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Srimanta Sankaradeva and Bertolt Brecht: A Comparative Study on their Dramatic Arts

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ABSTRACT

The present paper compares the dramatic arts of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Bertolt Brecht, two extraordinary writers from vastly different historical times and cultural traditions who shared a vision of theatre's social duty. Sankaradeva, the founder of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, used his Ankiya Nats to propagate religious principles, moral discipline, and spiritual awareness among the general public. His plays incorporated music, dance, narration, and devotional themes to produce an approachable and entertaining type of performance. In contrast, Bertolt Brecht, a twentieth-century German dramatist, created the notion of Epic Theatre to promote critical thinking and social consciousness. Rejecting emotional absorption, he employed strategies like episodic storytelling, the alienation effect and commentary through songs to stimulate rational reflection among audiences.

The study investigates their dramatic goals, structural elements, performance styles, and intended influence on spectators. It demonstrates how Sankaradeva strove to steer society by spiritual enlightenment, whereas Brecht sought to stimulate social inquiry and intellectual awareness. Despite their differing ideologies and methods, both dramatists saw theatre as an effective medium for teaching and reform. The research concludes that their dramatic contributions show theatre's ongoing ability to communicate ideas, form social consciousness, and affect human cognition across cultural and chronological borders.

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INTRODUCTION:

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) is one of the most charismatic geniuses and personalities born on Assamese soil. A devout Vaishnavite and the chief stalwart of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, Sankardeva is remembered not only for his socio-religious reforms enlightening the dark ages in Assam, but also for his outstanding literary creations and trans-creations. While discussing the dramaturgy of Sankardeva's plays, another giant of modern theatre comes to our mind. He is Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the German playwright and theorist of drama. Though separated by time, space and culture, there are serious resemblances in terms of their dramaturgy.

The study of dramatic literature from various cultures provides insightful information about how theatre reflects and responds to human experience. Drama has traditionally been used not just as a form of artistic expression, but also as a means of communication between performers and audiences. Performance communicates ideas, values, and social concerns in a more direct and compelling manner than many other literary forms. This communicative power makes theatre a useful tool for influencing ideas and shaping communal consciousness.

Understanding the universality and distinctiveness of dramatic art is aided by a comparative analysis of dramatists from various historical and cultural contexts. Despite coming from completely different eras and cultures, Srimanta Sankaradeva and Bertolt Brecht's contributions show notable parallels in their conceptions of the role of theater. In an effort to give theater greater significance and direction, both experimented with dramatic form and presentation. As Allardyce Nicoll points out, drama constantly evolves in accordance with societal requirements and conditions, modifying its tactics to better communicate with its audience (Nicoll, 1964, p. 12). In this light, comparing these two dramatists is crucial for understanding how theatre may function as a dynamic and purposeful art form across cultures.

Objectives of the Study

- To make a comparative study of the dramatic arts of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Bertolt Brecht, focusing on their dramatic purposes and techniques.
- To examine how both playwrights used theatre to promote social, spiritual, and intellectual reform and influence their cultures.

Method of Study

The study is undertaken with the help of qualitative and comparative approach with close reading of the select texts. To carry out this project help has been taken from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are the plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva, particularly his Ankiya Nats and major plays of Bertolt Brecht. Secondary sources involve relevant books, essays, articles, and e-resources accessed through database such as JSTOR, shodhganga-inflibnet, research gate, academia.edu etc.

Discussion and Analysis

Srimanta Sankaradeva wrote plays at the later stage of his life. There are six extant plays of Sankaradeva. It is believed that he wrote nine plays, of which only six are available: *Chinhayatra* (lost), *Kaliadaman, Patniprasad, Keligopal, Rukminiharan, Parijatharan,, Ram Vijoy, Janma-Jatra*(lost) and *Kangsa-badha* (lost). His plays are called *Ankiya Nats*. The sole purpose of writing *Angkiya Nat* was to propagate the religious ideas of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assamese society. Drama was his last literary tool

using as an effective means of communication, reaching out the common people of the society. Since drama is a performing art and an audio-visual medium of entertainment, it is capable of disseminating the ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism most effectively. "Among the diverse forms of theatre created in the sixteen century to propagate Vaishnavism, *Angkiya Nat* of Assam is one of the most unusual, because it blends religious philosophy with indigenous forms of folk entertainment and techniques of performance derived from the classical tradition of Sanskrit drama"(Richmond, 1974, p. 146). Sankardeva was well conversant with both the classical dramas and indigenous or local traditions of folk dramatic performances like *Ojapali*, *Putalanach* (puppet dance), *Dhuliaan* (Drumbeat dance), *Dhuliya Bhaona*, *Khuiya Bhaona*, *Kushangan* etc. "He made a happy fusion of the local with the Indian, two identities virtually merged in to one"(Pathak, 2012, p. 95). In fact he has formed a simplified yet effective medium in *Angkiya Nat* to serve his sole purpose of preaching the common people. Like other Neo-Vaishnavites, he also found in Bhagabat Purana strong sources of moral and spiritual insights. He has taken stories and legends of Bhagawat Purana as materials of his plays where Lord Krishna is the key figure and his activities (*lilas*) are considered to be appropriate subject matter for the *Angkiya Nats*. He considered *Angkiya Nat* as a strong tool for changing the society. "The outpouring of theatrical works towards the end of his career suggests that he regarded drama as important, although his connection with and interest in the theatre during the formative years of his life seems to have been slight. He probably saw highly popular forms of theatre on his pilgrimages through North India, such as the *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of Vrindavana and Varanasi and *Jatra* of Bengal and Odisha, and found theatre to be an effective means of reaching large numbers of people. Presumably for the benefit of the people who could neither read nor write, he simplifies his teachings in his dramatic stories from the life of Krishna"(Richmond, 1974, p. 146).

The *Angkiya Nats* are simple in its presentation and performance. In contrast to the classical Sanskrit plays, Sankardeva simplified the subject matter and medium of expression in order to make his plays easily accessible to the common people. As used in his Borgeets, he developed and used an artificial language called *Brajabuli*, "which bears elements from ancient Pali, mostly used by the Buddhists, and from Maithili, Awadhi and Bhojpuri. Even Persian elements are found in Sankari *Barjabuli*. Add to that the local Kamrupi elements that gave local flavor to his language. Such an effort has given the *Angkiya Nats* a national identity. In the process it established a rapport with the larger Neo-Vaishanavite fraternity that swept the country during that time. The language of such plays is not only poetic, but equally prosaic" (Pathak, 2012, pp. 103-104). *Angkiya Nats* are musical extravaganzas divided in to five categories of song sequences: *nandi bhatima*, songs sung by the actors while entering the stage, songs to narrate the story of the play, *poyar* and *muktimangal bhatima*. Songs and music has substantial contribution to the appeal of the *Ankiya Nats*. The institution of *Sutradhar* in *Angkiya Nats* is of pivotal importance. Borrowed from the Sanskrit plays, Sankardeva maximized the role of Sutradhar in the enactment of its story. It was developed in to an overwhelming presence in an *Ankiya Nat*. it has become the director, manager, narrator, actor, singer, dancer of the play, rolling in one. He is an indispensable and essential element in an *Ankiya Nat*. It evolved in the hands of Sankardeva an active agent in

establishing effective rapport with the audience by narrating and interpreting the presentation of the play.

Bertolt Brecht is a political playwright who also used drama as a strong tool for changing the existing order of society. He developed a theory of drama along with Erwin Piscator which went radically against the long standing theory of drama upheld and formulated by Aristotle. He has written more than a dozen of plays. Some notable plays are *The Threepenny Opera, Mother Courage and her Children, Life of Galileo, Mother, The Good Person of Szechwan, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* etc. Brecht was politically associated with the left wing political ideology. He was an ardent critic of western capitalism. Through theatre, Brecht has tried to set upside down in the western world. He openly revolted against the Aristotelian theory of drama which was based on emotions of pity and fear. He propagated a type of theatre which is quite opposite to Aristotelian one. He called this type of theatre as Epic Theatre. Brecht has been well-acquainted with different traditions of theatrical performances of the world. His "Epic Theatre was a break with the established dramatic styles. In Brecht's words, the 'essential point of epic theatre is that it appeals less to the spectators' feelings than to his reason'. It denotes a form of narrative/chronicle play which is didactic, which is not restricted by the unity of time and which presents a series of episodes in a simple and direct way: a kind of linear narration (each scene for itself). Notable features are the use of Chorus, a narrator, slide projection, film, placards and music. Much epic drama was devoted to the expression of political ideas and ideals, though not overtly propagandist" (Cuddon, 1999, pp. 273-74). In order to achieve the targeted goal of writing plays, he has devised innovative method and techniques of presenting the story. He wanted to transform theatre in a parliament hall where serious discussion and debates are set in for new legislation. The prime objective in the performances of plays is to achieve alienation effect. The alienation effect or A-effect (in German language known as *Verfremdungseffeke*) is a key element in Brechtian theory of drama. "Brecht's view was that both audience and actors should preserve a state of critical detachment from the play and its presentation in performance. He required the audience to be reminded from time to time that they were only watching a play, a representation of life, and therefore they should control their identification with the characters and action. Likewise the actors should keep a kind of distance from the parts they are interpreting; they should have an attitude towards the character rather than try to efface themselves within it" (Cuddon, 1999, p. 20).

Both Sankaradeva and Brecht wrote plays with definite purpose of changing and reforming the society to which they belonged. They could sense strong potential embedded in dramatic art capable of enlightening both the literate and non-literate sections of society. Through the medium of dramatic performances and already extant stories, they had been able to penetrate in to the hearts of different types of audiences. Through epic theatre Brecht tried to awaken the rationality of the audience to the bleak reality of society accentuated by and product of capitalism. He made the audience aware to the social problems and ills prevailing in society and through brainstorming while watching the performances they could find solutions. Sankaradeva through simplified forms of presentation, through music and dances wanted to purge their spirituality and morality by establishing *bhakti* at the hearts of the audiences. Through the medium of dramatic

performances, both the giants tried to transform and transport their respective societies in to different heights by changing the prevailing order of society.

Sankaradeva and Brecht's deliberate redefining of the audience's role in theatrical performances is a key point of comparison. The audience becomes an essential component of the spiritual experience in Sankaradeva's Ankiya Nat. The audience is progressively drawn into the moral and philosophical realm of the play through devotional music, stylized performance, and the Sutradhar's guiding presence. In addition to recounting events, the Sutradhar clarifies meanings and creates a channel of communication between the actors and the audience. This strategy ensures that the audience understands the religious significance underlying the theatrical scene. According to Richmond (1974), the Vaishnava dramas of Assam were intended to instruct and inspire devotion among ordinary people, particularly those who had limited access to formal religious resources (p. 146). Thus, performance becomes a living vehicle for the common sharing of spiritual knowledge.

In contrast, Brecht purposefully designed his plays to avoid complete emotional immersion. He was concerned that too much emotional involvement would hinder critical thinking. To combat this, he used strategies that constantly reminded the audience of the artificiality of theatrical depiction. Direct address, episodic storytelling, apparent stage layouts, and musical commentary all helped to keep illusion at distant. Instead of encouraging viewers to identify with characters, these tactics urged them to observe circumstances objectively. According to Cuddon (1999), epic drama appeals to the spectator's reason and presents events in a way that encourages reflection rather than emotional surrender (pp. 273-274). This approach allows theatre a platform for examining social realities rather than escaping them.

Music plays a significant but contrasting role in the dramatic structures of both the playwrights. In Sankaradeva's drama, music serves as a devotional force, deepening the emotional and spiritual environment. The quality of performance is reinforced by the borgeets and other musical components, which also aid in the accessible delivery of religious teachings. The devotional goal is reinforced by music, which also makes the audience and performer feel more united. But music has a different function in Brecht's theater. Songs frequently break up the story's flow to offer their own comments on the action. They promote critical observation rather than heightened emotional engagement. This unique application of music encourages intellectual awareness rather than passive receipt.

Another area of similarity can be seen in their approach to dramatic structure. Sankaradeva used a fluid performing technique, which was inspired by regional folk customs, kept his plays relevant and approachable for a wide range of audiences. His language and narrative strategies provided clarity while preserving artistic beauty. Similarly, Brecht shunned comprehensive realism in favor of an episodic format in which each scene depicted a specific idea or scenario. This structure enabled audiences to closely evaluate individual instances. In both cases, formal simplicity was used to communicate effectively.

Their dramatic tactics also reflect their deeper philosophical perspectives. Sankaradeva's dramatic vision is based on spiritual harmony and ethical refinement. His plays highlight

commitment, humility, and moral responsibility as necessary components of human life. In contrast, Brecht's dramatic vision emphasizes social awareness and critical inquiry. His plays place human acts in economic and political contexts, prompting audiences to consider the impact of social systems on individual conduct.

These distinctions illustrate the versatility of theatre as a cultural tool. Sankaradeva used performance to improve spiritual values and cultural coherence in Assamese society, whereas Brecht used it to promote analytical thinking and social consciousness in contemporary industrial society. Both dramatists exhibited a deep awareness of how theatrical approaches may alter perception and cognition. Their works demonstrate that theatre has the ability to not only portray life, but also alter how people understand their surroundings.

Conclusion

The study shows that both playwrights saw theater as an important tool for influencing society, despite coming from completely different historical eras, cultural backgrounds, and ideological frameworks. Their dramatic productions were meant to convey ideas, generate awareness and direct social change rather than just amuse audiences. They both broadened the goals and potential of theatrical performance with their unique dramatic techniques.

Sankaradeva's dramatic art arose from the socio-religious context of medieval Assam. His Ankiya Nats were established to disseminate Neo-Vaishnavism's ideas while also cultivating moral discipline and spiritual devotion among the masses. By combining narrative simplicity with music, dancing, and the Sutradhar's guiding presence, he created a dramatic form that was accessible to both literate and non-literate audiences. As a result, theatre evolved into a shared cultural arena for effectively communicating spiritual teachings and ethical ideals.

In contrast, Brecht approached theatre through a modern sociopolitical lens. Through his Epic Theatre concept, he challenged conventional dramatic traditions that emphasized emotional immersion. Instead, he created strategies that kept the audience at a critical distance from the performance, encouraging them to examine social realities and question established systems. His play attempted to promote rational reasoning and societal awareness rather than passive emotional involvement.

Despite these differences, both dramatists had a strong belief in the transformational power of theatre. Sankaradeva sought inner moral and spiritual awakening, whereas Brecht emphasized intellectual contemplation and societal critique. Their works show how theater can cross cultural and historical borders, serving as an effective vehicle for education, reflection, and society reform.

Glossary:

Angkiya Nat: A one act play form created by Srimanta Sankaradeva to promote Neo-vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

Bhakti: Devotion to Lord Krishna for which Sankaradeva composed Borgeets and Ankia Nats to promote people's surrender to one God e.g. Lord Krishna.

Brajabuli: An artificial language developed by Srimanta Sankaradeva for composing Borgeets and Ankia Nats.

Ojapali: A type of ancient folk performance of Assam comprising narrative singing,dancing and acting to recount tales from mythology.

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