gopāla* through his lust for abduction of ‘weak’ *Gopis* for forceful sexual encounters. In *Patnī Prasāda*,

the proud Brāhṃaṇas symbolizing the hegemonic masculine forces not only dictate their wives' devotional expressions but also belittle Kṛṣṇa in order to exhibit their power and legitimize their dominance in the society. They dismiss Kṛṣṇa's existence saying,

*āhegovālasaba: hāmubedatasāstrataparamapārgata:
 jājnabratadāneparamapavitra : o hāmubhudevatā :
 hāmākasarbbalokepujaya : nandasutakṛṣṇa :
 hāmākaāgekonahaya ||*

[Oh you cowherd boys! We are great experts in the Vedas and all the scriptures; performing sacrifices; observing fasts and making gifts we are absolutely pure; we are the gods in the earth; all the people worship us. Who is Kṛṣṇa, the son of Nanda, before us?]

Later in the play when the Brāhṃaṇas wanted to greet Kṛṣṇa in Gokula being ashamed of their arrogance, an old Brāhṃaṇa reminded them how it might provoke hegemonic masculinity in Kāṃsa, who could subjugate the entire Brāhṃaṇa community to perpetuate his supremacy. Similarly, in *Rukmīṇī Harṇa*, Rukma's hegemonic masculinity not only seeks for subjugation of his sister but also intends to emasculate Kṛṣṇa by forcing Rukmīṇī to marry Śiśupāla.

Sensing Kṛṣṇa's sensitivity towards his wife as a strike against normative masculinity, Nārada in the play *Pārijāta Harṇa* emasculates Kṛṣṇa by criticizing him as '*strikalādikā*' [under the control of one's wife]. Later in the play Śaci – Indra's wife endorses the forces of hegemonic masculinity when she ridicules Indra's nonchalance saying,

*hesvāmitohobidyamānathākite :
 hāmākapārijātamānusiniyā jāi :
 ṣahtoḥākadhikārathika:bajrakodhikārahokall*

[Oh dear husband, in your very presence my *pārijāta* has been taken away by humans. Oh shame on you and shame on your weapon *Vajra* too!]

Indra's masculine pride is in possessing his *Vajra* (thunderbolt) which can be considered as a phallus like symbol associated with his identity. In order to exercise dominance over mortal male (i.e. Kṛṣṇa), Śaci tries to instill fear of emasculation in her husband. It provoked Indra to 'man up' and perform his hegemonic masculinity by waging war against Kṛṣṇa to reclaim the *Pārijāta* tree. Similarly, in the play *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*, Paraśurāma symbolizes the ego of hegemonic masculinity who tries to legitimize his power in the social hierarchy while stating,

ayebeṇdasikaputra: merāgurukadhanubhaṅga kaya...

sabaḡsatrikamunḡdamārāla: se sonitekūthāramalinabhela:

āhājutohārakandha – rudhire: pununikākaraba ||

[Oh the son of a *candāla*, how can you go breaking the bow of my master...I have beheaded all the ksatriyas and with that blood the axe has become stained. Ah, today with the blood from your it will be cleaned again.]

Ajagava – the bow of Śivā is revered by Paraśurāma as a phallus like symbol associated with the 'masculine' identity. Rāma's 'audacity' to break the bow infuriated him and he waged war against Rāma in order to re-establish his dominance over other males like Rāma.

Femininity

As gender performance is culture specific, the ideals are indoctrinated through social processes. In a patriarchal society, women are socialized to present themselves as 'precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion' (Goffman); they are ought to exhibit shyness, timidity, frailty and fear in order to perpetuate gender hierarchies. An embodiment of such socio-culturally constructed feminine assertion is exemplified in the

narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* that reinforce purity, beauty, passivity, docility, receptivity and tenderness as the utmost qualities of a female. Hyper-feminization of female characters is glorified by portraying them as overemotional and feeble, personalities who can only swoon and cry when faced with oddities. Femininity is exhibited by female characters in *Bhāonā* through controlled movement, sophisticated gait, relaxed shoulders that are slightly drawn inwards, lowered eyes with a slight bend in head and spine, etc.

The female characters in the plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* are stereotypically portrayed as the epitome of beauty who are admired by the society only for their alluring physical appearances and innate 'righteousness'. In the play *Rukmīnī Harāṇa*, Rukmīnī is described as '*isatahasitamukhacāndaujora | dasanamotimajacanayanacakora ||*' [The moon-like face is bright with a smile. The teeth look like pearls and the eyes are like the *cakora* bird] whose '*navapallavarucipadajugasohe | pekhitesura-nara-muni-mana mohe ||*' [The pair of feet is beautiful like fresh buds or newly sprung sprouts, and seeing those, the minds of even gods, men and sages are fascinated]. In the play *Pārijāta Harāṇa*, Satyabhāmā is described as '*purnimākcāndabadanaparakāśā |*' [as fair as full-moon]. In the play *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*, Sītā is described as, '*kanaka putalitulanuanupāma ||*' [her body, like a doll made of gold, is incomparable] for whom,

isatahasitamadanamohajāi |
nāsā tilaphulakamalinimāyi ||
navayaubana tana badaripramāna |
urukarikarakāṭidambarukāthāna ||

[Even Madana is stupefied at the slight smile and the nose of that *padminī* woman is like the sesame flower. The new young body is like the jujube tree. The thighs are like trunks of elephants and the hips look like the *dambura*.]

The plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* delineate the culturally conceived binary antithesis between principled and unprincipled archetypes of women. The idealized virtue and divine beauty of ‘*trbhubanamohani : padumani : jānekisitāka*’ [who fascinates the three worlds, a *padminī* woman, Jānakī Sītā] is juxtaposed with crude, repulsive and unfeminine attributes of the demoness – Pūtanā, to suggest socio-cultural codes of conduct for either becoming or unbecoming a woman in a phallocentric society. The play *Keli Gopāla* ‘de-feminizes’ Pūtanā while describing her as a grotesque body having dark complexion, extremely wide waist, sagging breasts, disheveled hair, large fleshy lips and protruding teeth. The innate malevolent energy in Pūtanā instigates her to terrorize people by killing their babies. She is bereft of idealized motherly affection as portrayed through Yaśodā (Krishna’s mother), and turns sacred life-giving breast milk into poison.

The narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* introduce and establish the female characters through ascribed identities such as daughters, sisters and wives, and provide no room for their achieved identities. The concept of self in the female characters are reflection of the duties they are ought to shoulder (as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers) for proper functioning of patriarchy. In *Rukmīṇī Harāṇa* and *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*, Rukmīṇī and Sītā are expected to perform their roles as obedient daughters being recognized by the society through ascribed identities such as ‘*Bhismokrajnandini*’ [Daughter of King Bhismak] and ‘*Jonoksutā*’ [Daughter of Janak] respectively. Eschewing her longing for Rāma, Sītā decks herself up for the *svayamvara* organized by her father, just like the lovelorn Rukmīṇī. While imploring divine intervention to stop their marriages, they succumb to patriarchal forces without any

attempt for outrageous resistance; their concept of self dictates them to perform as compliant daughters.

The society promulgates another highly aspired identity for Rukmīnī, Sītā and Satyabhāmā - their identity as devoted wives. They are the embodiment of dutiful wives upholding the *patibrata* ideology (to staunchly remain faithful to husband in every ups and downs) with unfaltering devotion. They are ought to channelize their energy only in devotion to husband and fulfill familial ties. In *Pārijāta Harāna*, insecurity paralyses Satyabhāmā when she heard her husband had presented the *Pārijāta* flower to co-wife Rukmīnī. Preoccupied with thoughts about becoming '*sobhāgini*' (fortunate) for her husband, Satyabhāmā pleads with Kṛṣṇa to bring her the celestial *Pārijāta* tree from Indra's garden. The narrative depicts her as a parochial wife who is least bothered about the compromised peace and sovereignty of the land, being attacked by the demon Narakāśura, and is more concerned about winning her husband's love by possessing the *Pārijāta* flower. The play further elaborates that wife's life becomes meaningful only by serving '*prānanātha*' [Lord of life i.e. husband], when Rukmīnī affirms that the sole purpose of her life is to devote herself in her husband's feet as serving him will lead to the attainment of four goals of human lives namely, *dharma*, *artha*, *kaṃā* and *moḁsa*.

Othering and Denial of Agency to Women

Gender hierarchy has always oppressed women by assigning them the status of 'Other' in order to maintain patriarchal power dynamics. Simon de Beauvoir in the book *The Second Sex* chronicled that the 'subject' (male) can only be positioned as the 'One' or the 'Essential' when opposed with the 'object' (female) who are the established 'Other' or the 'Inessential'. It is not only that the object is 'dependent' upon the subject to compensate for her inherent biological limitations but the subject's status is established and leveraged by the object's presumed 'inferiority'. Socio-cultural constructs of hierarchical dualism within gender binary is indoctrinated through social institutions. While a man is

socialized to comprehend his identity in terms of what ‘he has got’, a woman weaves her concept of self in terms of what ‘she lacks’. Moreover, the ascribed status of being ‘Other’ orchestrates in a society through denial of agency to the ‘object’, where agency empowers an individual to act independently in determining one’s volitional actions and maneuver such choices to achieve desired goals.

Gender politics of the society as depicted in the plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* have ‘Othered’ women and denied agency to them; femininity is romanticized through disapproving women’s right to exercise the endowments enjoyed by men. In the play *Pārijāta Harāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa’s essentiality in the battlefield due to his unmatched intrepidity is juxtaposed with Satyabhāmā’s conceived ‘lack’ of valor for being a female. She is the ‘inferior’, ‘Inessential’ ‘Other’ in the battle against the demon Narakāśura as Kṛṣṇa says, ‘*he prve : tuhūnstrījāti : yuddhakasamavetohārigamanuchitanahe* ||’ [Oh dear wife, it is not proper for you, a woman class, to go at the time of war]. The narrative further ‘Othered’ women for presumed collective ‘lack’ of intellect as compared to their male counterparts when Kṛṣṇa says, ‘*sribujhavemenā juhjeka*’ [the women folk fight stubbornly without understanding], and Indra says to Śacī and Satyabhāmā, ‘*tuhūnstrījātikichobujhavenāhi* ||’ [You women folk do not understand anything]. Similarly, in the play *Patnī Prasadā*, the Brāhṃanas not only ‘Othered’ women by highlighting their lack of Vedic knowledge, when they say ‘*ohibrāhṃaṇīsabaśaucācārahīna: bedaśāstrajānāyēnāhi : gurusevā paramadharmabarjjita* ||’ [Our wives do not know the rites of purification; do not know anything about the Vedas; away from the noble practice of worshipping the preceptors] but also underlined women’s generalized ‘inferior’ position in the society while stating ‘*hāmusabastritoadhamabheṭo*’ [We have fallen lower than the women].

In *Kālī Damana* when Kṛṣṇa vanquished the serpent Kālī Nāga for poisoning the Kālīndī river, the serpent’s wives pleaded for his life to Kṛṣṇa saying, ‘*he paramaisvara : śrikrṣṇa*

: *aba kṛpā karu : hāmākaanāthakarabināhi : tohāriāgu āncolapāti : patidānamāgo* ||' [Oh Supreme God, Sri Kṛṣṇa, now please have mercy; please do not orphanate us. Spreading wide the fore-end of our clothing we beg of you for the life of our husband]. Similarly, in the play *Pārijāta Harāna* the two wives of Kṛṣṇa – Rukmīnī and Satyabhāmā long for the *Pārijāta* flower as it can make any woman 'sobhāgini' for her husband. The narratives overtly emphasize the importance of husband in a *patribrata* wife's life. Her existence is legitimized in a patriarchal society only through the presence of her 'man'. The husband is the 'Essential' 'subject' who possesses the 'agency' and his 'lack' will distance her from the locus of power thereby invalidating the life of 'Inessential', agency-less infantile wife. Moreover, the absence of husband equates to double denial of agency for women in the macrocosmic world.

In the play *Rukmīnī Harāna*, Rukmīnī discreetly swoons and cries for her love – Kṛṣṇa after hearing about her brother's decision to get her married with Śiśupāla. She despises her brother - Rukma in front of her friend by saying, '*pāpīśaratuḥnāhibhelināsa* !' [Oh, wicked brother, why have you not perished]. She also despises her prospective groom - Śiśupāla by saying, '*ae pāpi Śiśupāla: tuhuhāmākabibāh akariteāvala : hāhājaiCESimhakabhāryāka : ṣṛgālaabhilāsa kaya thikal*' [Oh you sinner Śiśupāla, you have come over here to marry me like a jackal wishing to have the wife of a lion]. Adhering to patriarchal social setting Rukmīnī is conditioned to privately vent out her dissent, in front of her confidante. In the outer world, she epitomizes the docile femininity who is denied the agency of confronting her love for Kṛṣṇa in front of patriarchal forces like her brother, and has to wait for Kṛṣṇa's agency to alter her fate.

In the play *Śrī Rāma Bijaya*, although Sītā longs for Rāma as her husband, she has no agency to either invite Rāma or stop the organized *svayamvara* where Rāma is not invited. It might apparently seem that she has the 'agency' to choose her husband through *svayamvara* but it can be counted as an

example how hegemonic masculinity camouflages execution of imposed patriarchal decisions; women are deceived with false assumption of having the agency to choose their husbands. Moreover, the assumed power of Sītā to choose her husband through *svayamvara* only paves the stage for Rāma to perform his masculinity by breaking the *Ajagava*, and exhibit his worthiness as a valiant ‘subject’ to win the ‘object’ through marriage. The agency-less garland in Sītā’s hands symbolizes her own feminine self in the hand of patriarchy, whose essentiality in the narrative is only to perpetuate the existing symbolic order with no agency to invert the semiotics of gender.

Conclusion

Institutionalization of Neo-Vaishnavism in *Satras* has created an exclusive space for the male *bhakats* and distanced women from formalized religio-cultural practices. Gender performances are represented and appropriated through various cultural manifestations within the gendered space of *Satra*. The dialogical structure of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* and the subsequent *Bhāonā* performances not only propagate Bhakti towards Supreme Being (i.e. Kṛṣṇa and Rāma) but also operate as religio-cultural ‘spectacle’ intending to maintain social order by establishing power hierarchies, shaping gender imagery, moralizing gendered behavior and legitimizing gender relations in a neo-Vaishnavite society. In the plays of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas*, masculinity interacts with different situations through different identities, thereby giving a scope for fluid masculinity, whereas female characters do not have any such ‘paradigms of femininity’ (Hoydis). The ideals of neo-Vaishnavism as presented through the narratives of *Aṅkīyā Nāṭas* villainize hegemonic masculinity and idolize the effeminized masculinity of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma in order to annihilate the then prevalent ‘hegemonic’ Brahmanical doctrines. The plays challenge and negate agents of hegemonic masculinity in patriarchal society to establish the fluid masculinity of a ‘Vaishnavite man’ and leverage his performance as a ‘complete’ man who could uphold the moral and social values. The female archetype in the plays of *Aṅkīyā*

Nāṭas is representative of idealistic characterization within a binary system whose chief austerity is to remain devoted to husband – her ‘veritable God’. The narratives of *Ankīyā Nāṭas* appropriate women’s status as subordinate agency-less ‘Inessential’ ‘Other’ in order to facilitate the apotheosis of the ‘subject’ – the husband (i.e. Kṛṣṇa and Rāma). The narratives have patronizing attitude towards women who are regarded as ‘incapable of handling their own affairs and to be socially inconsequential without relationships with men’ (Kinsley). The *Ankīyā Nāṭas* and *Bhāonā* performances not only delineate cultural conceptions around the desired qualities of a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’ but also elaborate the process of becoming or unbecoming a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’ in a neo-Vaishnavite society dominated by *Satra* institutions.

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