

Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat: Tradition, Characteristics, and Significance

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Abstract

Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat, created with the objective of propagating Ek Saran Naam Dharma in Assam, represents a remarkable contribution to the history of Assamese literature, theatre, music, and culture. These plays are not merely stage presentations of religious narratives; they embody a harmonious synthesis of devotion, morality, social consciousness, spiritual values, and aesthetic expression. Through the integration of literature, music, dance, acting, dialogue, songs, and stage performance, Ankiya Naat evolved into a distinctive dramatic tradition that has significantly strengthened the cultural identity of Assam. This paper examines the origin, development, dramatic structure, thematic content, artistic characteristics, and socio-cultural significance of Ankiya Naat. It also discusses the artistic presentation of mythological narratives, the integrated use of music, dance, and performance, the distinctive role of the Sutradhar, and the contribution of this dramatic tradition to the dissemination of Neo- Vaishnavite ideals among the people. The study reveals that Ankiya Naat not only laid a unique foundation for Assamese theatre but also played a significant role in fostering collective cultural consciousness, moral values, and devotional ideals. Despite changing times, it has preserved its heritage, artistic excellence, and cultural relevance, and continues to be recognised as a living cultural tradition of Assam. Thus, this study seeks to highlight the literary, theatrical, musical, and cultural significance of Ankiya Naat through a comprehensive evaluation of its tradition, characteristics, and enduring importance.

Keywords: Sankardeva, Ankiya Naat, Neo- Vaishnavite Culture, Theatre, Music, Bhaona.

Introduction

Sankardeva's contribution to the literary, cultural, and theatrical traditions of Assam is unparalleled. He was a religious preacher, social reformer, poet, playwright, musician, painter, and a creator of extraordinary versatility. With the objective of strengthening the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, he effectively employed literature, music, theatre, and other artistic forms as powerful means of communication. One of the most significant outcomes of this multifaceted creative endeavour was the emergence of Ankiya Naat. The term Ankiya Naat

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Published: 03 August 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJMRS.2026.v2.i3.301146>

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is derived from the word 'anka'. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva used terms such as naat, naatak, and yatra in their plays, while the designation Ankia Naat gained wider recognition in later literary discussions (Bayan, 2016, p.14). Ankiya Bhaona has had a profound influence on the social, cultural, and religious life of Assam. It extends beyond being merely a theatrical tradition, contributing significantly to the promotion of moral values, devotional consciousness, cultural identity, and social harmony. Through the integration of music, acting, instrumental performance, stagecraft, and other artistic elements, it has evolved into a comprehensive form of theatrical and cultural expression. (Thakuria, 2025, pp. 133–134) Sankardeva developed this dramatic tradition with the aim of presenting the fundamental principles of Ek Saran Nam Dharma to the common people in a simple, engaging, and appealing manner. His Ankia Naat plays *Patni Prasad*, *Kaliya Daman*, *Keli Gopal*, *Rukmini Haran*, *Parijat Haran*, and *Raam Vijay* played a significant role in shaping the Neo-Vaishnavite theatrical tradition of Assam and in establishing a distinctive dramatic heritage. In addition, his *Chihna Yatra* is regarded as one of the earliest and most remarkable theatrical experiments in the history of Assamese theatre, although its original manuscript is no longer available. The play was performed continuously for seven days and seven nights, astonishing the people of the society (Lahkar, 2025, p. 87).

The primary objective behind the creation of Ankia Naat was not merely to entertain audiences. Rather, it sought to awaken spiritual consciousness, promote moral values, and communicate the fundamental principles of devotional faith to the common people in a simple and accessible manner. Although the plays are based on mythological narratives and devotional themes, they were presented in a form that was both comprehensible and appealing to ordinary audiences. Through the harmonious integration of music, dance, recitation, acting, and stage presentation, Ankia Naat evolved into a complete dramatic tradition.

The influence of Ankia Naat on Assamese society has been profound and far-reaching. This dramatic tradition has played a significant role in the development of language, literature, music, theatrical performance, and collective cultural consciousness. Despite changes in society and culture over time, Ankia Naat has preserved its fundamental ideals and artistic identity and continues to be widely appreciated. Its distinctive dramatic conventions, thematic richness, and artistic excellence have enriched the cultural heritage of Assam and earned it a unique place within the region's cultural tradition.

Significance of the Study

Sankardeva's Ankia Naat is an invaluable heritage of Assamese literature, theatre, and the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural tradition. Through the harmonious integration of religious ideals, literary creativity, music, dance, and performance, it has established a distinctive dramatic tradition. Although the terms Ankiya Naat and Ankiya Bhaona are often used interchangeably, Ankiya Naat denotes the written dramatic text, whereas Ankiya Bhaona refers to its theatrical performance (Kalita, 2018, p. 219). The present study attempts to analyse the tradition, characteristics, and significance of Ankia Naat from a comprehensive perspective. It is expected that this study will provide a systematic understanding of the dramatic structure, artistic characteristics, and contribution of Ankia Naat to Assamese society and culture.

Furthermore, this study seeks to present a clearer understanding of Sankardeva's dramatic vision and the cultural significance of Ankia Naat while contributing to the study of Assamese dramatic literature. It is also expected to serve as a preliminary foundation for future research on the preservation of the heritage of Ankia Naat and the continuity of the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural tradition. In particular, this study is expected to be informative and useful for researchers, teachers, students, and readers interested in Assamese literature, culture, music, and theatre.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To analyse the origin, development, and nature of Sankardeva's Ankia Naat.
2. To examine the dramatic structure, artistic characteristics, and distinctive modes of presentation of Ankia Naat.
3. To evaluate the integration of music, dance, acting, and other artistic elements in Ankia Naat.
4. To analyse the role of Ankia Naat in the development of Assamese society, culture, and Neo-Vaishnavite consciousness.
5. To assess the significance of Ankia Naat in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Assam.

Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined Sankardeva's Ankia Naat from literary, dramatic, religious, and cultural perspectives. Among them, Maheswar Neog (1965), in his book *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*, provides a comprehensive discussion on the life of Sankardeva, the historical background of Ek Saran Nam Dharma, the growth of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, and the socio-religious context that led to the emergence of Ankia Naat. His work offers a valuable foundation for understanding Ankia Naat as an effective cultural medium for the propagation of the Bhakti movement.

In addition, the edited volume *Ankiya Nat* by Birinchi Kumar Barua has been recognised as an important source for the study of Ankia Naat. The collection facilitates an understanding of the language, dramatic structure, narrative organisation, and artistic features of the plays. It also makes a significant contribution to the preservation and authentic presentation of these dramatic texts.

The existing literature has discussed various aspects of Ankia Naat, including its origin, dramatic conventions, language, devotional philosophy, performance tradition, and cultural contribution. However, studies that examine its tradition, characteristics, and significance in an integrated manner remain comparatively limited. Therefore, the present paper attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the tradition, artistic characteristics, and overall contribution of Ankia Naat to Assamese literature and culture.

Research Methodology

The present study is primarily based on a qualitative research approach. Relevant published sources related to the subject have been examined to analyse different aspects of Ankiya Naat. The collected information has been interpreted through descriptive and analytical methods in order to explain the origin, characteristics, artistic form, and cultural significance of Ankiya Naat.

Origin and Development of Ankiya Naat

Ankiya Naat, created by Sankardeva, occupies a unique and distinguished position in the history of Assamese literature and culture. This dramatic tradition evolved through the synthesis of the Sanskrit theatrical tradition, narratives from the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the ideals of the Neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement. Sankardeva creatively adapted elements of the Indian dramatic tradition and harmonised them with the socio-cultural environment of Assam and the principles of Neo-Vaishnavism, thereby developing a distinctive theatrical tradition (Sharma, 1998, pp. 20–21). As a result, Ankiya Naat emerged as a unique dramatic form with its own artistic identity.

The primary objective of Ankiya Naat was to propagate the ideals of Ek Saran Nam Dharma among the common people in a simple and engaging manner. At that time, not everyone was familiar with the scriptures or the Sanskrit language. Therefore, complex religious concepts were presented in an accessible form through drama, songs, dialogues, and performance. From this perspective, Ankiya Naat developed not only as a form of dramatic literature but also as an effective medium for the dissemination of religious ideals.

The thematic content of Ankiya Naat is primarily based on episodes from the *Bhagavata*, the *Ramayana*, and the life of Lord Krishna. Although these narratives are mythological, their dramatic arrangement, characterisation, and sequence of events reflect Sankardeva's creative vision. The plays are characterised by a well-structured narrative, clear character portrayal, and a strong emphasis on evoking devotional sentiment.

Sankardeva did not restrict drama to spoken dialogue alone; instead, he accorded equal importance to music, dance, songs, instrumental accompaniment, and acting. Consequently, Ankiya Naat evolved into an integrated dramatic tradition. The opening of the performance, the entrance of the Sutradhar, songs, dances, and the progression of the narrative are harmoniously interwoven. This artistic integration constitutes one of the defining characteristics of Ankiya Naat.

With the gradual development of Ankiya Naat, its performance practices, stage presentation, and dramatic conventions also became more systematic. Particular emphasis was placed on discipline, spiritual ambience, and artistic order during theatrical performances. These features established Ankiya Naat not merely as a literary creation but as a living cultural tradition.

Overall, the origin of Ankiya Naat is closely associated with the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural awakening in Assam. Through the harmonious integration of Sankardeva's creative vision, religious philosophy, and artistic sensibility, this dramatic tradition inaugurated a new phase in Assamese dramatic literature. In the course of time, it exerted a profound influence on the

cultural life of Assam and laid a strong foundation for the subsequent development of Assamese theatre.

Characteristics of Ankia Naat

Ankia Naat represents a distinctive tradition within Assamese dramatic literature. Its structural design, thematic orientation, mode of presentation, and artistic organisation distinguish it from other dramatic traditions. Sankardeva conceived drama not merely as a literary form but as an integrated medium for the dissemination of religious ideals, artistic expression, and social instruction. Consequently, Ankia Naat reflects a harmonious combination of dramatic elements with music, dance, instrumental accompaniment, and performance, giving rise to a unique theatrical tradition.

(1) The Prominent Role of the Sutradhar

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Ankiya Naat is the central role of the Sutradhar. He initiates the performance, advances the narrative, establishes communication with the audience, and provides interpretative explanations that give coherence to the entire dramatic presentation (Bayan, 2016, p. 19). The Sutradhar functions not merely as an announcer or introducer but also as a singer, interpreter, director, and a vital link between the audience and the dramatic action. He actively participates in explaining the various situations on stage, the psychological states of the characters, and the progression of the narrative. Consequently, in Ankiya Naat, the Sutradhar is not simply a dramatic character; rather, he emerges as the driving force behind the entire theatrical performance.



Performance of the Sutradhar

(2) Use of Songs, Shlokas, and Payars

The extensive use of songs, shlokas, and *Payars* constitutes another important feature of Ankia Naat. These elements are not included merely for musical ornamentation; rather, they contribute significantly to the development of the narrative, the expression of emotions, and the creation of devotional sentiment. Songs accompany different stages of the dramatic performance, illustrating changes in mood, introducing new episodes, and reinforcing the spiritual message of the play. Thus, music becomes an essential narrative device rather than a supplementary artistic element.

(3) Use of Brajavali Language

The use of Brajavali is another distinguishing feature of Ankia Naat. The language lends literary elegance and devotional dignity to the dramatic text while enhancing the musical quality of hymns, songs, and devotional passages. Its use creates an atmosphere appropriate to the spiritual character of the plays without diminishing their communicative purpose. At the same time, the dramatic presentation remains sufficiently accessible to enable the audience to follow the narrative with ease.

(4) Rhythmic or Cadenced Prose

Ankia Naat also displays a distinctive style of rhythmic prose. The prose passages are characterised by rhythmic movement, alliteration, and carefully organised verbal patterns, giving them a musical quality even outside the lyrical sections. This rhythmic expression strengthens dramatic dialogue and establishes a natural transition between prose and song. As a result, the dramatic narration acquires both literary elegance and performative vitality.

(5) Devotional Themes and a Well-Structured Plot

The dramatic narratives of Ankia Naat are primarily derived from episodes of the *Bhagavata*, the *Ramayana*, and the life of Lord Krishna. However, these narratives are not reproduced mechanically; instead, they are reorganised to suit dramatic presentation. The plots remain coherent and free from unnecessary subplots or excessive complexity, allowing the central message to emerge with clarity. Throughout the plays, devotion, moral instruction, and spiritual values remain the principal thematic concerns.

(6) Integration of Music, Dance, and Performance

Another significant characteristic of Ankia Naat is the organic integration of literature, music, dance, instrumental accompaniment, and acting. These artistic components complement one another throughout the performance, creating a unified theatrical experience. Songs deepen emotional expression, dance enriches visual appeal, acting brings the characters to life, and instrumental music strengthens the dramatic atmosphere. This synthesis of multiple art forms constitutes one of the defining artistic features of Ankia Naat.

(7) Disciplined Mode of Dramatic Presentation

The performance tradition of Ankia Naat is marked by order, discipline, and artistic balance. Every stage of the presentation—including the entrance of the Sutradhara, musical performances, acting, dance, and the progression of the narrative—follows a systematic pattern. This disciplined mode of presentation contributes to the coherence and effectiveness of the performance while reflecting the organised nature of the dramatic tradition.

(8) An Integrated Cultural Tradition

Taken as a whole, Ankia Naat is far more than a dramatic composition; it represents an integrated cultural tradition of Assam. Its distinctive dramatic structure, the central role of the Sutradhara, the extensive use of songs, the employment of Brajavali, rhythmic prose, and the harmonious integration of music, dance, and acting collectively establish its unique identity.

These characteristics have enabled Ankia Naat to preserve its artistic excellence and cultural relevance across generations, securing its enduring place in the cultural heritage of Assam.

Purvaranga of Ankia Naat: Purpose and Significance

One of the distinctive features of Ankiya Naat is its well-structured Purvaranga. Purvaranga refers to the series of preliminary ceremonial performances conducted before the beginning of the main dramatic narrative to create an appropriate atmosphere for the theatrical presentation (Bayan, 2016, p. 27). Deka (2020) states that the *Purvaranga* in *Ankiya Naat* is observed as an auspicious preliminary ritual before the beginning of the main performance and is known as *Dhemali* (p. 55). In Ankia Naat, however, the Purvaranga is not merely a formal opening; it constitutes an integral part of the dramatic tradition. Through this preliminary stage, a spiritual and aesthetic atmosphere is created, establishing a meaningful relationship among the performance space, the performers, and the audience.

Every stage of the Purvaranga reflects discipline, systematic organisation, and spiritual consciousness. Before the commencement of the play, the performance space is prepared through music, instrumental accompaniment, and other ceremonial activities. This process transforms the dramatic presentation from a mere theatrical performance into an expression of religious and cultural devotion. By creating an appropriate dramatic atmosphere, the Purvaranga also prepares the audience mentally and emotionally for the unfolding narrative.

The entrance of the Sutradhar constitutes one of the most significant elements of the Purvaranga. At the beginning of the performance, the Sutradhar establishes communication with the audience by introducing the purpose of the play, its background, and the manner in which the presentation will proceed. His role reflects a harmonious combination of dignity, devotional sentiment, and dramatic discipline. As a result, the audience can easily understand the subject matter and become emotionally involved in the dramatic experience.

Music and instrumental accompaniment also hold an important place in the Purvaranga. The combined use of songs and musical instruments creates a solemn yet captivating atmosphere at the very beginning of the performance. Their function extends beyond providing musical pleasure; they initiate the dramatic mood and direct the audience's attention towards the main presentation. The harmonious integration of music, dance, and expressive movements further enhances the vitality and aesthetic appeal of the performance.

Another important aspect of the Purvaranga is its artistic discipline. Like the principal performance itself, every stage of the Purvaranga follows a definite sequence and established conventions. There is no scope for unnecessary or unrelated elements, as each activity contributes directly to the preparation of the dramatic presentation. This systematic organisation strengthens the dramatic discipline of Ankia Naat and lends the performance a distinctive artistic dignity.

The Purvaranga is equally significant from a religious perspective. The ceremonial proceedings performed before the commencement of the play awaken devotional consciousness and transform the entire presentation into an act of spiritual observance. Consequently, the

performance transcends the boundaries of a cultural event and becomes a collective experience of devotion, spirituality, and communal participation.

Overall, the Purvaranga constitutes an inseparable and distinctive component of Ankia Naat. It creates an appropriate environment for the performance, strengthens the discipline of dramatic presentation, and plays a vital role in establishing both the psychological and spiritual connection between the audience and the dramatic narrative. For these reasons, the Purvaranga may be regarded as one of the fundamental foundations of the dramatic tradition of Ankia Naat.



Dhemali performed before the commencement of an Ankiya Naat performance.

Literary, Cultural, and Social Significance of Ankia Naat

Ankia Naat, created by Sankardeva, represents a landmark achievement in the history of Assamese literature and culture. This dramatic tradition not only enriched Assamese dramatic literature but also played a significant role in promoting devotional ideals, moral values, and cultural unity within society. Sankardeva did not regard drama merely as a means of entertainment; instead, he employed it as an effective medium for social awakening and the dissemination of religious consciousness. Consequently, Ankia Naat became an integral part of the collective cultural life of Assamese society.

From a literary perspective, Ankia Naat introduced a distinctive dimension to Assamese dramatic literature. The coherence of its narrative, the clear portrayal of characters, the simplicity of its dialogues, and the creative use of songs enhance the dramatic appeal of the plays. The harmonious integration of devotional themes with literary excellence established these works not only as religious compositions but also as significant literary creations. Through its language, imagination, and dramatic structure, Ankia Naat marked the beginning of a new phase in the development of Assamese literature.

The cultural contribution of Ankia Naat is equally significant. This dramatic tradition encouraged the integrated development of music, dance, acting, instrumental performance, costume, and stage presentation, thereby fostering a comprehensive artistic culture. The collective participation associated with theatrical performances strengthened the values of cooperation, discipline, and cultural unity within society. At the same time, Ankia Naat

contributed to the preservation and continuity of the folk traditions of Assam and the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage.

Ankia Naat also possesses considerable social significance. Through its dramatic presentations, ideals such as truth, justice, devotion, tolerance, and human values were communicated to the common people in a simple and engaging manner. As a result, theatrical performance evolved beyond the sphere of entertainment and became an effective means of social education. Thus, Ankia Naat has exercised a lasting influence on literature, culture, and society alike, making an enduring contribution to the development of Assamese cultural life.

Conclusion

Sankardeva's Ankia Naat represents a unique and enduring contribution to the history of Assamese literature, culture, and theatre. Through this dramatic tradition, he successfully disseminated the ideals of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, devotional consciousness, and moral values among different sections of society in an artistic and accessible manner. The tradition of Ankia Naat, together with its dramatic structure, Purvaranga, the central role of the Sutradhara, and the harmonious integration of music, dance, acting, and language, has established it as a distinctive dramatic tradition. These characteristics not only enhance the artistic appeal of the performances but also effectively convey their underlying ideals of devotion, morality, and social welfare.

The significance of Ankia Naat extends far beyond the boundaries of literature and theatre. It has played a vital role in shaping a well-organised cultural tradition within Assamese society by encouraging collective participation, discipline, devotional values, and cultural unity. Through the integrated use of music, dance, and performance, Ankia Naat has provided Assamese cultural life with a distinctive identity while laying a strong foundation for the subsequent development of theatrical practices in Assam.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Sankardeva's Ankia Naat marked the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of Assamese dramatic literature. Its tradition, artistic characteristics, and cultural significance continue to remain relevant even today. Therefore, a systematic study of this dramatic tradition is essential not only for understanding Sankardeva's creative genius but also for appreciating the historical development of Assamese literature, theatre, and the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage.

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