

## Representation of Women in Srimanta Sankardeva's Ankia Naat: An Analytical Study of *PatniPrasad*, *KaliyaDaman*, *KeliGopal* and *RamBijay*

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a modest endeavor to focus on the representation of women in Srimanta Sankardeva's writings based on reading the texts of his plays –PatniPrasad, KaliyaDaman, KeliGopal and RamBijay. The focal points of the paper would be the status of women, women's subjugation, and the patriarchal values leading to women's suffering at a chaotic time of Assam's history which have got special treatment in almost all his plays composed to initiate social and religious reforms. It also aims at highlighting Sankardeva's mission of spreading progressive and human values negating the patriarchal setup.*

**Key Words:** *status of women, women's subjugation, patriarchal values, progressive and human values.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, a multi-faceted creative personality, was born at a very gloomy period in Assam's history. His was a time (1449-1568) when the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was undergoing a disdainful process of disintegration so far as the political and religious conditions of Assamese society were concerned. The fight for power shattered the political structure and people, in general, had been immersed in erroneous beliefs, irrational credences and false notions in the name of religion. Sankardeva took up the difficult task of redeeming the Assamese society and policy from the clutches of acute crisis. Dedicating his time and energy in a meaningful way he could eradicate many evils of the society for which he attained the insurmountable height of popularity during his age and till now has been revered as the great social reformer, an up-lifter of the Assamese culture and literature and the maker of modern Assam. An ardent follower of the Bhakti movement, Sankardeva not only propounded Ek Saran Naam Dharma, a new Vaishnava belief but also started a strong cultural movement by composing his unique Geet, Nat, Bhatima, Ghosha, Nritya and many more to motivate his followers to the path of dharma in the true sense of the term. Whatever Sankardeva, the versatile genius created, all were imbued with humanitarian enthusiasm. Vaishnavism and humanism coupled with a true democratic consciousness made Sankardeva's mission a distinctly genuine, progressive and compassionate one.

### 2. METHODOLOGY:

The method of discussion and content analysis is followed to bring forth the proposed notion.

### 3. DISCUSSION:

To redeem the society of the conflicts and frictions, Sankardeva preached the doctrine of universal brotherhood and peaceful harmonious living with equal respect to all creeds and sects of the society irrespective of gender. Many indigenous people joined his mission of social equality by adopting the *dasya* attitude of *Krishnabhakti*. Thus Sankardeva started the process of social transformation in the middle ages of Assam.

It is interesting to note that Sankardeva introduced the concept of female subjectivity way back in the fifteenth century, before the advent of all the western constructs of feminism. He was, in a sense, a pioneer in challenging the notion of women's traditional role of fulfilling the needs of their husbands and children only. In almost all ankiya nats women's representation from the standpoints of feminist theory is clearly discernible. It is observable that in his Ek

*Saran Naam Dharma*, Srimanta Sankardeva included many women devotees and advised the married couples to offer *bhakti* to God together. Women were not lagging in religious matters. His second wife Kalindi took up his mission of *dharma prachara* after his passing away. This exemplifies the equal status of women in Sankardeva's social philosophy (1)

Sankardev's progressive outlook is revealed in almost all his plays. The status and position according to the Assamese women in his plays were very significant. Though the society in which he lived through was a patriarchal society in which women were thought upon as subservient to their male partners, in his plays Sankardeva tried to ensure them a space of importance. In his *Patni Prasad*, Sankardeva tried to highlight how a few *brahman* wives were moved by their eternal love and desire to get united with Lord *Sri Krishna* which was pure and pristine and without an iota of adultery. But they were debarred from their willingness by their husbands and the doubts on the characters of their wives and mental tortures on them were found true reflection on the following speech:

*Aahe Brahmanisaba, Tomasaba ki dekhaha ki sunala,  
jagya karjya parihari gowalaka pachu pachu:  
koti ho jawa:ha ha terasaba bhrasta bheli ( Ankawali, pp 39)*

The play itself is a strong discourse on the domination of the males on the females in the name of father, brother, husband and son.

*Pitri putra bhatri sabe bishedha bolaya  
Hari bhakti rase aakula huya  
Tarasabe sunaye nahi (Ankawali, pp 39)*

The wives themselves were in a dilemma about their roles at home, their whims and wishes and their decision making power. Having the view of lord Krishna they couldn't but express their uncertainty about how they would be treated by their husbands and sons:

*Sohi patiputrasaba: Haamaaka thana naahi dwewaba:  
haamu grihe kosone banchaba? (Ankawali, pp 44)*

Their doubts and fears are the outcome of the treatment they experienced in their society by their male counterparts. The husbands dominating attitude to the wives are expressed in the following speech:

*Ohi brahmanisaba soucharahina: beda sashtra janaye nahi  
Gurusewa parama dharma borjita  
Aarasabar srikrisnato param prema bhakati bhela  
Aah sanusaba stritto adhama bhelo (Ankawali, pp 46)*

Thus the play can be considered as a women-centric play where the female characters are brought to the fore and their subjugation in the hands of patriarchal mindset and their mental suffering being the victims of patriarchy and social set-up have got a true representation.

The play *Kaliya Daman* focuses on the duties and obligations of the women. The mother image of Yashoda is foregrounded here. The snake wives' role in households is also reflected in the play. The wives seem to be very loyal and faithful though treated by their husbands as inferior to them. They were considerate, witty and dutiful to the core, though they were not free from the clutches of male domination. They also displayed modesty in their behaviour. This is how they begged the lives of their husbands from Lord Krishna quite submissively:

*Naaga Naarisaba bola: He Parama Iswara:  
tohari pada prahare: swami mori jai:ohi durghone :  
tohaka najani dansala:ihaka dosha bareka maram gohayi:  
tohari aagu khudra patanga ...hamaka anatha korbi nahi:  
tohari aagu anchola pati: patidan mago (Ankawali, pp 18)*

The prayer to save the lives of their husbands shows how mindful the women were in their housewives' role. The central character Yoshoda exemplifies the motherly duty and bonding in a very strong way. When she heard the incident of Sri Krishna biting by the *Kalinaga*, Yoshoda expressed her restlessness like an ordinary mother thus-

*Dekho tohari santape jiba rahe nahi  
Ha ha ohi chanda bodanaka kaheka nia delo  
Hamara putraka ke niya jai (Ankawali, pp 18)*

In the *Keli Gopal*, on the other hand, the wives are shown as challenging their household duties rushed to get in touch with Sri Krishna, their idol. They considered it their right to have the sight of the desired god lord Krishna breaking all peripheries:

*He Swami Krishna: swabhabe chanchal strik dosha dharabi naahi:  
Hamu Kinkari tohara: iha jani darasana dehu (Ankawali, pp 71)*

Equality as such. Thus the play *Keli Gopal* depicts the psychology of women who lived in a patriarchal society and who wished to come out of the traditionally constructed periphery of family bonding. They exhibited their inner courage to establish their right to enjoy equal status and position in society obtaining blessings from their god Lord Krishna.

In the play *Rambijay* too, Sankardeva depicted the situation of women in a male-dominated society. Sita wished to get married to Ramachandra, but she couldn't choose the groom of her dream by herself. So, she had to wait for her father's decision. She had to depend on her father Janaka's choice for her marriage. Hers was a situation in which she had to live by the customs, rules and traditions of a patriarchal mindset. Under this social setup, she was born and brought up. So she had no way out than to accept everything according to her father's desire. She had to wait for a long to get Ramachandra which she expressed in the following speech:

*Hamu aneka janama kay klesha karie  
Bahuta barasa tapashya kayalo  
Toho ohi janame swamika bheta napawaba ar janama  
Srirama rupe tohaka bibaha karawaba (Ankawali pp 234)*

But the Sita of *Ram Bijaya* raised her voice when she was banished by Ramachandra in *Uttarakanda Ramayana*. She grew angry at Ramachandra's decision to leave her and expressed her vehemence against him in quite strong derisive words.

*Moi jeve jano raama enuwa nirdaya  
Lankate tejilo hante pranaka nischaya (Uttara Kanda Ramayana, pp 303)*

At the time of entering into the earth after the trial at the court, she uttered with grief that she wouldn't hear the name of Rama again,

*Aura jena nushuno Ramara ito nau  
Phat diya Basumati patale lukau (Uttara Kanda Ramayana, pp 381)*

Her bitter vehemence against Ramchandra's decision exemplifies the strength of mind that a faithful wife might show at the moment she is deceived by her better half. A woman felt insecure even at the time of epics Sita's tragedy was the misfortune of the crumbling values of patriarchal society. No one wanted to fight against the system. But the victim herself was bold enough to express her disgust against the power of the husband. In the original Ramayana Sita was a passive sufferer, but Sankardeva was progressive enough in making Sita raise her voice against the maltreatment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Thus the ankiya nats of Srimanta Sankardeva allocate a powerful medium to portray representations of women as well as the patriarchal constraints that tried to restrict their free will and psychological growth in his contemporary time. The women as represented in the aforementioned plays are not free from the shackles of patriarchal culture. Still, they, in the hands of the creator, have come forward to raise their voice at times when they felt it necessary. Though the characters are taken from the ancient epics, Sankardeva presented them against the backdrop of contemporary society.

The representation of the women characters has become an ideal representation of the real condition of women. This is the point where Sankardeva's originality as an initiator of woman emancipation lies.

**FOOT NOTE:**

1. Barkakati, Dr. Sanjib Kumar: Srimanta Sankardeva as a Feminist (Source: Internet)

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