From Aṣṭa-Nāyikā to Bhakti: Reconfiguring the Heroine in Śaṅkaradeva's Aṅkīyā Nāṭ

A Comparative Aesthetic Study of Classical Heroine Archetypes and Transcendental Devotional Consciousness in Early Assamese Drama

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Abstract*—This study investigates the representation, dramaturgical function, and aesthetic reconfiguration of the heroine (nāyikā) in Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Aṅkīyā Nāṭ through the critical matrix of classical Indian aṣṭa-nāyikā-bheda, śṛṅgāra rasa, and Vaiṣṇavite Bhakti aesthetics. Challenging the reductive critical tendency in modern scholarship to impose classical Sanskrit dramaturgical categories—specifically Bharata Muni's situational eightfold heroine states (aṣṭa-nāyikā)—as static, prescriptive templates onto medieval Assamese vernacular drama, this article demonstrates that Śaṅkaradeva appropriates classical dramaturgical conventions primarily to serve the theological objectives of Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma. Focusing on Rukmiṇī across Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa and Pārijāta-Haraṇa, the Brahmin wives in Patnī-Prasāda, Satyabhāmā in Pārijāta-Haraṇa, the Gopis in Keli-Gopāla, and Sītā in Rāma-Vijaya, the paper analyzes how romantic and erotic paradigms (śṛṅgāra) are systematically redirected toward spiritual surrender (bhakti). Rukmiṇī's dramatic trajectory reveals an ontological development from active, longing pursuit (kāntā-bhāva) to detached devotional serenity (śānta/dāsya). Concurrently, the journeys of the Brahmin wives in Patnī-Prasāda and the Gopis in Keli-Gopāla reconfigure the classical abhisārikā into an embodied, metaphysical "Devotional Abhisāra," wherein the physical journey symbolizes the soul's transcendence over mortal embodiment. Furthermore, Sītā in Rāma-Vijaya is repositioned not as a secular mortal heroine, but as a supreme devotee (paramā bhaktā) whose longing spans lifetimes of ascetic discipline (tapasyā), culminating in absolute divine refuge (śaraṇāgati). Integrating close textual analysis of primary Brajavalī dramatic literature with performance analysis of costume iconography (āhārya), metric song registers (aṅkīyā gīta), and the continuous framing role of the Sūtradhāra, this study establishes that Śaṅkaradeva's heroines possess active dramatic and devotional agency. The female persona in Aṅkīyā Nāṭ operates as a theatrical vehicle transmuting worldly emotion (laukika bhāva) into transcendental devotional consciousness (alaukika bhakti rasa).

***Index Terms*—Aṣṭa-Nāyikā, Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, Śaṅkaradeva, Bhakti Aesthetics, Śṛṅgāra Rasa .**

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ in sixteenth-century Assam represents a foundational milestone in the history of Indian devotional performing arts. Initiated by the polymath, saint-poet, and social reformer Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568 CE) as the primary aesthetic vehicle for the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement (Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma), these single-act plays synthesized classical Sanskrit dramaturgy with indigenous Assamese theatrical traditions [1]. Unlike classical Sanskrit court drama (kāvya-nāṭaka)—which catered largely to an aristocratic and scholarly elite—the Aṅkīyā Nāṭ was conceived as an accessible, egalitarian, and communal theatrical medium. It integrated spoken Brajavalī prose dialogues, rhythmic verse meters (payāra, tripadī), classical raga-based songs (aṅkīyā gīta), and elaborate choreographic movements [2], [3]. Through this multifaceted dramatic form, Śaṅkaradeva sought not merely to entertain, but to build an immersive devotional apparatus capable of instilling non-dual Bhakti philosophy across all strata of society.

Within this theatrical framework, the characterization of the dramatic personae—specifically the heroine (nāyikā)—undergoes a transformative realignment. In classical Sanskrit poetics and dramaturgical treatises, beginning with Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra (Chapter 24) and systematically codified in Dhanañjaya's Daśarūpaka (Second Prakāśa), the emotional states of the heroine are analyzed primarily through the foundational framework of the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā (the eight situational heroines) (Nāṭyaśāstra 24.210–225 [4]; Daśarūpaka 2.23–27 [5]). This taxonomy categorizes the heroine based on her spatial, psychological, and relational condition relative to the hero: (1) Vāsakasajjā: the heroine adorning herself and expectantly preparing the bedchamber; (2) Virahotkaṇṭhitā: the heroine pining in distress due to the unexplained delay of her lover; (3) Svādhīnabhartṛkā: the heroine commanding the complete devotion and obedience of her consort; (4) Kalahāntaritā: the heroine estranged by lovers' quarrel or ego; (5) Khaṇḍitā: the offended heroine confronting a lover bearing signs of infidelity; (6) Vipralabdhā: the disillusioned heroine deceived at the tryst; (7) Proṣitabhartṛkā: the suffering heroine whose husband is away on a prolonged journey; and (8) Abhisārikā: the bold heroine venturing through darkness and adversity to unite with her beloved.

When critical scholarship examines vernacular devotional drama, a persistent tendency exists to superimpose these situational categories as rigid, static templates onto medieval dramatic figures. However, such an approach remains insufficient because Śaṅkaradeva's dramatic universe is not grounded in the pursuit of mundane sensual gratification (laukika śṛṅgāra). In the Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, Śrī Kṛṣṇa (or Rāma) is simultaneously the narrative hero and the Supreme Reality (Parama Brahma) [6]. Consequently, romantic affection, separation, jealousy, and union operate simultaneously on narrative and spiritual planes.

This study addresses three central research questions: (1) How did Śaṅkaradeva reconfigure the classical Aṣṭa-Nāyikā framework to serve the theological imperative of Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma? (2) What textual and dramatic strategies facilitate the sublimation of mundane eros (śṛṅgāra) and separation into transcendental servitude (dāsya) and serene devotion (śānta)? (3) How do staging conventions—specifically costume iconography (āhārya), melodic registers, and the continuous intervention of the Sūtradhāra—act as metatheatrical devices guiding audience reception toward devotional absorption?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of Sanskrit dramaturgy, regional performance traditions, and devotional aesthetics has drawn sustained scholarly attention. Classical Indian aesthetics establishes that aesthetic experience (rasa-niṣpatti) emerges from the harmonious conjunction of determinants (vibhāva), consequents (anubhāva), and transitory emotional states (vyabhicāribhāva) (Nāṭyaśāstra 6.31 prose [4]; Pollock 45 [7]). While classical poetics designates śṛṅgāra as the sovereign aesthetic sentiment (rasarāja), medieval Vaiṣṇavite theologians—most prominently Rūpa Gosvāmī (Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu, Ujjvalanīlamaṇi)—posited that Bhakti represents the ultimate transcendental aesthetic experience (Bhakti Rasa), wherein worldly affection (laukika rati) is refined and elevated into divine attachment (kṛṣṇa-rati) [8].

Significantly, Assamese Vaiṣṇavism maintains a distinct theological identity from neighboring schools. Unlike Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which emphasizes parakīyā śṛṅgāra and esoteric erotic mysticism (mādhurya), Śaṅkaradeva's Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma deliberately subordinates śṛṅgāra to the attitudes of servitude (dāsya) and serene contemplation (śānta) [1]. In analyzing the classical dimensions of Assamese performing traditions, Barman (2022) demonstrates that while Bharata's canonical rasasūtra underpins dramatic expression, the Sattriya idiom fundamentally alters the nature of rati-bhāva: the devotee-heroine's relationship with Kṛṣṇa or Rāma is mediated through humble servitude (dāsya-bhāva), transmuting intense human emotion into serene devotional repose [9]. Consequently, earthly sensuality is stripped away while devotional emotional intensity remains intact.

Recent scholarship has traced the migration of the aṣṭa-nāyikā motif across diverse Indian artistic media. Gupta (2024) illustrates how the heroines of Keśavadāsa's Rasikapriyā were visually adapted in Pahari miniature paintings as dynamic psychological states [10]. In the Assamese context, Hazarika (2025) identifies the presence of Bharata's nāyikā-bheda across the melodic and metric structures of the Aṅkīyā Gīta [11]. This musical correspondence is supported by Barman (2022), who demonstrates how specific ragas such as Māhura and rhythms like Pari-tāla embody the vāsakasajjā aspect during Rukmiṇī's procession to the Bhavānī temple [9]. Nonetheless, as Barman observes, critical inquiry into the holistic dramaturgical, philosophical, and characterological application of heroine archetypes across complete dramatic narratives remains severely limited [9]. Three structural areas demand rigorous examination: the intertextual development of characters across plays, the metaphysical transformation of the tryst (abhisāra), and the metatheatrical framing provided by performance conventions (Vatsyayan 95–99 [12]).

III. METHODOLOGY AND PRIMARY TEXTUAL CORPUS

This study employs an integrated qualitative methodology combining textual criticism, comparative dramaturgy, and dramatic aesthetic analysis. The primary textual corpus consists of the surviving plays canonically attributed to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva: Patnī-Prasāda, Keli-Gopāla, Kālīya-Damana, Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa, Pārijāta-Haraṇa, and Rāma-Vijaya. The primary Brajavalī dramatic texts are examined from Kesavananda Dev Goswami's critically edited Aṅkamālā (fourth enlarged edition, 2014) [13] and Maheswar Neog's compilation in Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmṛta (1998) [14]. These primary vernacular texts are analyzed alongside Sanskrit treatises including the Nāṭyaśāstra [4] and Daśarūpaka [5].

The analytical investigation is structured across five interconnected dimensions: (1) Situational Typological Dimension [9]; (2) Emotional-Psychological Dimension; (3) Characterological Dimension; (4) Devotional Dimension; and (5) Theatrical Dimension.

IV. FROM EROTIC LONGING TO DEVOTIONAL SERENITY: THE MATURATION OF RUKMIṆI

The developmental arc of Rukmiṇī across Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa and Pārijāta-Haraṇa exemplifies sophisticated female characterization in pre-modern Indian drama. Far from remaining a static archetype or a perpetually entitled consort, Rukmiṇī undergoes profound psychological and spiritual maturation.

A. Rukmiṇī in Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa: Desire, Epistolary Agency, and Surrender

In Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa, Rukmiṇī's dramatic journey begins in the mode of pūrvarāga (incipient romantic longing). Hearing the wandering bard (Bhāṭa) describe Kṛṣṇa's transcendent beauty and virtues, an intense emotional longing awakens within her. Within the framework of Vaiṣṇava aesthetics, this manifests as kāntā-bhāva—the soul's passionate yearning for the Divine as the Supreme Beloved. However, in Śaṅkaradeva's dramaturgy, this erotic affection is not self-indulgent; it moves directly toward total surrender (śaraṇāgati). When her elder brother Rukmī arranges her matrimonial alliance with Śiśupāla, Rukmiṇī openly rebels against the patriarchal mandate.

Her inner agony mirrors the classical virahotkaṇṭhitā (anxious heroine in separation), yet she refuses passive resignation. She summons the Brahmin Vedanidhi and dispatches a confidential epistolary plea to Kṛṣṇa, explicitly organizing her own divine abduction:

> *"He svāmi— bhikṣuka mukhe tuvā guṇa rūpa śuniye kāyavākyamane tohāka patibhāve baraichi□□ Tathi pāpī śiśupāla hāmāka vibāha karite āvala thika? Yece siṁhaka bhāryyā nite śṛgāla cumpiye rahaya thika□ Tāhe dekhiye bhaye daṇḍe yuga yāi jāni hāmi nija dāsīka satvare nevasīyā svāmī□□ Yava bolaba tuhu anteṣapure raha— kona parakāre bheṇṭa pāõ = tatocita upāya kahaũ— he nātha tā śunaha: bivāhaka pūrba divase bhavānīka maṭhe calaba = sohi samaye hāmāka hari niyā yāo□□ Yeve tuhu helā kaya nāhi nevaba— teve tohāta badha diye hāmu prāṇa cāṛaba□" ([13], p. 53)*
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> (English translation: "O Lord, hearing of your supreme virtues and divine form from the mendicant's mouth, I have accepted you as my husband in body, speech, and mind. Yet the sinful Śiśupāla has arrived to marry me—can this ever be borne? Just as a jackal is utterly unworthy to claim the consort of a lion, so is Śiśupāla unfit for me. Terrified at his sight, every passing moment feels like an aeon; knowing this, O Master, come swiftly and deliver your own handmaiden. If you ask how we might meet when I am cloistered within the inner quarters, hear the fitting recourse: on the eve of the wedding, I shall proceed to the shrine of Bhavānī; at that exact hour, come and abduct me. If you neglect me and do not carry me away, I shall yield my life, and the burden of my death will rest upon you.")

This dramatic action operates simultaneously on two distinct registers: on the secular plane, an assertive royal maiden exercises emotional agency against dynastic compulsion; on the theological plane, the individual soul (jīvātman) renounces worldly entanglements (symbolized by Śiśupāla) to seek unconditional redemption from the Supreme Being (Paramātman). Her agency is the catalyst for absolute surrender (prapatti), mirroring the orthodox stages of Bhakti: hearing the Lord's glory (śravaṇa), experiencing the agony of separation (smaraṇa/viraha), and sending the devotional messenger [2].

Subsequently, as she proceeds to the shrine of Bhavānī, she embodies the adorned visual splendour of the vāsakasajjā, captured lyrically in Raga Māhura: "Raṅginī saṅginī bālā / calali yaiche cāndakeri kālā" ([13], p. 59; [9], p. 346). Yet this outward adornment is devoid of mundane erotic coquetry; it represents the ritual purification and consecration of the body as an offering prior to divine abduction.

B. Rukmiṇī in Pārijāta-Haraṇa: The Sublimation of Claim into Divine Detachment

In Pārijāta-Haraṇa, Rukmiṇī reappears within a transformed domestic and spiritual setting. Now established as the principal crowned queen (paṭṭamahiṣī) in Dvārakā, she requests the celestial Pārijāta flower gifted by the sage Nārada:

> *"Rukmiṇī bola□□ He svāmī hāmu tohāra prathama patnī, jāni ohi devadurlabha pārijāta, prāṇanātha hāmāka dehu□□" ([13], p. 84)*
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> (English translation: "Rukmiṇī spoke: 'O Lord! Knowing me to be your first wedded wife, bestow this celestial Pārijāta flower—rare even unto the gods—upon me, O Lord of my life!'")

While this request might initially resemble the privileged conduct of a svādhīnabhartṛkā (Daśarūpaka 2.24–25 [5]), the narrative trajectory reframes her character. When Satyabhāmā learns of the gift, she erupts in virulent jealousy and wounded pride (māna and īrṣyā), demanding that Kṛṣṇa uproot the entire tree from Indra's heaven. In classical Sanskrit drama, such favoritism toward a rival co-wife would inevitably cast Rukmiṇī into the role of the kalahāntaritā or the aggrieved khaṇḍitā.

Remarkably, Rukmiṇī exhibits neither resentment nor jealousy. She asserts no claim over the newly transported celestial tree. Her initial request was an expression of intimate loving communion (mādhūrya), not possessive entitlement. Once received, the physical object becomes inconsequential; what endures is her unshakeable spiritual bond with Kṛṣṇa. Through this transition, Rukmiṇī evolves from an anxious maiden seeking union into an enlightened devotee anchored in serene, detached servitude (śānta/dāsya).

V. SATYABHĀMĀ VS. RUKMIṆI: THE DUAL MODALITIES OF FEMININE EMOTIONALITY

In Pārijāta-Haraṇa, Śaṅkaradeva deliberately orchestrates an aesthetic and psychological polarity between Satyabhāmā and Rukmiṇī, illustrating two divergent devotional approaches toward the Divine. Satyabhāmā exemplifies the assertive pragalbhā nāyikā combined with the volatile distress of the wounded khaṇḍitā and māninī (Nāṭyaśāstra 24.215–216 [4]). Discovering that the celestial flower was presented to Rukmiṇī, she vents domestic indignation:

"Satyabhāmā bola□□ He svāmi, hāmi durbhāgāka kapaṭa vākye kata kadarthanā karaha : ye tohāra priyatamā rukmiṇī tāheka samīpa calaha, hāmāta kona prayojana thika□□" ([13], p. 91)
(English translation: "Satyabhāmā spoke: 'O Lord! Knowing me to be unfortunate, how long will you mock and humiliate me with deceitful words? Go rather to the side of your beloved Rukmiṇī; what conceivable need have you of me!'")

Śaṅkaradeva incorporates Satyabhāmā's possessiveness to highlight how worldly ego (ahaṅkāra) obstructs true spiritual surrender. Satyabhāmā seeks to possess Kṛṣṇa through external status and material trophies (the celestial tree). In contrast, Rukmiṇī's devotion is entirely self-sufficient, requiring no external validation.

TABLE I. COMPARATIVE CONTRAST BETWEEN SATYABHĀMĀ AND RUKMIṆĪ IN PĀRIJĀTA-HARAṆA

Analytical Dimension	Satyabhāmā in Pārijāta-Haraṇa	Rukmiṇī in Pārijāta-Haraṇa
Situational Aṣṭa-Nāyikā State	Khaṇḍitā / Māninī (Wounded pride)	Svādhīnabhartṛkā / Dhīrā (Tranquil assurance)
Psychological Disposition	Assertive, possessive, competitive, volatile	Restrained, self-contained, serene
Devotional Modality	Ahaṅkāra-yukta Bhakti (Ego-mediated devotion)	Śuddha-Śaraṇāgati (Unalloyed spiritual surrender)
Relation to Material Objects	Possessive (Demands the entire tree)	Detached (Values divine presence over the object)
Dramatic Function	Drives conflict and dramatic tension	Anchors the moral and theological center
Theatrical Demeanor	Sharp vocal tone, haughty posture, active reproach	Calm vocal delivery, modest gaze, serene presence

VI. DEVOTIONAL ABHISĀRA: THE METAPHYSICAL SUBVERSION OF THE TRYST

In classical Sanskrit dramaturgy, the abhisārikā is celebrated as the boldest situational archetype, defying societal boundaries to seek her lover (Daśarūpaka 2.27 [5]; Nāṭyaśāstra Chapter 24 [9]). In Patnī-Prasāda and Keli-Gopāla, Śaṅkaradeva appropriates the outward structure of the nocturnal tryst, but strips it of worldly eroticism (kāma) to inaugurate an embodied, metaphysical Devotional Abhisāra (Bhakti-Abhisāra).

A. Patnī-Prasāda: The Metaphysical Ascent of the Brahmin Wives

In Patnī-Prasāda, the ritual-bound Vedic priests (karmakāṇḍī vipras) refuse food to Kṛṣṇa's hungry companions. Upon hearing of Kṛṣṇa's presence in the nearby groves, their wives (vipra-patnīs) are seized by devotional longing. Defying patriarchal commands and orthodoxy, they carry offerings into the forest:

"Sūtra □□ Õhi suni brāhmaṇisaba : parama haraṣita mane : śrīkṛṣṇaka prati : parama sugandhi anna beñjana : piṭhāpanā paramānna, panasa sukla cinī : bahuvidha ṣaṛarasaḥ bicitra pātrabhari laiyā kahõ : jaice calala : tā dekhaha sunaha nirantare hari bola hari□□" ([13], p. 6)
(English translation: "Sūtradhāra: Hearing this, the Brahmin wives, with joyful hearts, gathered intensely fragrant cooked rice and curries, sweet cakes, rice pudding, ripe jackfruits, refined sugar, and six kinds of delicacies filling diverse vessels for Śrī Kṛṣṇa; behold and listen attentively to how they hastened forth, and chant unceasingly the name of Hari!")

When several wives are forcibly locked within their houses by their husbands, Śaṅkaradeva introduces a profound theological moment set to Raga Belovāra:

"5। Gīta ।। Rāga—Belovāra ।। Rūpaka tāla

Haripada pekhaye napāvali māī।

Phokāraye ghane ghanaḥ nayana jhurāī ।। dhrūṁ ।।

Pada ।। Bandhu bijoga āgi prāna phuṭi jāi।

Aruṇa caraṇa mane rahali dhiyāī ।।

Choṛi parala prāṇa dhari hari pāve।

Pāvali gati sati śaṅkare gāve ।।" ([13], p. 7)
(English translation: "Failing to behold the lotus feet of Hari, tears streamed from her eyes and she sighed deeply in agonizing succession. The blazing fire of separation from her beloved companion rent her heart in twain; yet within her mind, she remained steadfastly meditating

upon His crimson lotus feet. Holding fast to the feet of Hari in deep contemplation, she surrendered her mortal breath; thus that virtuous woman attained supreme liberation, so sings Śaṅkara.")

Blocked from physical mobility, the confined devotee internalizes the journey, fixing her consciousness upon the crimson feet of Hari (aruṇa caraṇa mane rahali dhiyāī) and relinquishing her mortal embodiment. The physical tryst is transformed into the soul's metaphysical ascent.

B. Keli-Gopāla: The Dual Modalities of Gopi-Bhakti and the Peril of Spiritual Pride

In Keli-Gopāla, Śaṅkaradeva portrays the devotional journey of the Gopis through two sharply contrasting yet dialectically unified spiritual phases:

1) Intense Devotional Longing and Disembodied Union: Hearing Kṛṣṇa's flute in the autumn moonlight, the Gopis abandon domestic duties: "Śuniyā madana-mohana beṇurāva / Tejiyā gṛhabāsa calali gopī-jhāṅka□" ([13], p. 114). Similar to the Brahmin wives, those maidens who are locked inside their rooms by family members (niruddhāḥ patidevaraiḥ) perform an internal contemplation, embracing Mādhava in deep meditation (nibiṛa dhyāna) and casting off their mortal bodies:

"Yā gopyaḥ pārśvamaprāptā niruddhāḥ patidevaraiḥ□
Hṛdi govinda caraṇaṁ vicintya vijahuḥ tanuḥ□□
Āhe sāmājika loka : ye gopīsaba kṛṣṇaka dekhite napāvala, svāmī devare dvāra bandha kaya rākhala se saba virahatāpe tāpita hoiyā hṛdi prāṇa mādhavaka nibiṛa dhyāne āliṅgi kahõ yaicana priyatama tanu cārala tā dekhata śunata nirantare haribola haribola□□" ([13], p. 119)

(English translation: "Those Gopis who, obstructed by their husbands and brothers-in-law, could not reach His presence, meditated in their hearts upon the feet of Govinda and relinquished their bodies. The Sūtradhāra announces: 'O spectators, those Gopis who could not see Kṛṣṇa because their husbands and brothers-in-law bolted the doors, burned with the agony of separation; embracing the Lord of their life, Mādhava, in deep meditation within their hearts, behold how they abandoned their cherished mortal bodies—witnessing this, chant unceasingly the name of Hari!'")

This illustrates that when intense, pure yearning for God awakens, physical and social impediments are rendered powerless; the Divine receives the surrendered soul regardless of circumstance.

2) The Onset of Arrogance and Devotional Shipwreck: In the second phase, Śaṅkaradeva introduces a solemn theological warning. The Gopis who physically reach Kṛṣṇa succumb to spiritual vanity, presuming themselves uniquely privileged consorts. Consequently, they begin to slight and disrespect Kṛṣṇa:

"Śloka □□ Gopyā govinda sanmāna mada-mohita cetasaḥ□
Garvena kharva vākyena cakrustā hari helanam□□
Sūtra □□ Tadanantara strīka durjana bhāva śunaha = ye pūrṇānanda śrīkṛṣṇa unikara kutsita viṣaya sukhe kona abhilāsa thika□
Nāhi nāhi yaice kāmadhenu vṛndādhikārīka chāgalīta ki prayojana thika□ Gopīsave tāhe nāhi jānaye, mādhavata mahā mānya pāi kaho buddhi andha bhela, kṛṣṇaka avahelā kaya lāgala□ Anyo-anye kahaya□□" ([13], p. 122)

(English translation: "Verse: The Gopis, their minds intoxicated with pride by the honor shown by Govinda, arrogant and filled with vanity, slighted Hari with haughty words. Sūtradhāra: 'Hear now the worldly vanity of women: does the supremely blissful Śrī Kṛṣṇa harbor any craving for vile sensual pleasure? Never! What conceivable need does the master of the wish-fulfilling cow (Kāmadhenu) have for a mere goat? The Gopis did not comprehend this sublime truth; having received great esteem from Mādhava, their intellect became blinded with pride, and they began to treat Kṛṣṇa with dismissive neglect. Thus they began conversing among themselves...'")

The Sūtradhāra's metaphor contrasting the wish-fulfilling cow (Kāmadhenu) with a common goat strips mundane erotic pride of philosophical standing. The moment ego infects devotion, Kṛṣṇa vanishes instantly. Bereft of divine presence, the Gopis become like a rudderless boat tossed upon a tempestuous ocean, cast into intense viraha. Only when their vanity is purified through grief and complete humility does Kṛṣṇa reappear to initiate the circular Rāsa dance.

VII. SĪTĀ IN RĀMA-VIJAYA: HEROINE AS SUPREME DEVOTEE, LIFELONG ASCETICISM, AND SHARANAGATI

In Śaṅkaradeva's final dramatic masterpiece, Rāma-Vijaya, the characterization of Sītā elevates the classical nāyikā paradigm to supreme devotional heights. At first glance, Sītā's anxiety at the royal svayaṁvara might appear to be the distress of an ordinary maiden in love. However, closer dramaturgical analysis reveals an underlying spiritual imperative: Sītā is not merely a secular princess, but a paramā bhaktā (supreme devotee).

Just as an ardent devotee yearns across lifetimes for divine liberation, Sītā has endured multiple incarnations of intense ascetic discipline (tapasyā) to attain Śrī Rāma as her divine consort. The inability to attain full communion with the Supreme Lord Nārāyaṇa in a prior life caused her soul to be reborn. The Sūtradhāra introduces Sītā as a jātismara kanyā—one possessing conscious memory of her prior births ([13], p. 224). When disclosing her inner agony to her companions, her monologue redefines the virahotkaṇṭhitā motif:

"Sītā bola□□ Āhe sakhīsaba, parama abhāginīka ki puchaha : hāmu pūrba janama īśvara nārāyaṇaka svāmī icchā kaya aneka janama kāya kleśa kariye bahuta bariṣa tapasyā kayalõ tadanantara ākāśībāṇī śuṇala : āhe kanyā = toho ohi janame svāmīka bheṭa nāhi pāvaba ārara janama śrīrāmarūpe tohāka bibāha karāvaba : ihā jāni hāmu agani praveśi prāṇa cāṛala āhe sakhī saba □□" ([13], p. 226)

(English translation: "Sītā spoke: 'O dear companions, why do you inquire of this most unfortunate soul? In my former life, yearning for Lord Nārāyaṇa as my husband, I practiced severe bodily penance and austerities across many years. Then I heard a heavenly voice: "O maiden, you shall not attain your Lord in this birth; in another incarnation, He shall marry you in the form of Śrī Rāma." Knowing this, I entered the fire and yielded my life. But alas, companions, has that divine prophecy proved futile today? For even in this birth, I have failed to behold and touch the lotus feet of my Lord Śrī Rāma!'")

This textual revelation establishes fundamental aesthetic and theological insights: (1) Supreme Intensity of Longing: Sītā's grief is the ontological pain of separation from God. Having previously perished in sacred fire, she experiences life-threatening anguish at the prospect of the divine prophecy failing. (2) Pure Ascetic Commitment: Her love is the fruit of disciplined penance (kāya-kleśa), untainted by mundane desire. (3) Divine Reciprocity: When Śrī Rāmacandra breaks the bow of Śiva, quells the wrath of Paraśurāma, and claims Sītā, the devotee's timeless prayer is fulfilled. Through this narrative resolution, Śaṅkaradeva demonstrates the theological tenet that the Divine responds to the devotee in the precise mood and relationship desired (kāntā-bhāva). (4) Inviolable Refuge (Śaraṇāgati): When Sītā trembles at Paraśurāma's entry and takes refuge behind Rāma, classical maidenly fear (mugdhā nāyikā) is transformed into the secure surrender of the protected soul (Daśarūpaka 2.16–17 [5]).

VIII. COMPARATIVE TAXONOMY: CLASSICAL SITUATIONAL ARCHETYPES VS. DEVOTIONAL TRANSMUTATIONS

TABLE II. SYSTEMATIC TAXONOMY OF CLASSICAL ARCHETYPES AND DEVOTIONAL RECONFIGURATIONS

Dramatic Persona & Play	Classical Aṣṭa-Nāyikā State	Inherent Worldly Emotion (Laukika Bhāva)	Devotional Reconfiguration (Alaukika Bhakti)
Rukmiṇī (Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa)	Virahotkaṇṭhitā / Abhisārikā	Romantic longing; anxiety over forced alliance	Active agency-driven spiritual pursuit (prapatti); rejection of worldly alliance for God
Rukmiṇī (Pārijāta-Haraṇa)	Svādhīnabhartṛkā	Conjugal security; claim over husband's favor	Detached, serene devotion (śānta-bhakti); transcendence of material jealousy
Satyabhāmā (Pārijāta-Haraṇa)	Khaṇḍitā / Māninī	Wounded pride; competitive jealousy toward co-wife	Ahaṅkāra-yukta devotion; dramatic demonstration of the hazard of spiritual pride
Brahmin Wives (Patnī-Prasāda)	Abhisārikā	Transgression of domestic boundaries for lover	Devotional Abhisāra; soul transcending bodily boundaries to attain divine union
Gopis (Keli-Gopāla)	Abhisārikā / Khaṇḍitā / Māninī	Nocturnal passion; pride and slighting of the beloved	Ego-dissolving Abhisāra; purification of spiritual pride through collective viraha
Sītā (Rāma-Vijaya)	Virahotkaṇṭhitā ➔ Vāsakasajjā ➔ Svādhīnabhartṛkā	Sensual anxiety and distress; fear of adversary	Lifelong devotional penance (tapasyā); absolute divine communion and refuge (śaraṇāgati)

IX. THEATRICAL INTEGRATION: COSTUME, MUSIC, AND SŪTRADHĀRA MEDIATION

An analysis confined to written dramatic texts cannot fully comprehend how meaning is enacted in performance. In Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, the reconfiguration of classical archetypes into Bhakti is actualized through theatrical performance devices.

A. Costume and Visual Iconography (Āhārya)

In Sanskrit court theatre, costuming for the vāsakasajjā or abhisārikā emphasized sensual appeal and luxury (Nāṭyaśāstra 23.52–55 [4]). In contrast, Śaṅkaradeva's heroines project austere dignity. Rukmiṇī, Sītā, and the Brahmin wives wear traditional Assamese handloom silks (pāṭ or mugā), with the rihā wrapped modestly across the torso, complemented by simple floral ornaments. This visual semiotics neutralizes voyeuristic gaze, projecting serene purity (sāttvika-bhāva) and establishing the heroine as an emblem of devotion.

B. Melodic Registers and Sonic Atmosphere

The emotional states of the heroines are framed by classical ragas (such as Māhura, Kalyāṇa, Śrī, Kau, and Suhāi). In Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa, Rukmiṇī's viraha is rendered through solemn melodic lines, transforming personal sorrow into a contemplative prayer.

C. Continuous Sūtradhāra Intervention and Audience Bridge

The most innovative dramaturgical distinction from classical Sanskrit drama is the continuous presence of the Sūtradhāra [12]. In Sanskrit theatre, the Sūtradhāra exits after the prologue (prastāvanā). In Śaṅkaradeva's plays, the Sūtradhāra remains on stage throughout the entire performance. Whenever dramatic tension rises and dialogue alone cannot adequately articulate internal devotional grief or transcendent emotion, the Sūtradhāra intervenes directly, connecting with the audience and interpreting the scene.

For instance, when Kṛṣṇa reads Rukmiṇī's desperate letter in Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa and weeps with reciprocal love, the Sūtradhāra interprets the moment for the spectators:

> *"Sūtra □□ Tadanantara rukamiṇīka sakaruṇa patra dekhiye kṛṣṇaka hṛdaye tāpa upajala : kamala nayanaka nira jhuraye lāgala— yaicana bilāpa kayala tā dekhaha sunaha nirantare hari bola hari bola□□" ([13], p. 54)*
> (English translation: "Sūtradhāra: Thereupon, reading Rukmiṇī's pathetic letter, the fire of separation flared within Kṛṣṇa's heart, and tears streamed from his lotus-like eyes; behold and hear how He lamented, and chant unceasingly the name of Hari!")

Similarly, in Pārijāta-Haraṇa, when divine compassion surpasses verbal dialogue, the Sūtradhāra elucidates Kṛṣṇa's loving solace:

> *"Sūtra □□ Tāhe dekhi śrīkṛṣṇao hā hā buli bāhu meli dharala, priyāka dukha dekhiye marama caṛala : kamala nayanaka nira jhuraye, preme prabodha bolala□□" ([13], p. 92)*
> (English translation: "Sūtradhāra: Seeing her grief, Śrī Kṛṣṇa cried 'Alas! Alas!' and stretched forth His arms to embrace her; beholding His beloved's distress, deep tenderness welled within Him. Tears flowed from His lotus eyes, and with profound love He spoke words of solace.")

Through these metatheatrical interventions, the Sūtradhāra prevents the audience from perceiving the drama as mundane secular romance, continuously guiding the collective spectatorship toward congregational devotion and Bhakti Rasa.

X. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the heroines in Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Aṅkīyā Nāṭ cannot be adequately interpreted as passive reproductions of classical Sanskrit aṣṭa-nāyikā taxonomies. While Śaṅkaradeva masterfully adopted classical dramatic motifs, he subordinated them to the spiritual philosophy of Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma. Five major findings emerge: (1) Rukmiṇī's Maturation: an ontological progression from active romantic pursuit to detached devotional serenity; (2) Devotional Abhisāra: the subversion of the physical tryst into an allegory of spiritual transcendence; (3) Plurality of Devotional Modalities: the dramatic contrast between ego-mediated devotion (Satyabhāmā) and selfless surrender (Rukmiṇī); (4) Sītā as Supreme Devotee: incarnational penance leading to unshakeable divine refuge (śaraṇāgati), affirming that God manifests according to the devotee's heartfelt love; and (5) Integrated Theatrical Framing: restrained visual iconography, devotional melodies, and the continuous guidance of the Sūtradhāra bridging dramatic action and spiritual realization.

Śaṅkaradeva's heroines emerge as active moral agents who transcend domestic and social conventions to realize divine communion. By reconfiguring the classical heroine into a vehicle for Bhakti, Śaṅkaradeva forged a unique synthesis that remains an enduring contribution to Indian dramatic traditions.

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