Almost 500 years after saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardeva experimented with the literary language of Brajvali, Assam’s Bhaona has now reached foreign shores in an English avatar.

Bhaono:

- Entertainment played a major role in the neo-Vaishnavite movement that Sankardeva started in Assam.
- He wrote his prose in Sanskrit but used Assamese and Brajvali to develop Borgeet, a new form of spiritual music, and Bhaona, a mythology-based theatrical performance, and monastic dances that evolved into the classical Sattriya.

Why Brajvali?

- Sankardeva needed to connect with his Assamese masses, who did not expect the divine characters of his plays to speak in the common man’s language. So he created the Brajvali, a literary language limited to theatrical usage.

How English Boano evolved?

- The need to connect with an audience not conversant with Assamese, not to speak of Brajvali, was the reason why three siblings from Sonitpur district’s Jamugurihat conceived the English Bhaona a couple of years ago.
- The experiment has taken them to Abu Dhabi where they are set to stage two Bhaonas — Keli Gopala (‘Playful Krishna’) and Ravana Badha (‘Slaying Ravana’)

Issues:

- Conservatives have been critical of the trio for “deviating” from the pure form of Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdeva’s creations with their “English misadventure”.

Transporting an entire troupe with their costumes and array of musical instruments is unwieldy besides being expensive.

Sattriya dance:

- The Sattriya dance form was introduced in the 15th century A.D by the great Vaishnava saint and reformer of Assam, Mahapurusha Sankaradeva as a powerful medium for propagation of the Vaishnava faith.
- The dance form evolved and expanded as a distinctive style of dance later on. This neo-Vaishnava treasure of Assamese dance and drama has been, for centuries, nurtured and preserved with great commitment by the Sattras i.e. Vaishnava maths or monasteries. Because of its religious character and association with the Sattras, this dance style has been aptly named Sattriya.
- Sankaradeva introduced this dance form by incorporating different elements from various treatises, local folk dances with his own rare outlook.
- There were two dance forms prevalent in Assam before the neo-Vaishnava movement such as Ojapali and Devadasi with many classical elements. Two varieties of Ojapali dances are still prevalent in Assam i.e. Sukananni or Maroi Goa Ojah and Vyah Goa Ojah. Sukananni Oja paali is of Sakti cult and Vyah Goa Oja paali is of Vaishnava cult. Sankaradeva included Vyah Goa Ojah into his daily rituals in Sattra.
- Till now Vyah Goa Ojah is a part of rituals of the Sattras of Assam. The dancers in a Oja paali chorus not only sing and dance but also explain the narration by gestures and stylized movements.
- As far as Devadasi dance is concerned, resemblance of a good number of rhythmic syllables and dance postures along with footwork with Sattriya dance is a clear indication of the influence of the former on the latter.
- Other visible influences on Sattriya dance are those from Assamese folk dances namely Bihu, Bodos etc. Many hand gestures and rhythmic syllables are strikingly similar in these dance forms.
- Sattriya dance tradition is governed by strictly laid down principles in respect of hastamudras, footworks, aharyas, music etc. This tradition, has two distinctly separate streams - the Bhaona-related repertoire starting from the Gayan-Bhayanar Nach to the Kharmanar Nach.