

## Epithets for the plays of Sankardeva Madhabdeva, their Followers and Rivals

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The plays of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, two great vaishnavite saints, are being described as *ankianats* in common parlance. But Sankardeva and Madhabdeva never used the same epithet to designate their plays. Nor do we find any reference to their plays as such in the *charitputhis*. Sankardeva used the terms like *anka*, *nataka*, *nat*, and *yatra*. The play *Patni Prasad* was called *nat*, while **Kali Daman** was called *yatra*. Keligopal was called *natak (nat)*, while plays like **Parijat Haran**, **Rukmini Haran** and **Ram Bijoy** were called *nats*. Where did the epithet *nat* come from? Most of the critics point to Ramcharan Thakur for the coinage of the epithet. But the same epithet does not cover all the plays of Madhabdeva. Except **Arjun Bhanjan**, being described as *yatra*, the rest of his plays, including the disputed ones, are called *Jhumurahs*. How is a *jhumurah* different from a *yatra* or *nat*?

The plays of Madhabdeva are described as *jhumurahs*, apart from being called *nats* as well. These two appellations are being juxtaposed by the critics of Madhabdeva's plays in common parlance. They are also called *yatras* by another set of critics. The plays of the saint, being described as *Jhumurahs*, have brought in a separate name for the playwright. In fact, his plays constitute a class by itself – a genre founded on different forms and contents, not comparable with the plays of his distinguished predecessor – Sankardeva. *Jhumurahs* are lyrically rich compositions. They are

short lyrical plays. Dance and music are integral parts of the dramatic presentations. Whatever is stated in the form of a dialogue is also being recapitulated as lyrical numbers. Srikrishna is the main character of the plays. But Srikrishna is not the adult one, but the child one with everything juvenile about him. Although Madhabdeva was a celibate, his plays are dominated by the women characters. Male characters are largely functionless. The women characters are seen to play decisive roles in the *jhumurahs*, while their male counterparts are outside the periphery of decision-making process. Amongst the women characters the role of mother Yasoda has all along been prioritized, while the rest of the women characters, in most cases nameless, play as supporting characters, in most cases chastised by Yasoda. Thus, the mother-son duos constitute the crux of the *jhumurahs*, and we do not come across any exclusivist heroines in the plays of Madhabdeva. Despite the abundance of the devotional fervor, juvenility and comedic situations have received special priority in his plays. We do have nine dominant *rasas* (sentiments) in the plays of Sankardeva, while in the plays of Madhabdeva we find special and exclusive focus on *bhakti* (devotion). Unlike his Master, Madhabdeva has found the sources of his plays more especially in the text of Lilasuka or in Billamangal's text of **Krishnakarunamrta**. He was not interested in full-length plays, except in his first play **Arjun Bhanjan**. Except **Arjun Bhanjan**, all his plays are short and episodic in nature. The Sanskrit slokas of some his plays are also not his own compositions. They are stated to have been drawn from **Krishnakarunamrta**. Apart from Brajavali, he also had a free play with the colloquial Assamese speech with flavored domesticity.

Madhabdeva, himself being the second in command within the order during the lifetime of Sankardeva, created a situation conducive to drama. Taking the cue of his Master, he inspired his own disciples to author plays for the propagation of the bhakti cult. For that matter, he had to be a model for his disciples and devotees. Although he was inspired by Sankardeva to develop a literary persona, Madhabdeva's creativity as a dramatist developed within

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his own trajectory. Unlike his Master, he chose to write short plays with abundance of musical elements, if not musical extravaganzas, to be more precise. Except his first play – Arjun Bhanjan – all his subsequent plays are very short, with focus on a single episode. The model of the play developed by him are seen to be characterized by the following points –

His plays have made distinct departures from the usual models of the classical Sanskrit plays. Nor has he ever tried to be a copy cat of the plays of his Master.

Sankardeva could travel across different *rasas* (sentiments) in his plays. On the contrary, Madhabdeva sought to keep himself singularly attached only to the *bhakti rasa*.

Humorous elements are seen to pervade, almost dominate, the plays of Madhabdeva. The humor relates to child Krishna's juvenile pranks and pastimes and the behaviors of the adult characters like Nanda, Yasoda, and the playmates of Srikrishna. In that light, his plays may also be categorized as children plays.

All his plays are not uniformly built. Arjun Bhanjan ( Dadhi Mathan) is a full-length play, designated as *yatra*. This play begins with a Sanskrit sloka. The role of the Sutradhar is also considerably reduced. His other plays, except Brahmamohan, Raas Jhumurah and Bhusan Haran, are seen to begin with Sanskrit slokas.

His interest for local Assamese, instead of for Brajavali, is marked in all the plays. To put in the opposite direction, he has tried to Assamise the Brajavali to suit his needs.

His plays are without formal *nandi* and *mukti mangal bhatimas*.

Madhabdeva created a situation conducive to drama. Like his Master, he also inspired his own disciples to author plays for the propagation of *bhakti* as the principle of life. Accordingly, a good number of plays came to be written during and after his life, more especially during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ramcharan Thakur authored a play named Kongsabadh (killing of Kongs), while his son, Daittari Thakur, wrote plays namely Nrisingha Yatra, and Swamantak Haran. Dwijabhusan authored two plays –Ozamil Upakhyan and

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Swamantak Haran. Yadumonideb wrote a play named Falgoo yatra. Ramakanta authored three plays, namely Pandab Bijoy, Pralambasur badh and Ravan badh. Diza Mohindra wrote a play named Badhodoi Nat.

The tradition of writing plays with religious intent and content survived the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century we have plays like Jorasandha badh and Sita Haran by Gopal, Brahmamohan by Lilaram, Karna badh by Gopikanta, Sindhu yatra by Purnakanta, Talbhojan by Haridas, Kumar Haran Lakhinath, Harichandra Upakhyan Purnakanta, Putana badh Harendra, Harmohan Nat Lakhinath, Narasimha yatra Lakhikanta and a few others. About some of the plays the authorship is shrouded in mystery.

We have a number of plays of the same category preserved in the Historical and Antiquarian Department of the Government of Assam. Such plays include Sankardeva Janmayatra by Keshab Kayastha, Harichandra Upakhyan by Padma kanta, Patali kanda by Gopal, Abhmanyu Badh by Lakhikanta, Amrit Manthan by Santa Das, Sindhura Parva by Lakhinath, Sambarasur Badh by Bhavadeva misra and a few others.

The tradition of writing plays often had a rival section of dramatists, who chose to write plays in Sanskrit, outside the purview of what was popularly called *ankianat*. Attraction for Sanskrit was a potent force amongst a section of scholars, and a number of plays in Sanskrit came up.

A start in this direction could be seen during the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the patronage of the Ahom monarchs. About the precise number of such plays nothing definite can be said. Reliable records are also not available. For that we have no other alternative but to depend on only available records. We can bring in the names of the plays like Kamkumar Haran by Kavi Chandra Diza, Bingesha Janmoday by Kavisurjya Gourikanta, Sankhasur Badh and Krishna Prayan by Dina Diza, Sri Krishna Prayan by Diza Panchanan, Lakshan Shaktisel by Bhakattranjan Das, Sri Ramjanma, Amrit manthan and Bolichalan by Koivalyanandadev, Dharmodoi by Dharmadev Goswami to mention a few.

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Despite royal patronage from the Ahom royalty, these Sanskrit plays failed to garner any response from the common people. They proved to be feeble rivals before the plays of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. The Sanskrit plays appeared to have incorporated a number of dramatic devices introduced by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva in their own plays. The Sanskrit plays were enacted within the court premises or within select circles, away from the commoners. So, with the fall of the monarchy the Sanskrit plays lost their foothold. Interestingly enough, those playwrights writing in Sanskrit failed to rid themselves from the spell of the *ankia* tradition. Those Sanskrit plays eventually added a new dimension to the dramatic tradition of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, and to the entire range of plays authored and enacted by their disciplic successors.

Problem arises only regarding the nomenclature of the plays written by Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and their disciples of the order and the subsequent Sanskrit plays by their arch rivals. The plays of Sankardeva are by and large described as *ankianats*, although the saint never used the appellation as regards his plays. Madhabdeva called his first play – Arjun Bhanjan – as *yatra*, while his other plays were called Jhumurahs. The word ‘Jhumurah’ may be the coinage of Madhabdeva himself or of his followers. What about the Sanskrit plays authored by a few dramatists who had mastery over Sanskrit? These playwrights restricted themselves within the royal premises without displaying any concern for the common viewers of their plays. It appears to be evident that they wanted to establish themselves as dramatists without caring for the participation of the common audiences. They thought they had the royal support. On the one hand, they were greatly inspired by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva in private, but in public they sought to establish their own place not as followers, but as rivals. Nevertheless, they continued the tradition of writing plays on scriptural themes. What should be the nomenclature of those plays? Even the modern scholarship is yet to spell out clearly on the point. Cannot we find a generic term for their individual plays? Why not - we can. To us the plays of Sankardeva ought to be described as Sankari or Sankarite

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plays, and those of Madhabdeva as Madhavite plays, just as we designate the plays of Shakespeare as Shakespearean plays, and those of Christopher Marlowe as Marlovian plays. We also describe the plays of George Bernard Shaw as Shavian plays, while those of T.S.Eliot as Eliotian plays in common parlance. Within the same logic, we cannot position the plays of Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and those of their literary descendants under the single umbrella called *ankianat*. Similarly, we should not describe the plays of Madhabdeva as *Jhumurahs*. In view of the above situation, we have no other alternative but to designate them as Post-Sankarite plays provided we intend to broaden the size of the umbrella. But we cannot put all their plays into a single kitty, packaged within a single brand epithet.

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