

Management of the Stage: Sūtradhār in **Kālidaman** and Chorus in **Dr Faustus**- a Comparative Analysis

Montu Saikia

Assistant Professor

Pub Kamrup College

Baihata Chariali, Guwahati- Assam

An abstract: The present paper is an attempt to analyze the techniques applied by playwrights for immediate stage management in the very texture of their plays. The Chorus in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and the Sūtradhār in Sankardev's Kalidamana are two of such techniques of stage management. Focus is made on Sankardev's innovative use of the Sūtradhār for overall management of the action in his play. The Chorus therein Marlowe's Dr Faustus has been analyzed as a specimen of the use of chorus in the occidental theatre. The paper aims at focusing Sankardev's innovative use of the dramatic figure, Sūtradhār while writing in the early period of Assamese literature.

Keywords- stage management, action, narration, unenactable, Comparative literature, Assamese dramatic literature

Drama both as a form of performing art and as a literary form invites both artistic and literary reception. Hence in spite of the fact that drama is a form of literature it is expected to be enacted on stage like other forms of performing arts. That is why 'mise en scene' is a unique and unavoidable element in the texture of a play. In other words, in addition to normal literary sort of development, a playwright needs to allow some space to some 'non-narrative' portion in order to support producing the desired effects of the text on the stage. There lies the space for stage management in the texture of the play. Chorus has very actively been playing its part in that as far as occidental theatre is concerned. Sūtradhār plays a role of the kind in traditional Assamese drama. A comparative study can therefore be done on these two modes and methods of stage management. The present paper is an attempt to focus in that keeping in mind the hypothesis that

Sankardev through his six plays pioneered Assamese dramatic literature, and Christopher Marlowe, with seven brilliant tragedies in his too short a career could leave his indelible marks in the Golden Age of English drama. The present paper will, in a comparative tone focus on an important aspect of theatre- stage management, taking two apparently different technicalities from two different playwrights belonging to two equally different cultural contexts.

The present analysis is an attempt to working out with the following objectives-

- To comprehend the needs of measures for stage management
- To observe the role of Sūtradhār in traditional Assamese drama in its initial stage as in Kālidaman by Sankardev
- To focus on the theatrical essence of Chorus in European drama as in Dr Faustus by Christopher Marlowe
- Comparative analysis between Sūtradhār and Chorus in the respective plays

Sankardev- the creator and his creations: Sankardev (AD 1449-1568), called Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev with reverence was simultaneously a neo-Vaishnavite saint, artist, composer and social reformer of Assam. As part of the socio-political reformation across India in the 15th century, he discoursed the liberal neo-Vaishnavite cult under the banner ‘ek sarana nam dharma’ among the people of Assam and the north east all divided in caste, creed and ethnicity. It became his lifelong unremitting endeavour. That is why almost all of his creations are felt to be deviced by his declared mission in his life. The way he excelled in verse, he was also a master of gayan-bayan (musical concert), dance forms and of other creative arts including theatrical and other artifacts. The dance form initiated and composed by this great saint-poet and artist, and preserved by the satras (monasteries) was declared as a form of Indian classical dance in the year 2000 by the name ‘Satriya Dance’.

Sankardev is considered as one of the founding fathers of Assamese literature. He excelled in verse from his very school days when he went to the ‘tol’ (school). The vast bulk of literature that has been accredited to the saint-poet includes-

1. Poetic works (kāvya): i. Kirttan-Ghoshā ii. Harischandra-upakhyān iii. Rukmini-haran iv. Ajamilopākhyana v. Balichalana vi. Kurukshetra-yātra vii. Gopi-Uddhava Samvāda viii. Amritmantahana ix. Krishnaprayāna-Pāndava-Niryāna Kāmajaya
2. Bhakti Theory: i. Bhakti-Pradeep ii. Anādi-Patan iii. Nimi-Navasiddha Samvāda iv. Bhakti Ratnākar (Sanskrit) v. Gunamālā
3. Transliteration: i. Bhāgavata (Book I, II, VI, VII, VIII, IX -partial, X- partial, XI, XII), Ramayana (Uttarakānda, supplemented to Madhav Kandali's *Saptakānda Rāmāyana*)
4. Drama: i. Cihna Yātrā (lost) ii. Patni-Prāsād iii. Janma-Yātrā (lost) iv. Kangsa –Badh (lost) v. Pārijāt Haran vi. Kālidadamana vii. Rukmini-Harana viii. Keli-Gopāl ix. Sri Rām Vijaya

Sankardev is treated as the fountainhead of Ankiyā Nāt, a form of drama. His *Cihna Yātrā* has been claimed as one of the earliest open theatre performances in the world. This lost play is believed to be a dance drama. Innovations such as the Sūtradhār (narrator) on the stage and use of mask etc. were later used by playwrights and directors including Bertolt Brecht.

5. Songs: i. Borgeet (total 240, but only 34 exist as of now) ii. Bhatimā (panegyrics) iii. Deva Bhatimā (panegyrics to God) iv, Nāt Bhatimā (panegyrics for plays) v. Rāja Bhatimā (panegyric to his patron king Naranarayana)

Borgeets (literally meaning 'great songs') are devotional songs set to music. These songs are sung in various ragas. These ragas are slightly different from those of the Hindustani as well as the Carnatic styles. The songs are written in 'Brajāvali' language.

6. Visual Art: i. Sapta Vaikuntha- part of the Cihna Yātrā production, does not exist now
- ii. Vrindāvani Vastra- parts of this work are preserved in Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

KĀLIDAMANA (TAMING OF THE KĀLI NĀGA): This play by Sankardev relates the story of taming of Kāli Nāga who kills (Lord) Krishna along with his cowherd companions by poisoning the water of the pool Kalindi- his abode in Brindavana. Krishna brings himself to life with his cosmic power. The Lord then very easily overpowers the powerful Kāli Nāga and sends him away to Ramanaka island. The three dominant sentiments (rasa) dramatized in the play are Bhayānaka (Terrible), Karunā (Pathetic) and Adbhuta (Marvelous).

SPACE FOR STAGE MANAGEMENT: ROLE OF THE SŪTRADHĀR

The Sūtradhār is a leading figure in the traditional Assamese dramatic variety known as 'Ankiyā Nāt'. The word is formed by a conjoined word- 'ankiyā nāt'. Both these words- 'ankiyā' (adjective of the root 'anka') and 'nāt' stand for 'drama'. This ancient dramatic form is basically on devotional themes where the gods and goddesses and other divine figures are the most frequenting characters. God's benevolence, taming of the asura and other evil powers and protection and preservation of the honest and pious are the common themes mostly taken from the scriptures including the Purānas, the two Indian epics- the Rāmāyana and the Mahābharata, and other mythological sources.

As to the role of the Sūtradhār, equivalent dramatic appearances can be found even in Sanskrit dramas- the 'Director', for instance in *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by the stalwart of Sanskrit poetry, Kālidasa. But the way Sankardev uses the 'Character' of the Sūtradhār is immensely creative. It has to play a wider role with deeper dramatic significance than its counterparts in Sanskrit drama. Unlike the Director/ Sthapaka/ Sūtradhār in Sanskrit drama, the Sūtradhār in Ankiyā Nāt plays its role repeatedly, even taking part in the musical concert 'gāyan- Bāyan' and reciting the panegyric parts. The Sūtradhār also directs the action through his narration part- all on stage. The 'nat' itself begins with the entry of the Sūtradhār to a peculiar drum (khol) beat accompanied with music. The narrative parts of an Ankiyā Nāt plays a vital role in linking the plot of the play. The end of the role of the Sūtradhār in an Ankiyā Nāt comes only with that of the play itself.

SŪTRADHĀR IN *KĀLIDAMAN* BY SANKARDEV

The text of Kālidamana when brought out in quarto-size pages completes only in 30 pages. The Sūtradhār there addresses as many as 46 times out of which 26 he delivers as 'sūtra' and 20 as 'kathā sūtra'. 'Sūtra' and 'kathā' stand respectively for 'linkage' and 'speech'. The name of the 'Sūtradhār' comes from the fact that it is the holder (of command) of the 'sūtras'. Since its name signifies 'sūtra' + dhar (owner/ possessor/ proprietor). 'Kathā sūtra' in the play basically serves two purposes. First, it links the action with the dialogue of a character. Secondly, it sometimes narrates the dialogue of some character in the form of its narration. 'Sūtras' on the other hand is devised to play all possible dramatic roles on stage by an extraordinary dramatic figure.

First of all, the ‘sūtra’ is used to introduce a character on to the stage and in to the action. The Sūtradhār through his ‘sūtra’ links the action of the play through narration that becomes a direct contribution of the Sūtradhār to the dramatic development of the play. A significant contribution of the Sūtradhār is that through its narration part it supplies those actions which for some conventional bindings and theatrical shortcomings are not possible to be enacted on stage. Finally, the Sūtradhār’s narrations help the dramatist maintaining economy of language.

THE ROLE OF THE SŪTRADHĀR IN THE TEXTURE OF *KĀLIDAMAN*

i. **The prologue:** The Sūtradhār introduces and unveils the play before the audience in the prologue-

Je parama purushuttama

Sanatana Nārāyana: Srisrikrishna sabhā maddhye

Kālidamana lilā yātrā: parama koutuke karaba (Sutra- 3)

(Here enters the perpetual lord of all people on stage to enact with extreme pleasure the drama of taming of Kālināga)

He even tactfully makes space for the musical concert when he asks his companion his preference of musical instruments-

Āhe sakhi: kona badya suni e?

The companion expectantly replies that he would prefer nothing but mridangga and flute both being considered as instruments of musical concert among the gods in heaven-

Sanggi (companion): *Sakhi, mridangga bangshi dhwani suni*

ii. **Direct contribution to the story line:** Lord Krishna and his cowherd companions amidst their playing and merrymaking reaches the bank of the Kālindi pool. The long action of the playful hustle and bustle of the group of cowherd has been cut short when the Sūtradhār supplies this information on stage through his Kathā Sūtra (no. 10)-

Nritya karate... sishusaba Kālindi hradaka samipa pāwala

...

... se bishamaya pāni tāheka najāni

Parama pipāse pidita hoiyā sabahi

Hradaka jala udar bhari pāna karala

Tatkāle durghura bishara jwālā lāgiye

Chetanā harala. Sarira kampi kampi batsa batsapāla

Kālindi tire parala

(The cowherds thus reach the Kālindi pool in their dancing. To quench their thirst they drank the water from the pool being ignorant that it was poisonous. Immediately after, they lay there senseless.)

iii. Embedding dialogues of characters in its speech: Lord Krishna frees himself from the deadly effect of the poison. When he looks at his companions all lying senseless on the bank of the pool, he is deeply grief-stricken. The words that Lord Krishna utters to express his concern over the fate of his friends get embedded in the a ‘sūtra’ (no. 12)-

Hā hā ki bheli boli dhari kahu: ulatā palatā kari e dekhala: nirantare prāne marala: hā hā hāmāra bhakataka oichana awasthā: buli se bhakatabatchala Gopāla: bahuta kheda kaya kahu: amrita dristi nirekhi: tatkāle sabāke jiyāwala.

(Krishna checks his friends and feels utterly sorry to see that all are dead. Aggrieved at the plight of his followers he brings them back to life with some miraculous power of vision.)

iv. Direction from the front on stage: Sometimes the Sūtradhār through his narration plays the role of the director directing the character’s action on stage. When Krishna’s parents Nanda and Yasudā arrive at the Kālindi looking for him they discover their son and other cowherds lying on the bank. The Sūtradhār while narrating this part explains-

Nanda Yashudā hradaka tire pāwala...

Sri Krishna mritaka bhāve raiyese: chakuta nimesha nāhi

The words in the last line of the above quote- *Krishna mritaka bhāve raiyese* (Krishna lies like a dead) and *chakuta nimesha nahi* (he fails even to wink) are directorial in tone.

v. Spokesperson of the playwright: The Sūtradhār in an Ankiyā Nāt is apparently the spokesperson of the playwright. Kālidamana is a part of Sankardev's mission for preaching neo-Vaishnavism cult among the people of Assam. As a neo-Vaishnavite saint his primary aim was to educate the people in terms of the benevolence, tenderness and eternal goodness of the almighty, Lord Vishnu (whose incarnation Krishna here in the play is). The duty of mankind is to declaim His glory and pronounce His name in order to win His kindness, favours and blessings in their journey towards eternal peace in heaven after this life.

The Sūtradhār in Kālidamana time and again, at the end of almost every narration advises the audience reminding them their duty to declaim God's glory-

Kouti brahmānda iswara jāni: trāhi trāhi swāmi Krishna boli

(Know that Lord Krishna is the lord of all the worlds, endlessly sing His glory and chant His name.)

Tāke dekhaha sunaha: nirantare hāri bola hāri

(Watch the actions played on stage, be attentive to the speeches: endlessly chant the name of God.)

vi. Narration of the unenactable part of the play: Narration of the unenactable portion in a play has been an age old tradition adopted by dramatists across dramatic traditions. In *Kālidamana* too such actions on stage have been replaced by narrations made by the Sūtradhār. Two major scenes of this play, first, the dreadful fight between Lord Krishna and the devil Kālināga and the other, the bushfire on the bank of the Yamunā have been narrated by the Sūtradhār. Such scenes would have been very difficult to enact on stage otherwise.

THE CHORUS IN *DR FAUSTUS*

Doctor Faustus is the central character of the great Elizabethan tragedy *Doctor Faustus* (1589-1592) by Christopher Marlowe (1564-93). It is the story of damnation of a renaissance scholar deviated to the path of unbounded knowledge through the path of black magic. Doctor Faustus, a talented German scholar at Wittenberg, rails against the limits of human knowledge.

He has learnt everything that the traditional branches can at best offer him. Even after that his thirst for knowledge remains unquenched. Hence he turns towards black magic which he believes can expose him to limitless domain of knowledge. The Good Angel and the Bad Angel appear before him representing Faustus' choice between Christian conscience and the path to damnation. They being the presentation of the divided self of the scholar, he prefers the latter. Through necromancy Dr Faustus wins over the devils and succeeds in signing a bond to the effect that Faustus will sell his soul to them in lieu of twenty four years of unbounded power and knowledge, with Mephostophilis, the agent of the devils as his servant to his every whim.

The Chorus in *Dr Faustus* plays a very significant dramatic role in the texture of the play. First of all, it narrates Faustus' journey across the heavens and the world in search for knowledge. He makes this journey in a chariot drawn by dragons. When the scholar arrives in Rome, he tricks with necromancy to insult and misbehave the Pope. The Chorus again plays a vital role towards the end of the play when the devils come to Dr Faustus to claim his soul as per the provision of the bond made by him. They snatch his soul out of his physique making the play a terrible one ending with bloodshed and death.

A Chorus in an Elizabethan drama is usually designated a single person, sometimes the speaker of the prologue and the epilogue. The Chorus in *Dr Faustus* plays these usual roles in the play. Other roles it plays having extreme dramatic significance in Marlowe's play are as follows-

The Prologue: The Chorus in the Prologue of the play introduces the play along with a detail portrayal of the life and achievements of the protagonist. Further it contains the invocation to the muse which the playwright makes for successful accomplishment of his design of the play. Also it contains a direct authorial address to the audience:

Intends our muse to vaunt his heavenly verse.

... Gentles: we must now perform

The form of Faustus' fortune, good or bad,

And now to patient judgments we appeal

The Prologue then concentrates around the life and achievements of Faustus. It narrates how a man coming from an ordinary family background excels in all the existing disciplines and

then receives a doctoral degree from the University of Wittenberg. Eventually the uncontrolled craving for knowledge prompts him to take to necromancy, the Black magic, an art never encouraged by Christian doctrines. This blunder brings the inescapable fall of the learned man Dr Faustus.

And speak for Faustus in his infancy.

Now is born, of parents base of stock,

In Germany within a town called Rhode.

At riper years to Wittenberg he went

...

That shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,

Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes

...

His waxen wings did mount above his reach,

And melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow

...

He surfeits upon cursed necromancy

...

And this the man that in his study sits.

Thus the Chorus in the Prologue offers a comprehensive narration about the protagonist and finally the action of the play is unveiled in the concluding sentence. ('Prologue', *Dr Faustus*)

Chorus 1: This Chorus comes in between Act II and Act III. Here it links the story line between these acts. It narrates Faustus' adventure around the entire universe before visiting Rome. Thus

the cosmic tour of the renaissance scholar is beautifully narrated which would have been near impossible to enact on an Elizabethan stage.

Chorus II: This appearance of the Chorus between Act III and Act IV relates the effects of the cosmic journey of the protagonist. Further it narrates the jubilant receptions Dr Faustus has had from the learned circle all around. The apparent dramatic contributions of this appearance of the Chorus include maintaining economy of action and narration of an unenactable scene on the stage like the cosmic journey.

The Epilogue: The Chorus in the epilogue formally closes the action of the play. But while accomplishing this designated role, it comes out strongly with the morale of the play-

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,

And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,

That sometime grew within this learned man.

Faustus is gone: regard this hellish fall,

Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,

Only to wonder at unlawful things,

Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits

To practice more than heavenly power permits. [Exit]

(Epilogue, Doctor Faustus)

The Sūtradhār in Kālidamāna and the Chorus in Doctor Faustus- an observation:

A brief relative projection of the techniques of stage management adopted by Christopher Marlowe (AD1564-1593) and Sankardev (AD1449- 1568) can be made-

	Sūtradhār in Kālidamāna	Chorus in Dr Faustus	Observation
1	Speaks the morale of the play	Speaks the morale of the play	Identical role

	playing the role of the spokesperson of the playwright.	playing the role of the spokesperson of the playwright.	
2	Comments on the action from time to time.	Comments on the action when it appears.	Identical role
3	Narrates the unenactable portion.	Narrates the unenactable portion.	Identical role
4	Enters the stage with a distinct form of dance performed to the rhythm of a music and drum beat.	No such provisions are there.	Role differs
5	Directs the action on stage	Such distinct directorial duty is not accorded	Role differs
6	It remains present on stage during the entire course of the play, sometimes accompanying the musical concert. In this play the Sūtradhār performs 46 'sutras' and 'katha sutras'	Appearance is occasional. It appears only for four times in the entire play.	Role differs

Sankardev was one of the pioneers of Assamese literature and can be considered the founding father of Assamese dramatic literature. He developed Assamese drama from a few performing arts with dramatic qualities, such as Ujāpālī, Putalā Nāch (puppetry), Khuliyā and Dhuliyā. Being a leading figure in the infant stage of Assamese drama, Sūtradhār therefore had to be engaged as a cementing force in the entire process of creating dramatic effect. Christopher Marlowe on the other hand was a playwright contributing in the Golden Age of English Drama, the Elizabethan period. English drama had by then overcome a long period of time since the days of the Miracle and Mystery plays of the middle ages. Hence, the role of an elementary dramatic figure like the Chorus by then had been significantly reduced. Even then a comparative study of the dramatic techniques applied for stage management by two playwrights working in two distinct cultural domains living in two very dissimilar stages of development of their respective genres can be a potential source of academic pursuit and delight in Comparative literature.

Select Bibliography

- Appelbaum, Stanly, *Dr Faustus, Dover*, Thrift Editions, Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York, 1994.
- Barman, Sibanath. *Srimanta Sankardev- Kriti Aru Kritittva*, Jagaran Sahitya Prakash, Dhing, Nagaon, Assam, 1986.
- Bevington, David & Eric Rasmussen ed. *Dr Faustus, A & B Texts by Christopher Marlowe*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1993
- Bharali, Sailen. *Natak Aru Asamiya Natak*, Bani Prakash, Pathsala, Assam, 2003 (1990).
- Bhattacharyya, Harichandra. *Asamiya Natya Sahityar Jilingani*. LBS, Guwahati, 1988 (1968).
- Datta, Kitty ed. *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, OUP, Calcutta, 1989 (1986).
- Deka Hazarika, Karabi. *Madhavdev: Sahitya Kala Aru Sanskriti*, Banalata, Dibrugarh, Guwahati, 1998 (1987).
- Devgoswami, Narayana Chandra. *Satriya Sanskritir Swarnalekha*, LBS, Guwahati, 2000.
- Gohain, Hiren. *Asamar Jaiya Jiwanat Mahapurusiya Parampara (Part I)*. LBS, Guwahati, 1987.
- Medhi, Kaliram ed. *Ankavali*, LBS, Guwahati, 1997.
- Neog, Maheswar. *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith in Assam: Sankardev and His Times*, Motilal Banarsi Dass, Delhi, Varanasi, Patna, Madras, 1985 (1965).

: *Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha*. Chandra Prakash, Guwahati. (7th edition) 1987.

