



Performing Devotion: Ritual, Religion, and Theatre in Neo-Vaishnavite Assam

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20094281>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 19-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

Neo-Vaishnavism, Ritual Performance, Assamese Theatre, Ankiya Naat, Indigenous Aesthetics, Bhakti Movement.

ABSTRACT

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam, initiated in the fifteenth century by Srimanta Sankardeva and later extended by his disciple Madhavdeva, created a remarkable cultural tradition where religion and performance became closely intertwined. Rather than remaining confined to scripture or ritual alone, devotion was expressed through music, dance, storytelling, and drama. This paper explores how Neo-Vaishnavite practices gradually developed into a rich theatrical tradition in Assam, where acts of worship were experienced as collective performances. In forms such as *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, stories from the *Bhagavata Purana* are enacted in communal spaces like *Namghars* and *Satras*, transforming religious narratives into vivid dramatic experiences that engage both performers and audiences. The study also examines the indigenous aesthetic practices that shape Neo-Vaishnavite theatre. Elements such as expressive gestures, symbolic costumes, masks, devotional songs like *Borgeet*, and the integration of the classical dance form *Sattriya* contribute to a distinctive style of performance rooted in local culture and spirituality. These performances are not merely artistic displays; they serve as living rituals that strengthen community bonds and transmit religious and cultural values across generations. By approaching Neo-Vaishnavite theatre through the lens of performance studies, the paper highlights how devotion in Assam is not only believed but also performed—turning religious practice into a shared aesthetic and cultural experience that continues to influence



Introduction

The relationship between ritual and theatre has long occupied a central position in interdisciplinary scholarship, particularly within the fields of performance studies, anthropology, and religious studies. Early approaches in Western theatre historiography frequently conceptualized ritual as a primitive precursor to the more “developed” form of theatre, thereby reinforcing an evolutionary model that privileged secularization and aesthetic autonomy. Such perspectives, however, have been increasingly challenged by contemporary scholars who argue for a more nuanced understanding of performance as a spectrum rather than a linear progression (Schechner, 2003). Within this revised framework, ritual and theatre are not discrete or hierarchically ordered categories; instead, they are viewed as coexisting, overlapping, and mutually constitutive modes of performative expression. Both rely on repetition, symbolic action, codified gestures, and audience engagement, thereby complicating any rigid distinction between sacred and secular performance.

This shift in theoretical orientation has opened new avenues for examining non-Western performance traditions, where the boundaries between ritual and theatre are often fluid and culturally embedded. In this context, Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam emerges as a particularly compelling case study. Founded in the fifteenth century by the saint-scholar Srimanta Sankardeva, the movement represents not merely a religious reform but a cultural transformation that reconfigured the relationship between devotion, aesthetics, and community life. Sankardeva’s formulation of *Ekasarana Naam Dharma* emphasized devotional monotheism centered on Krishna while simultaneously rejecting ritual excess, caste hierarchy, and Brahmanical orthodoxy. Crucially, however, this rejection of ritualism did not result in the elimination of performative practices; rather, it led to their rearticulation within new aesthetic and communal frameworks.

At the heart of this transformation lies an integrated cultural system in which theatre, music, dance, and visual arts function as vehicles of religious expression. The dramatic form *Ankiya Naat*, composed by Sankardeva, and its performative realization in *Bhaona*, constitute the most visible and enduring manifestations of this system. These forms are not merely theatrical representations of religious narratives; they are themselves acts of devotion, embedded within ritual contexts and communal participation. Performed primarily in *Namghars* and *Satras*, *Bhaona* blurs the distinction between performer and devotee, audience and participant, thereby creating a shared experiential space in which



the sacred is both represented and realized. As such, Neo-Vaishnavite performance challenges conventional categorizations by demonstrating that theatre can function not only as a medium of representation but also as a mode of religious practice.

Building on this premise, the present study advances three interrelated arguments. First, it proposes that Neo-Vaishnavite theatre exemplifies a form of “performative religion,” wherein belief is not confined to doctrinal affirmation but is enacted through embodied, sensory, and collective practices. In this framework, devotion is experienced through gesture, movement, music, and dramatic narration, transforming performance into a site of lived religiosity. Second, while established theoretical models—particularly those developed by Schechner (performance as restored behavior), Turner (liminality and communitas), and Geertz (symbolic anthropology)—offer valuable analytical tools, they remain insufficient for fully capturing the cultural specificity and internal logic of Neo-Vaishnavite practices. These frameworks, largely grounded in Western epistemologies, often require adaptation or critical re-evaluation when applied to South Asian devotional traditions. Third, the paper argues that Neo-Vaishnavite performance must be situated within its broader socio-historical context, where it operates as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation, identity formation, and power relations. Far from being a static or purely devotional practice, *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* participate in ongoing processes of social organization, institutional authority, and cultural reproduction.

By foregrounding these dimensions, this study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre and instead offer a critically engaged analysis that situates it within both local traditions and global theoretical debates. In doing so, it contributes to a more expansive understanding of performance—one that recognizes the inseparability of ritual, aesthetics, and social life in shaping human experience.

Literature Review

Research on ritual and performance spans multiple disciplines and reflects a range of perspectives rather than a single unified framework. For clarity, this discussion is organized into three overlapping areas: major theoretical contributions, studies focused on South Asian and Assamese traditions, and more recent critiques that question universal models.



Theoretical Perspectives

Much of the conceptual groundwork in this field comes from scholars such as Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz. Their work continues to influence how performance is analyzed, although it requires careful adaptation when applied to different cultural settings.

Schechner's approach broadens the definition of performance by placing activities such as ritual, theatre, and everyday behavior along a shared spectrum. His idea of "restored behavior" draws attention to how actions are repeated and recognized within social contexts. This perspective challenges rigid distinctions but may overlook cultural differences when applied too generally.

Turner's work emphasizes the experiential dimension of ritual. His concept of liminality describes moments when participants move outside ordinary social structures, creating conditions for collective unity or *communitas*. While useful, this model can overstate the transformative nature of such experiences and may not fully account for persistent social hierarchies.

Geertz approaches ritual from an interpretive standpoint, focusing on how symbolic actions produce and communicate meaning. His emphasis on detailed cultural analysis is valuable, though it tends to prioritize interpretation over embodied experience.

Together, these frameworks provide useful tools but do not fully capture traditions where ritual and performance are inseparable in everyday life.

South Asian and Assamese Contexts

Studies of South Asian performance traditions often emphasize the integration of ritual and artistic expression. In many cases, performance is not separate from religious practice but forms part of it.

Within Assam, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre has been widely studied. Early work by Maheswar Neog situates the movement within broader historical developments, highlighting its cultural impact. Later research has explored the aesthetic and pedagogical aspects of Ankiya Naat and Bhaona, showing how they communicate religious ideas while engaging audiences.

Recent scholarship has expanded this focus by examining embodiment, performance space, and continuity. These studies emphasize that performance is not an addition to religious life but a central mode through which it is experienced.



Emerging Critical Approaches

More recent work has questioned the reliance on universal theoretical models. Scholars argue that frameworks developed in Western contexts may not fully explain traditions where distinctions between ritual and theatre do not apply.

There is also growing attention to issues of power and institutional authority. While Neo-Vaishnavism promotes inclusivity, its institutional structures can regulate participation and reinforce hierarchies. Additionally, processes such as globalization and cultural preservation have introduced new dynamics that affect how these traditions are practiced and interpreted.

Theoretical Framework

This study engages with established theories while also recognizing their limitations. Rather than applying them directly, it adapts their insights to better reflect the specific context of Neo-Vaishnavite performance.

Performance as an Expanded Field

Viewing performance as a broad category helps explain why Neo-Vaishnavite practices do not fit neatly into conventional definitions. Bhaona, for example, operates simultaneously as devotional activity and artistic expression. However, treating all performance as part of a single continuum risks overlooking cultural specificity.

Liminality and Experience

The idea of liminality helps explain the immersive nature of Bhaona, where participants engage in a shared experience that differs from everyday life. However, these moments do not necessarily lead to lasting social change. Instead, they exist alongside established structures and hierarchies.

Symbolism and Embodiment

Symbolic elements such as music, costume, and gesture play a key role in shaping meaning. At the same time, these meanings are not only interpreted but physically enacted. This highlights the importance of embodiment in understanding performance.



Toward Context-Sensitive Analysis

A more effective approach combines theoretical insight with attention to local context. Rather than treating Neo-Vaishnavite theatre as an example of broader models, it should be understood on its own terms.

Historical Background of Neo-Vaishnavism

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam represents a significant religious and cultural transformation that emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It not only redefined devotional practices but also reshaped the socio-cultural and artistic landscape of the region. Central to this transformation was the integration of religion with performative arts, resulting in a distinctive tradition where theatre, music, and dance became primary vehicles of spiritual expression.

Sankardeva and the Bhakti Movement

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement was founded by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), a polymath, saint, poet, dramatist, and social reformer. His contributions must be understood within the broader context of the Bhakti movement in India, which emphasized personal devotion (*bhakti*) over ritual orthodoxy and priestly mediation. However, Sankardeva's approach was not merely derivative; it introduced a regionally specific articulation of Bhakti that was deeply intertwined with Assamese cultural forms.

Ekasarana Naam Dharma

At the core of Sankardeva's religious philosophy lies *Ekasarana Naam Dharma*, which advocates exclusive devotion to a single deity—Krishna—through the recitation of his name (*naam*). This doctrine emphasizes simplicity, emotional devotion, and direct engagement with the divine, rejecting elaborate rituals and sacrificial practices that characterized earlier religious systems (Neog, 1965).

Unlike Brahmanical traditions that relied heavily on Sanskrit texts and priestly authority, Sankardeva promoted the use of vernacular language, making religious teachings accessible to a wider audience. His compositions, including *Borgeet* (devotional songs) and *Ankiya Naat* (one-act plays), functioned as pedagogical tools that conveyed theological ideas in an engaging and comprehensible manner.

Importantly, *Ekasarana Naam Dharma* reoriented religious practice from ritual performance in the orthodox sense (i.e., sacrificial rites) to performative devotion expressed through collective singing,



recitation, and theatrical enactment. This shift laid the foundation for the emergence of a performative religious culture in Assam.

Anti-Caste and Reformist Ideology

Sankardeva's movement is often characterized by its reformist and egalitarian ethos. By rejecting caste hierarchies and ritual exclusivity, Neo-Vaishnavism sought to create a more inclusive religious community. Devotion, rather than birth or social status, became the primary criterion for participation.

However, this egalitarianism must be understood critically. While the movement challenged rigid caste distinctions, it did not entirely dismantle social hierarchies. Certain institutional roles, particularly within *Satras*, remained regulated, reflecting a tension between ideological inclusivity and practical constraints (Pathak, 2015).

Nevertheless, Sankardeva's emphasis on collective participation and accessibility marked a significant departure from earlier religious practices. By integrating performance into devotional life, he created a framework in which religious experience could be shared across social boundaries.

Institutional Structures

The consolidation and dissemination of Neo-Vaishnavism were facilitated by the establishment of key institutional structures, notably *Namghars* and *Satras*. These institutions played a central role in embedding performative practices within the religious and social fabric of Assamese society.

Namghars and Satras as Cultural Spaces

Namghars (literally "prayer houses") function as community centers where devotees gather for collective worship, singing, and performance. Unlike temples, which are often associated with hierarchical access and priestly control, *Namghars* are relatively open and participatory spaces. They serve as sites of both religious practice and cultural expression, hosting performances of *Bhaona*, recitations of sacred texts, and communal gatherings.

Satras, on the other hand, are monastic institutions that act as custodians of Neo-Vaishnavite traditions. They provide structured environments for religious training, artistic production, and performance. Each *Satra* is organized around a hierarchical system, with a *Satradhikar* (head) overseeing religious and administrative functions.



Together, *Namghars* and *Satras* form a network of cultural institutions that sustain Neo-Vaishnavite practices across Assam. They are not merely religious centers but dynamic spaces where art, performance, and community life intersect.

Integration of Religion and Performance

One of the most distinctive features of these institutions is the seamless integration of religion and performance. In Neo-Vaishnavite practice, performance is not an optional or supplementary activity; it is an essential mode of devotion.

Ankiya Naat and *Bhaona* are regularly performed within *Namghars* and *Satras*, often as part of religious festivals and rituals. These performances are imbued with sacred significance, transforming theatrical enactment into a form of worship. As scholars have noted, the staging of *Bhaona* involves ritual preparation, including purification rites, invocation of deities, and adherence to prescribed performance conventions (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

This integration challenges conventional distinctions between sacred ritual and artistic performance. In Neo-Vaishnavism, theatre becomes a medium through which religious narratives are not only represented but also experienced and internalized.

Socio-Cultural Transformation

The emergence of Neo-Vaishnavism brought about profound changes in Assamese society, particularly in terms of religious practice, cultural production, and social organization. These transformations can be understood through two key processes: the democratization of devotion and the spread of performative practices.

Democratization of Devotion

One of the most significant impacts of Neo-Vaishnavism was the democratization of religious experience. By emphasizing devotion over ritual expertise, Sankardeva made spiritual practice accessible to a broader population. The use of vernacular language, combined with performative forms such as music and theatre, enabled the dissemination of religious ideas beyond elite circles.

This democratization was not merely theological but also performative. Participation in *Bhaona* and other cultural activities allowed individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage actively in religious life. The



collective nature of these performances fostered a sense of shared identity and belonging, reinforcing social cohesion.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the limitations of this democratization. While access to devotional practices expanded, institutional structures continued to regulate participation, particularly in leadership roles within *Satras*. Thus, the movement reflects a complex interplay between inclusivity and hierarchy.

Spread of Performative Practices

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement also contributed to the widespread proliferation of performative practices across Assam. Through the establishment of *Namghars* and *Satras*, performance became an integral part of everyday religious and cultural life.

Forms such as *Borgeet*, *Sattriya* dance, and *Bhaona* were not confined to elite or specialized contexts but were practiced and transmitted within communities. This widespread participation ensured the continuity and evolution of these traditions over time.

Moreover, the performative nature of Neo-Vaishnavism facilitated its adaptability. As performances were repeated and reinterpreted in different contexts, they allowed for the incorporation of local variations and innovations. This dynamic process contributed to the resilience and longevity of the tradition.

From a broader perspective, the spread of performative practices can be seen as a form of cultural consolidation. By integrating religion, art, and community life, Neo-Vaishnavism created a cohesive cultural framework that continues to shape Assamese identity.

Ankiya Naat and Bhaona: Dramatic Form, Ritual Performance, and Embodied Devotion

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre in Assam finds its most complete expression in the interrelated forms of *Ankiya Naat* (dramatic text) and *Bhaona* (performance). Rather than existing as separate entities, these forms function as complementary dimensions of a unified performative system in which religious narrative, aesthetic expression, and ritual practice converge. While *Ankiya Naat* provides the textual and structural foundation, *Bhaona* actualizes these elements through embodied performance within a sacred and communal context. Together, they exemplify a form of performative religion in which devotion is enacted through theatrical means.



Origins, Structure, and Performance Context

The origins of *Ankiya Naat* can be traced to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Srimanta Sankardeva composed a series of one-act plays based primarily on episodes from the *Bhagavata Purana*. These narratives, centered on the life and exploits of Krishna, were selected not merely for their theological significance but also for their potential to communicate devotional ideals in an accessible and engaging manner (Neog, 1965).

Structurally, *Ankiya Naat* differs from classical Sanskrit drama in both form and function. It is characterized by a relatively simple narrative arc, designed for clarity and immediacy rather than dramatic complexity. A key feature of this structure is the presence of the *Sutradhar* (narrator), who plays a central role in mediating between the performance and the audience. The *Sutradhar* introduces the play, provides contextual explanations, and guides the audience through the narrative, thereby ensuring comprehension and reinforcing the didactic purpose of the performance (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

The performative realization of *Ankiya Naat* occurs through *Bhaona*, typically staged in *Namghars*—community prayer halls that function as sacred performance spaces. Unlike proscenium theatre, the *Namghar* is not merely a venue but an integral part of the performance itself. Its spatial organization reflects and reinforces the communal and devotional nature of the event, positioning the audience within a shared sacred environment.

The staging of *Bhaona* is preceded and accompanied by ritual elements, including purification rites, invocation of deities, and musical preliminaries. These practices underscore the inseparability of ritual and theatre, transforming the performance into an act of worship rather than mere representation.

Aesthetic Features and Symbolic Representation

The aesthetic structure of *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* is marked by a synthesis of multiple artistic forms, including music, dance, dialogue, and visual symbolism. This integration creates a multisensory experience that engages both the intellect and the emotions of participants.

Music plays a foundational role in shaping the rhythm and mood of the performance. Devotional songs (*Borgeet*), composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, are interwoven into the narrative, enhancing its emotional and spiritual resonance (Saikia, n.d.). Similarly, *Sattriya* dance contributes a kinetic dimension, embodying theological concepts through stylized movement and gesture.



Dialogue in *Ankiya Naat* is typically composed in a mixture of Brajavali (a literary dialect) and Assamese, reflecting both devotional tradition and local linguistic context. This linguistic hybridity further enhances accessibility while maintaining a sense of sacred authority.

Symbolic representation is another defining feature of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre. Costumes, masks (*mukha*), and gestures are employed not to create realistic illusion but to signify divine presence and mythological identity. As Gogoi (2016) observes, the use of masks transforms performers into embodiments of sacred figures, thereby collapsing the distinction between representation and manifestation.

This symbolic mode aligns with broader non-Western aesthetic principles, where emphasis is placed on suggestion and evocation rather than realism. In this sense, *Bhaona* operates within a semiotic framework that prioritizes spiritual meaning over theatrical spectacle.

Theatre as Religious Instruction and Embodied Experience

One of the primary functions of *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* is pedagogical. These performances serve as vehicles for disseminating religious teachings, particularly in contexts where literacy levels may be limited. By presenting theological narratives in performative form, they make complex ideas accessible to a wide audience (Borooah & Begum, 2014).

However, the significance of these performances extends beyond instruction. They constitute a form of **embodied devotion**, in which religious experience is mediated through the body. Performers engage in disciplined practices of movement, voice, and expression, while audiences participate through attentive viewing, emotional response, and collective presence.

This embodied dimension blurs the boundary between performer and spectator. Unlike modern theatre, where audiences are typically passive observers, *Bhaona* encourages active engagement, creating a shared experiential space. The audience is not external to the performance but participates in its devotional atmosphere, contributing to what Turner (1982) describes as *communitas*.

Liminality, Experience, and Its Limits

The performative space of *Bhaona* can be understood as liminal, in Turner's sense, as it temporarily suspends ordinary social roles and creates a sacred environment. Participants enter a transitional state in which the boundaries between the human and the divine, the real and the representational, become fluid.



However, this liminality must be critically assessed. While *Bhaona* creates moments of collective unity and spiritual immersion, these experiences are often temporary and do not necessarily result in lasting social transformation. Hierarchies and institutional structures persist beyond the performance, suggesting that liminality operates within, rather than outside, existing social frameworks (Schechner, 2003).

Moreover, the idea of liminality as an exceptional state may not fully capture the nature of Neo-Vaishnavite practice, where performance is a regular and integral part of religious life. Rather than a rupture from everyday reality, *Bhaona* may be better understood as a continuation or intensification of it.

Bhaona as a Living and Evolving Tradition

Despite its historical origins, *Bhaona* remains a vibrant and evolving tradition. Its continued practice across Assam demonstrates its adaptability and cultural resilience. While maintaining core elements of structure and aesthetics, *Bhaona* has undergone various transformations in response to changing social and cultural contexts.

For instance, performances have expanded beyond traditional *Namghar* settings to include public stages and cultural festivals. Similarly, the inclusion of new technologies and performance techniques reflects ongoing processes of adaptation. At the same time, efforts to preserve traditional forms—particularly within *Satras*—highlight tensions between continuity and change.

This dynamic interplay between preservation and innovation underscores the status of *Bhaona* as a living tradition. It is not a static relic of the past but an active and evolving practice that continues to shape and reflect Assamese cultural identity.

Critical Perspective: Democratization and Control

While Neo-Vaishnavite theatre is often celebrated for its accessibility and inclusivity, it is important to critically examine the limits of this “democratization.” Although *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* make religious narratives available to a broad audience, participation in performance is not entirely unrestricted.

Institutional structures, particularly within *Satras*, play a significant role in regulating who can perform, what roles they can assume, and how performances are conducted. Historically, for instance, female participation in *Bhaona* was limited, with male actors performing female roles (Pathak, 2015). Such practices reflect underlying social norms and power dynamics that shape the performative field.



Thus, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre must be understood not only as a site of communal unity and devotional expression but also as a space where authority, hierarchy, and cultural norms are negotiated and reproduced.

Indigenous Aesthetic Systems

The Neo-Vaishnavite tradition of Assam is distinguished by a sophisticated and integrated aesthetic system that combines music, dance, visual culture, and stagecraft into a unified performative framework. These elements are not merely decorative or supplementary; they are constitutive of religious experience and function as vehicles for theological expression. Unlike Western aesthetic traditions that often prioritize representation and illusion, Neo-Vaishnavite aesthetics emphasize embodiment, symbolism, and affective engagement. This section examines four key components—*Borgeet*, *Sattriya* dance, mask and visual culture, and stagecraft—to demonstrate how indigenous artistic practices shape the performative and devotional dimensions of *Bhaona*.

Borgeet (Music): Emotional and Devotional Structure

Borgeet—a corpus of devotional songs composed by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva—forms the musical foundation of Neo-Vaishnavite performance. These compositions are characterized by their lyrical simplicity, melodic sophistication, and deep spiritual resonance. Written primarily in Brajavali, a literary dialect blending Assamese with Maithili influences, *Borgeet* bridges linguistic accessibility with devotional authority.

Functionally, *Borgeet* serves both structural and affective purposes within *Bhaona*. Structurally, it punctuates the narrative, marking transitions between scenes and guiding the temporal flow of performance. Affectively, it creates a devotional atmosphere that facilitates emotional engagement with the narrative. As Saikia (n.d.) notes, the integration of music into Neo-Vaishnavite practice transforms religious experience into an auditory and emotional phenomenon, allowing participants to internalize theological concepts through sensory immersion.

From a theoretical perspective, *Borgeet* exemplifies what Schechner (2003) describes as “restored behavior,” wherein repeated musical forms acquire ritual significance through performance. The recurrence of specific melodies and lyrical motifs reinforces collective memory and devotional sentiment, thereby sustaining the tradition across generations.



Sattriya Dance: Embodied Theology and Classical Recognition

Sattriya dance represents the kinetic dimension of Neo-Vaishnavite aesthetics, embodying theological ideas through stylized movement and gesture. Originating within the monastic institutions (*Satras*) established by Sankardeva, *Sattriya* was initially performed by male monks as part of ritual practice. Over time, it has evolved into a widely recognized classical dance form, officially acknowledged by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2000.

Theologically, *Sattriya* functions as a form of **embodied devotion**, translating abstract religious concepts into physical expression. Gestures (*mudras*), postures, and rhythmic patterns are imbued with symbolic meaning, representing divine attributes, narrative events, and emotional states. This alignment of body and belief underscores the inseparability of physical performance and spiritual experience.

Scholars have emphasized that *Sattriya* operates within a disciplined aesthetic system that integrates movement, music, and narrative (Nath, 2023). The dancer's body becomes a site of transformation, mediating between the human and the divine. In this sense, *Sattriya* exemplifies the broader Neo-Vaishnavite emphasis on performative religiosity.

Mask and Visual Culture: Symbolism and Transformation

Visual elements, particularly masks (*mukha*), play a crucial role in Neo-Vaishnavite performance. These masks are used to depict mythological characters—such as demons, animals, and divine beings—and are crafted with intricate detail and symbolic precision.

The use of masks facilitates a process of transformation in which performers become embodiments of the characters they portray. As Gogoi (2016) argues, masks in *Bhaona* are not merely theatrical props but ritual objects that carry spiritual significance. They enable the manifestation of the divine within the performative space, collapsing the distinction between representation and presence.

This symbolic function aligns with Geertz's (1973) conception of culture as a system of meanings embodied in symbols. In *Bhaona*, visual elements operate as “models of” and “models for” reality, simultaneously representing and shaping religious understanding.

Stagecraft and Minimalism: Non-Western Aesthetic Principles



Neo-Vaishnavite theatre is characterized by a minimalist approach to stagecraft that contrasts sharply with Western theatrical conventions. Rather than relying on elaborate sets, lighting, and special effects, *Bhaona* emphasizes the expressive capacities of the performer's body, voice, and gesture.

The performance space—typically the *Namghar*—is simple and unadorned, allowing for flexibility and communal participation. This minimalism reflects a philosophical orientation that prioritizes essence over embellishment. The absence of elaborate scenography directs attention to the performative act itself, reinforcing its devotional significance.

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach challenges Eurocentric notions of theatrical realism and spectacle. As scholars have noted, non-Western performance traditions often privilege symbolic representation and audience imagination over visual illusion (Schechner, 2003). In *Bhaona*, meaning is generated not through realistic depiction but through suggestion, repetition, and shared cultural codes.

Synthesis: Aesthetic Unity and Performative Religion

Taken together, these indigenous aesthetic systems—music, dance, visual culture, and stagecraft—form an integrated framework that defines Neo-Vaishnavite performance. Each element contributes to a holistic experience in which sensory engagement, symbolic meaning, and communal participation are intertwined.

This integration reinforces the central argument of this study: that Neo-Vaishnavite theatre constitutes a form of performative religion. Devotion is not confined to abstract belief but is enacted through artistic practices that engage the body, senses, and community. The aesthetic system thus becomes a medium through which religious meaning is produced, transmitted, and experienced.

Community, Participation, and Power

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre, particularly through *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, is fundamentally a communal practice that integrates religious devotion with collective participation. Unlike modern theatrical forms that often emphasize individual spectatorship and professional performance, Neo-Vaishnavite performance operates within a participatory cultural framework in which community members actively engage as performers, organizers, and audiences. However, this apparent inclusivity coexists with structured hierarchies and institutional controls, revealing complex dynamics of power, access, and authority.



Communitas and Collective Identity

One of the most significant features of Neo-Vaishnavite performance is its capacity to generate a sense of collective belonging. Victor Turner's (1982) concept of *communitas*—an intense feeling of social unity experienced during ritual—provides a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. During *Bhaona* performances, participants gather in *Namghars* or open communal spaces, where distinctions of status, occupation, and everyday identity are temporarily softened in favor of shared devotional engagement.

This collective experience is reinforced through synchronized participation in music (*Borgeet*), chanting, and attentive viewing. As Chattopadhyay (2024) observes, ritual performances in Neo-Vaishnavite contexts create a shared religious identity that transcends individual differences, fostering cohesion within the community. The performative space thus becomes a site where cultural values are collectively enacted and reaffirmed.

Participation and Social Structure

While Neo-Vaishnavite theatre encourages broad participation, this participation is not entirely egalitarian. The structure of involvement varies across different roles, including performers, musicians (*gayan-bayan*), organizers, and spectators. Each role carries specific responsibilities and levels of authority, reflecting an underlying social organization.

Participation is often mediated through institutional affiliations, particularly with *Satras*, where performers receive training and adhere to established norms of conduct. As Goswami (2015) notes, the *Sattra* system organizes participants within a hierarchical framework, with designated roles and ranks that govern both religious and performative activities.

This structured participation ensures the preservation of tradition and the maintenance of aesthetic standards. However, it also limits spontaneity and restricts access to certain roles. For example, historically, women's participation in *Bhaona* performances was limited, and male actors performed female roles—a practice that reflects broader gender norms within the society (Pathak, 2015).

Institutional Authority and Hierarchies

The role of institutional authority is central to understanding the dynamics of Neo-Vaishnavite performance. *Satras* function as both religious and cultural institutions, exercising control over the training of performers, the organization of performances, and the interpretation of religious doctrine.



Within these institutions, authority is typically vested in the *Satradhikar* (head), who oversees both spiritual and administrative matters. This hierarchical structure extends to the organization of performances, where decisions regarding casting, repertoire, and staging are often determined by institutional leaders.

Recent scholarship highlights that *Satras* are not merely sites of spiritual practice but also spaces of social regulation. Chakravarty (2025) notes that monastic communities within *Satras* maintain structured hierarchies that shape individual identities and roles, influencing both religious and performative practices. These hierarchies can reinforce existing social distinctions, even within a tradition that espouses egalitarian ideals.

Power, Representation, and Cultural Control

Beyond institutional structures, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre also reflects broader dynamics of power and representation. The narratives performed in *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* are drawn from canonical texts and are interpreted within specific theological frameworks. This process involves selective representation, privileging certain narratives and perspectives over others.

Performance thus becomes a site where cultural meanings are not only expressed but also regulated. The authority to define “authentic” performance practices often rests with institutional leaders and cultural custodians, shaping how traditions are preserved and transmitted.

At the same time, participation in performance can serve as a means of social mobility and recognition. As Bhattacharjee (2024) suggests, involvement in theatrical activities allows individuals to gain visibility and status within the community, even as it reinforces broader cultural norms.

Reconsidering *Communitas*: Unity and Its Limits

While Turner’s concept of *communitas* emphasizes unity and egalitarianism, its application to Neo-Vaishnavite theatre must be critically reconsidered. The sense of collective belonging generated during *Bhaona* is real and significant, but it is also temporary and context-specific.

Once the performance concludes, participants return to their everyday social roles, where hierarchies and distinctions are reasserted. This suggests that *communitas* operates within, rather than outside, existing social structures. As such, it should be understood not as a transformative force that eliminates inequality but as a momentary suspension that coexists with enduring systems of power.



Synthesis: Participation as Both Inclusion and Regulation

In sum, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre embodies a complex interplay between community, participation, and power. On one hand, it fosters collective identity, cultural continuity, and shared religious experience. On the other, it operates within structured systems that regulate participation and reinforce social norms.

This duality underscores the need to move beyond simplistic interpretations of Neo-Vaishnavism as either purely egalitarian or strictly hierarchical. Instead, it should be understood as a dynamic cultural system in which inclusion and regulation coexist, shaping the ways in which performance is experienced and understood.

Cultural Politics and Identity Formation

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre, particularly through *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, plays a crucial role in the construction, negotiation, and dissemination of Assamese cultural identity. Far from being merely a religious or aesthetic practice, Neo-Vaishnavism operates as a powerful cultural framework that shapes collective memory, social cohesion, and political consciousness. This section examines how performance contributes to identity formation, while also engaging critically with the politics of representation, inclusion, and cultural authority.

Neo-Vaishnavism and the Formation of Assamese Identity

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement has been widely recognized as a foundational force in the formation of Assamese cultural identity. Sankardeva's integration of religion, literature, music, and theatre created a shared cultural vocabulary that transcended linguistic, ethnic, and regional differences. Through practices such as *Bhaona*, *Borgeet*, and *Sattriya*, the movement fostered a sense of collective belonging rooted in devotional and cultural participation.

Scholars have argued that Neo-Vaishnavism contributed to the emergence of a unified Assamese identity by providing a common ideological and cultural framework (Bora, 2023). The use of vernacular language in performances and texts played a particularly important role in this process, enabling broader participation and reinforcing linguistic unity. In this sense, performance functioned as both a medium of communication and a tool of cultural consolidation.

Moreover, institutions such as *Namghars* and *Satras* served as nodes of identity formation, bringing together diverse communities under a shared religious and cultural system. As Bhuyan (2011) notes,



these institutions acted as custodians of Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy and artistic practices, thereby sustaining a collective cultural consciousness.

Performance as Cultural Memory and Identity Practice

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre operates as a form of **cultural memory**, preserving and transmitting narratives, values, and practices across generations. Through repeated performances of *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, communities engage in what may be described as “identity practice”—the ongoing enactment and reinforcement of collective identity.

These performances are not static reproductions of tradition but dynamic processes of reinterpretation. As Pathak (2024) suggests, *Bhaona* plays a significant role in shaping Assamese identity by continuously rearticulating cultural values in changing contexts. The repetition of familiar narratives creates continuity, while variations in performance allow for adaptation and innovation.

From a theoretical perspective, this process aligns with Geertz’s (1973) notion of culture as a system of meanings that is both inherited and actively constructed. In Neo-Vaishnavite theatre, identity is not simply transmitted but performed, negotiated, and redefined through collective participation.

Pluralism, Integration, and Cultural Fluidity

One of the distinctive features of Neo-Vaishnavism is its capacity to integrate diverse communities into a shared cultural framework. Unlike rigidly exclusive religious systems, Neo-Vaishnavism historically accommodated various ethnic and social groups, contributing to a pluralistic cultural landscape.

Kakati (2025) emphasizes that Neo-Vaishnavism facilitated processes of cultural fluidity and identity reformation, particularly among indigenous communities. By incorporating local traditions and practices, the movement created a hybrid cultural system that was both inclusive and adaptable.

Cultural Politics and the Question of Representation

The role of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre in identity formation is inherently political. Cultural practices such as *Bhaona* do not simply reflect identity; they actively shape and regulate it. Decisions about which narratives are performed, how they are interpreted, and who is allowed to participate are all embedded within broader structures of power.

Scholars have noted that Neo-Vaishnavite traditions often privilege certain cultural and religious perspectives, potentially marginalizing alternative voices (Bora, 2023). For instance, while the movement



promotes inclusivity, its dominant narratives are primarily derived from Vaishnavite theology, which may not fully represent the diversity of Assamese religious practices.

Furthermore, the institutional control exercised by *Satras* and cultural organizations influences how traditions are preserved and presented. This raises questions about authenticity and authority: Who has the right to define “true” Neo-Vaishnavite performance? How are competing interpretations negotiated?

Nationalism, Regional Identity, and Modern Reinterpretations

In the modern period, Neo-Vaishnavite traditions have been increasingly mobilized within discourses of regional and national identity. As Baruah (1999) argues, the politics of identity in Assam is closely linked to questions of culture, language, and history. Neo-Vaishnavism, with its rich artistic and religious heritage, has become a key resource in articulating Assamese distinctiveness.

Performances of *Bhaona* and the promotion of *Sattriya* dance at national and international levels contribute to the construction of a cultural identity that is both locally rooted and globally recognized. However, this process also involves selective representation, emphasizing certain aspects of tradition while downplaying others.

Identity, Performance, and Contemporary Challenges

In contemporary Assam, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre continues to play a vital role in cultural life, but it also faces new challenges. Urbanization, globalization, and changing social dynamics have transformed the contexts in which performances occur.

On one hand, increased visibility and institutional support have strengthened the position of Neo-Vaishnavite traditions. On the other, these changes raise concerns about authenticity, accessibility, and relevance. As Bezborah (2024) notes, the promotion of Neo-Vaishnavism as a cultural resource—particularly in tourism—can lead to its commodification, altering its original meaning and function.

At the same time, contemporary reinterpretations of *Bhaona* reflect ongoing processes of identity negotiation. New forms of performance, including adaptations for modern theatre and digital platforms, demonstrate the adaptability of the tradition.

Synthesis: Identity as Performance and Process



The analysis above underscores that identity in Neo-Vaishnavite Assam is not a fixed or static entity but a dynamic and ongoing process. Through *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona*, identity is continuously performed, negotiated, and redefined.

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre thus operates at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics. It fosters collective belonging while also reflecting and shaping power relations. By engaging with both tradition and change, it remains a vital site for understanding the complexities of identity formation in Assam.

Modern Transformations and Continuities

Neo-Vaishnavite theatre, while deeply rooted in historical and religious traditions, has undergone significant transformations in response to modernity, globalization, and changing socio-cultural conditions. These transformations do not signify a rupture from tradition; rather, they reveal a dynamic process in which continuity and change coexist. This section examines how *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* have adapted to contemporary contexts while retaining their core devotional and aesthetic principles.

Influence on Contemporary Assamese Theatre

Neo-Vaishnavite performance traditions have had a lasting impact on the development of modern Assamese theatre. Elements of *Bhaona*—including its narrative structure, stylized acting, musical integration, and symbolic staging—continue to inform contemporary theatrical practices.

As Pathak (2015) observes, modern Assamese theatre often draws upon indigenous forms such as *Ankiya Naat* to create hybrid performance styles that blend traditional aesthetics with modern dramaturgy. This influence is evident in the incorporation of devotional themes, chorus-based narration, and non-realistic staging techniques.

Urbanization and Changing Performance Contexts

One of the most significant transformations in Neo-Vaishnavite theatre is the shift in performance contexts due to urbanization. Traditionally, *Bhaona* was performed in *Namghars* and rural community spaces, where it functioned as an integral part of religious life. In contemporary settings, however, performances increasingly take place in urban auditoriums, cultural festivals, and institutional venues.

This shift has led to changes in audience composition, performance style, and presentation. Urban audiences may engage with *Bhaona* more as a cultural spectacle than as a devotional practice, altering the



nature of participation and reception. Additionally, the constraints of modern stage settings often require modifications in staging, duration, and technical design.

Despite these changes, *Bhaona* continues to maintain its ritual elements, even in urban contexts. This suggests that the tradition is capable of adapting to new environments without losing its core identity. As Bhattacharjee (2024) notes, the practice of *Bhaona* across diverse settings reflects its resilience and cultural significance.

Globalization and Cultural Exchange

Globalization has introduced new dynamics into the practice and perception of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre. Increased mobility, media exposure, and cultural exchange have brought *Bhaona* and *Sattriya* dance to national and international audiences.

On one hand, this visibility has enhanced recognition and appreciation of Assamese cultural heritage. Performances are now showcased at festivals, academic conferences, and international platforms, contributing to the global circulation of indigenous art forms (Baral, 2023).

On the other hand, globalization also raises concerns about **standardization and homogenization**. As traditional forms are adapted for wider audiences, there is a risk of simplifying or altering their original meanings. The transformation of *Bhaona* into a performative “product” for cultural consumption can lead to the commodification of what was originally a sacred practice (Dutta & Goswami, 2021).

Media, Technology, and New Modes of Performance

The advent of digital media and new technologies has further transformed Neo-Vaishnavite performance. Recordings of *Bhaona*, online dissemination of *Borgeet*, and digital documentation of *Sattriya* dance have expanded the reach of these traditions beyond their immediate geographic context.

These developments offer new opportunities for preservation and accessibility. At the same time, they raise questions about the nature of performance itself. When *Bhaona* is mediated through screens rather than experienced in a communal and ritual setting, its experiential and participatory dimensions may be altered.

Continuity Amid Change: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

The transformations discussed above highlight a central tension between tradition and modernity. Neo-Vaishnavite theatre is neither static nor entirely transformed; it exists in a state of ongoing negotiation.



As scholars have argued, indigenous performance traditions often respond to modernity not by resisting it outright but by reinterpreting it within local frameworks (Sen, 2023). In Assam, this process is evident in the coexistence of traditional *Bhaona* performances with modern theatrical innovations.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The relationship between ritual and theatre, long debated within performance studies and anthropology, finds a particularly rich and complex expression in the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition of Assam. This study has argued that *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* challenge reductive distinctions between ritual and theatre by exemplifying a form of **performative religion**, in which belief is enacted through embodied, communal, and aesthetic practices. Rather than existing as separate or sequential phenomena, ritual and theatre in this context operate along a continuum, reinforcing Schechner's (2003) proposition that performance encompasses a broad spectrum of human activity, from sacred ritual to staged drama.

At the same time, the analysis has demonstrated that while the theoretical frameworks of Schechner, Turner, and Geertz remain foundational, they are not fully adequate for capturing the specificity of Neo-Vaishnavite performance. Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas*, for instance, provides valuable insights into the transformative and collective dimensions of *Bhaona*, yet it tends to overemphasize temporary social suspension at the expense of enduring hierarchies (Turner, 1982). Similarly, Geertz's interpretive approach foregrounds symbolism and meaning-making but does not sufficiently account for the embodied and performative aspects of religious experience (Geertz, 1973; Beeman, 1993). Schechner's performance theory, while more flexible, risks universalizing categories that may obscure local epistemologies and cultural specificities (Schechner, 2017).

By situating Neo-Vaishnavite theatre within its historical, social, and cultural context, this paper has highlighted the need for a more nuanced and **decolonial approach to performance studies**. Neo-Vaishnavism is not merely an example that fits within existing theoretical models; rather, it challenges and expands those models by foregrounding indigenous aesthetic systems, community-based participation, and the integration of art and devotion. As Grimes (2012) suggests, the study of ritual and performance must move beyond rigid conceptual boundaries to accommodate the diversity of cultural practices.

Furthermore, the analysis has underscored the central role of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre in processes of **identity formation and cultural politics**. Through *Bhaona* and related practices, communities in Assam actively construct and negotiate collective identities, drawing upon shared narratives, symbols, and



aesthetic forms. However, this process is not neutral; it is shaped by institutional structures, power relations, and selective representations that both include and exclude. Thus, Neo-Vaishnavite performance must be understood as a site of both cultural cohesion and ideological contestation.

The discussion of modern transformations has further revealed that Neo-Vaishnavite theatre is not a static tradition but a dynamic and evolving practice. Urbanization, globalization, and technological change have introduced new contexts and challenges, leading to adaptations in performance style, audience engagement, and institutional organization. Yet, these transformations have not diminished the tradition's core significance. Instead, they demonstrate its resilience and capacity for reinvention, confirming that continuity and change are not opposing forces but interdependent processes.

Future Directions for Research

Building on these insights, several avenues for future research emerge.

First, there is a need for more **ethnographic and practice-based studies** that foreground the perspectives of performers, practitioners, and local communities. Much of the existing scholarship remains textually or theoretically oriented, often privileging external analytical frameworks over lived experience. Detailed fieldwork could provide a deeper understanding of how Neo-Vaishnavite performance is experienced, interpreted, and transmitted in contemporary contexts.

Second, further research should explore the **intersections of gender, caste, and power** within Neo-Vaishnavite traditions. While the movement is often celebrated for its egalitarian ethos, historical and contemporary practices reveal persistent exclusions and hierarchies. A more critical examination of these dynamics would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the tradition.

Third, the impact of **digital media and globalization** on Neo-Vaishnavite performance warrants sustained investigation. As performances are increasingly mediated through digital platforms and adapted for global audiences, questions arise regarding authenticity, commodification, and cultural ownership. Comparative studies examining similar processes in other indigenous performance traditions could offer valuable insights.

Fourth, there is significant potential for developing **indigenous theoretical frameworks** that emerge from within the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition itself. Rather than relying exclusively on Western paradigms, scholars might engage with local philosophical concepts, aesthetic principles, and modes of knowledge production. Such an approach would not only enrich the study of Neo-Vaishnavism but also contribute to the broader project of decolonizing performance studies.



Finally, interdisciplinary research that integrates **performance studies, anthropology, religious studies, and cultural history** can further illuminate the multifaceted nature of Neo-Vaishnavite theatre. By bridging disciplinary boundaries, scholars can develop more holistic and context-sensitive analyses.

Final Reflection

In conclusion, Neo-Vaishnavite theatre offers a powerful lens through which to rethink the relationship between ritual, performance, and society. It challenges binary distinctions, expands theoretical frameworks, and foregrounds the importance of cultural context in shaping performative practices. As both a religious and theatrical tradition, it demonstrates that performance is not merely a reflection of social reality but an active force in its creation and transformation.

By engaging critically with both theory and practice, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand performance as a dynamic and culturally embedded phenomenon. In doing so, it reaffirms the importance of situating local traditions within global academic discourse while remaining attentive to their unique histories, meanings, and possibilities.

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