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SATTRIYA, THE CLASSICAL DANCE FORM OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

There are eight forms of Indian classical dances, which include Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniattam and Sattriya.

Sattriya is originated in Assam, one of the premier north-eastern states of India. It was developed as the part and parcel of dance-drama performances. Its root traces back to the 15th century during the Kṛṣṇa-centered Vaishnavite Bhakti movement in Assam. The great scholar and Vaishnavite saint Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva created this art form as an important medium to preach Vaishnavism.

After getting recognition as classical dance form of India, the dance has undergone too many changes, modifications to arrive at its present form. Hastas (Hand gestures) and other Āṅgika movements (Āṅgika Abhinaya), Costumes, Ornaments (Āhārya Abhinaya) and Music of this dance style too have witnessed too many changes and modifications.

So, a brief history of Sattriya is tried to discuss in this paper. A brief idea about the dances practiced before Sattriya came into existence, the emergence of Vaishnavism and creation of Sattriya as vehicle to propagate Vaishnavism, Development of Sattriya as dance, its renaissance and its transition to performing art is included herewith.

KEYWORDS: Sattriya, Dance, Assam, Classical, Śaṅkardeva

INTRODUCTION

Sattriya or Sattriya Nritya is the youngest of the eight Indian Classical dance traditions. It is a dance form evolved and developed in Assam. Whereas some of the other traditions have been revived in the recent past, Sattriya has a living tradition since its creation about Six hundred years back in the 15th century by Mahāpuruṣa

Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva, the great Vaishnavite saint, social reformer, poet, playwright, lyricist, painter, sculptor, singer and dancer of Assam.

Initially, Sattriya was confined within the four walls of Sattras (Vaishnavite monasteries), because of the conservative attitude of the religious Sattria community. However, with the advent of modern age, the



Sattriya has started coming out of the Sattras and because of its classical elements, the Sattriya has ultimately been recognized as a classical dance on 15 November 2000.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF SATTRIYA

The Sattriya style was probably originated either towards the end of the 15th century or early in

the 16th century.¹ Its birth can be traced in the Kṛṣṇa centred Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam, popularly known as Sattras. The dance form was preserved and later developed and practised by the dedicated and mostly celibate monks at Sattras. It was created as an important segment to a larger body of theatrical tradition of Añkīyā Bhāonā – a drama form created by the great Śaṅkardeva and his equally talented, ardent disciple Mādhavdeva. This form may be treated as an example of the “third generation theatre forms” which finds its beginning in India from the 14th century onwards². These forms are counted as people’s forms and have a wide appeal.

The history and development of Sattriya can be discussed in four important segments:-

Up to 1500 A.D	: Dance in pre-Śaṅkardeva era
1500 A.D to 1957A.D	:Sattriya within Sattras (Śaṅkardeva & Mādhavdeva era, Post Śaṅkardeva & Mādhavdeva era)
1957 A.D to 2000A.D	: Sattriya outside Sattras and its subsequent developments
2000 A.D onwards	: Renaissance (Recognition as classical dance form & contemporary approach)

Up to 1500 A.D – Dance in pre-Śaṅkardeva era

Since of very great age, Assam has remarkably placed itself as a land of Performing Arts. It has a long and strong tradition of music and dance. When the great Chinese traveller, Hiuen-tsiang visited the Kamrup in the seventh century, King Bhaskar Barman entertained the holy guest with the variety number of dances and music almost every day for one month.³

Before the emergence of Sattriya form, two dance styles had marked its existence in Assam with the classical elements in them.⁴ These are - the Naṭī or Devadasi dance and the dance of non neo-Vaishnava Ojāpālī group. Both the dance styles have their influences on the Sattriya dance style.

The Naṭī or Devadasi dance of Assam:

The Devadasi tradition of Assam or Naṭīnāch is the part of ancient Socio-cultural tradition. The origin of Devadasi dance as a part of religious services is found in India in a historically remote past. In case of Assam, however, it is difficult to say with any definiteness that in which century the dance-form became established in the region as the part of its unique and indigenous tradition. Also it becomes difficult to arrive at any definite opinion about whether the Devadasi custom of Assam had purely Assamese roots like custom in Tamilnadu or whether the custom became established in Assam after being migrated from some other places as a result of cultural expansion. Dr. S.K Chatterjee, does not choose to reiterate definitely that the Devadasi custom had been prevalent in Assam from the past.⁵ Yet, it can be gathered from many copper plates and stone inscription that the Naṭīnāch was regularly performed in the Da-Parbatīyā, Biśwanāth Cāriāli, Dergāon, Hātakeswara, Parihareśwara and Umānanda Śiva temples in Assam during ancient times. Pradip Chaliha opines that the ritual dancing and singing by temple dancers or Naṭīs had been prevalent in various temples in Assam from pre-historic times.⁶

The term ‘Naṭīnāch’ was given to the dance form as the dancers performing it were known as the “Naṭī”. The terms Naṭa and Nartaka are synonymous and the Naṭa-Nartaka were associated with the Devadasi dance or Naṭīnāch. It is seen again that various terms like Nartakī, Beśyā, Bāraṅganā, Daluhāṅganā etc are also used in addition to Naṭī dancers.⁷Naṭas and Naṭīs or dancers of both sexes belonged to the Naṭa-Kalitā community and they were also called the Gāndharva-Kāyasthas. Members of this community were traditionally related to the performance of ritual dancing and singing.

Though it is not known at what time the process of temple construction began in ancient Assam, it is believed that the Da-Parvatīā of Śiva temple, around three kilometers away from modern Tezpur, was the oldest and architecturally the most notable temple in the state. Historian Kanaklal Baruah believes that the temple was constructed by some ancestor of King Bhaskar Barman around the 5th or

6th century A.D.⁸ Like other parts of India, in ancient Assam also, temple building had been started probably during the 4th-5th centuries A.D and it had reached its highest point of development in the 9th-10th centuries A.D. along with the flourishing of the Devadasi custom in the state.

The Āhom kings, after the establishment of their kingdom in 1228 A.D and later their conversion to Hinduism, did not only construct temples, but also initiated dance performances in these temples as well as the royal court itself by establishing a special community of dancers called the Nācanīyār khel. The Devadasis had begun to come out of the four walls of the temple to perform during various public festivals and celebrations after getting such royal and social favor.

Sattriya came into existence approximately in the last part of 15th century. So from then onwards, these two traditions, Naṭināch and Sattriya, were practiced parallel in the entire state for almost 500 years. Many hand gestures and dance movements were imbibed from Naṭināch into Sattriya dance form by the great Śaṅkardeva.⁹ Both the Cāli and Naṭuwā Nāch – the important dance pieces of Sattriya owe their allegiance to the Devadasi dance.

The dance of non neo-Vaishnava Ojāpāli chorus

Ojāpāli dance, belongs to Kamrup region, is performed to express the meaning of the choral singing of Ojā and Pāli in gestures. The Ojāpāli tradition that was in vogue even before the emergence of the great Śaṅkardeva and his ardent disciple Mādhavdeva is known as non neo-Vaishnava Ojāpāli. The word Ojā depicts Upādhyāya or a wise man. He leads the entire team. In the Vedic period, four kinds of religious men performed the religious rituals. They were Brahmā, Adhvaryu, Hotā and Udgata. Udgata used to sing the Sāmagāna. It is usually said that the term Ojā have been obtained from Udgata. The remaining singers in the group are known as Pāli. The term Pāli traces its root to the term 'Pālitā' in Sanskrit. They are subservient i.e. assistants of the leader in music. Dāinā-Pāli (Dāinā comes from the Sanskrit term Dakṣiṇa, means right side, here the term depicts the man who is right hand of Ojā), who is not only principal among the Pālis, but is like a second head of the chorus. Ojā sets the refrain for the Pālis to repeat it after him with the counting of time on their feet and the striking of the small cymbals, which is known as 'Khuṭi Tāl', with their hands. Ojā sings the main part of verses of the narrative taken on the occasion. Ojā makes his performance more attractive with the help of various hand gestures, facial expression and different movements of the feet. He stands in the centre of the group for the major part of the performance. To make the audience understand the song and its gist, the Dāinā Pāli now and then starts to deliver dialogue, sometimes in the form of verbal encounter with the Ojā. He also indulges into witty comments, funny actions for the entertainment of the audience. Many dance movements seen in Ojāpāli are described in the old treatises related to dance and drama.

Ojāpāli is considered as an ancient art form of dance in the classical frame in Assam. Initially it did evolve and developed in Darrang district and later becomes equally popular in Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta and Nagaon districts¹⁰.

The non neo-Vaishnava Ojāpāli is divided into two types – a) Sukanānnī Ojāpāli and b) Vyāsgowā or Viyāhar Ojāpāli.

The first type of Ojāpāli is connected with Manasā puṇjā whereas the later one with Lord Vishnu worship. The songs of Sukanānnī Ojāpāli are taken from Padmā Purāṇ. It was translated into Assamese by Sukavi Narayana, from the 16th Century AD. The songs of Vyāsgowā Ojāpāli are composed from the episodes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Hence it is known as Vyāsar Geet (songs of Vyāsa).

1500 A.D to 1957 A.D - Sattriya within Sattras

Even though detailed information is not available about the origin and development of Sattriya, this period can still be divided into two categories.

- a) Śaṅkardeva and Mādhadeva era
- b) Post Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva era

Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva era:

Though the exact timing of the creation of Sattriya is not known, it is assumed that its origin traces back to either at the end of the fifteenth century or beginning of the sixteenth century. The period saw the restlessness of religious, social and political scenario. Not only of duck, goat or buffalo but also human sacrifices got prominence in the premiere temples of the state. Violence, Greed, Killings in the name of religion were everywhere. The great Śaṅkardeva was pained by such inhuman activities. He decided to spread the neo-Vaishnavism philosophy amongst the folk of Assam. Instead of idol-worship, he started to campaign for the idol-less prayer offering to Śrī Kṛṣṇa through songs, dramas, dances and so on. To propagate his “Ek Śarana Nām Dharma” based on Neo-Vaishnavism; he created Dramas, Dance, Songs, Poems, Painting, Sculpture, Mask-making and what not! Though his innovative and then progressive thinking made almost all the sections of Literature, Fine Arts and Performing Arts as vehicle for the propagation of Neo-Vaishnavism, it also enriched the Assamese culture and society in all aspects. The result of Neo-Vaishnavite movement not only made the people morally, spiritually and culturally elite, but also Śaṅkardeva’s extra-ordinary talent as writer, poet, actor, singer, dancer, painter and sculptor created a huge repertoire for all kinds of Performing Arts including dance and drama. The great Śaṅkardeva created six plays which are known as “Aṅkīyā Nāṭ” or “Bhāonā”. ‘Aṅkīyā’ means principal part of a drama i.e. ‘act’ or ‘episode’, and ‘Nāṭ’ means drama or play. Thus, ‘Aṅkīyā Nāṭ’ means play with acts. But by ‘Aṅkīyā Nāṭ’ people here understand plays written by the great Śaṅkardeva and his equally talented chief disciple Mādhavdeva. It is a class by itself.

It is worth-mentioning that Aṅkīyā Nāṭ of the great Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva is nothing but dances and dances. To make their dramas richer and aesthetically beautiful, they created dance borrowing elements from local dance traditions especially Naṭī and Ojāpālī dance tradition. Each and every character portrayed in Aṅkīyā Nāṭ has to sing and dance. This action created a new form of dance style naming it Sattriya. The term “Sattriya” comes from the word “Sattra” means holy area. As mentioned earlier, Sattras are the socio-religious institutions in the Assam that act as the preaching centres of Vaishnavism. Monks, who are full time residents of Sattras, are called Bhakats. They live in Sattras under strict religious discipline and with austerity of life.

As the dance created by these saints was later developed within Sattras, it became popular as Sattriya dance. Whereas the great Śaṅkardeva composed items of Sattriya only to serve the purpose of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, his ardent disciple Mādhavdeva developed several dance items to establish Sattriya as solo dance forms. He composed some new items like Nādubhaṅgī, Jhumurā, Cālī, Bāhār and so on. As a result, along with the dance items represented in dramatic presentation, the dances of solo performance have also been added to Sattriya repertoire to make it huge. Later his disciples carried out his legacy with further development.

Post Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva era:

The practice of Sattriya and subsequent arts was continued even after the great Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva. Some of his foremost disciples of Mādhavdeva took the tradition forward. Amongst them, Badalā Padma Ātā was chieftain. He expanded the dance repertoire by incorporating more compositions to it. He also tried to assemble the theoretical and practical materials of Sattriya scattered in all over the Assam. A huge collection of Mādhavdeva’s creation was preserved in Barpeṭā and Bhelā Thān Sattrā. He sent two Bhakats to these Sattras to collect these treasures. He established Kamalābārī Sattrā in 1673 ¹¹and transformed it into a hub of Sattriya culture where the practice of Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, Sattriya and other Performing Arts and Fine Arts became the essential part of the lives of Bhakats. Taking inspiration from Kamalābārī Sattrā, the other Sattras also started to practice these art forms. They also started to contribute more and more in the form of various compositions to the Sattriya repertoire. The repertoire gradually became more enriched with the items like Naṭuwā Nṛtya, Apsarā Nṛtya, Indrābhiṣek, Pātsā salām etc. But unfortunately these items were confined within 2-3 Sattras only. Again, the number of talas created by the great Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva for Śaṅkarī music system was increased from 9-10 to almost 40. Sarbajay Balarām Barbāyan, Govinda Bargāyan, Janārdan

Ātoi Barbāyan, Keśavcaran Ātā Bargāyan, Hari Ātoi Puruṣ Bargāyan, Jagannāth Caran Bargāyan were some of those torchbearers who handed down the tradition to the next generation.

Getting award from the Āhom king by Bhakat Bāpirām Ojā for his contribution towards Sattriya is the strong evidence that the dance started to gain popularity outside the Sattras in that period¹². The popularity of this dance form made the path clear for the kings to invite the practitioners to their royal courts for the performances. The invitations created a quake inside the Sattras as the Bhakats were sure that the performance and practice of Sattriya outside the Sattras would destroy its purity and originality. Unable to ignore the Kings' invitation, the Bhakats composed a re-constructive item taking elements from Mādhavdeva's Cālī Nāch. Instead of the syllables of Khol, the main percussion instrument of Sattriya, the syllables of Mṛdaṅgam were applied in this item. Dresses, steps, speed of the items were also modified in this item. This creation evolved stunning item like 'Rajāghariyā Cālī'. The practice of the dance was continued till twentieth century even amidst of political disturbances due to the attack of 'Mān' from Myanmar and entry of British to Assam.

1958 A.D to 2000 A.D – Sattriya outside Sattras and its subsequent developments

In 1958, Sangeet Natak Akademy organised a seminar on Indian Dance in New Delhi. A group of Sattriya scholars and performers from Assam were invited to attend that seminar. Among them were traditional monks from Kamalābārī Sattras, led by Manirām Muktiyār and scholar Dr Maheswar Neog. Dr Maheswar Neog presented two papers on "Dance traditions of Assam" and "Shubhanakar's Śrī Hasta Muktāvalī". The monks from Kamalābārī Sattras gave demonstration of various aspects of Sattriya dance as it was performed in the Sattras. This was for the first time that such a large number of dancers, gurus, scholars and dance aficionados from all over India saw this unique dance form.

Earlier in 1955 for National Dance Festival held in New Delhi, some of the dancers from Kamalābārī Sattras had participated. Perhaps that was for the first time that Sattriya dance was presented in the Capital.

These two steps were like the wake up calls for the Sattriya scholars and torchbearers like Ananda Mohan Bhagawati, Suresh Chandra Goswami, Raseswar Saikia Borbayan, Padmashri Jatin Goswami etc. Dr. Maheswar Neog wrote several books on Sattriya dance, the great Śaṅkardeva and the great Mādhavdeva's cultural movements. The book "Śaṅkarī Nāṭya Nṛtya Kalā" of Suresh Chandra Goswami also encouraged the Sattriya lovers.

The bold and revolutionary step taken by Raseswar Saikia Barbayan has traced a significant mark in the development of Sattriya. He started to teach the non-residents of Sattras against the Sattras tradition. Not only that, he has also welcomed girls to this field. He was assisted by another Sattriya exponent Nṛtyacharya Padmashri Jatin Goswami. Despite of protests and ban by Sattras on him, Guru Raseswar Saikia along with Padmashri Guru Jatin Goswami has kept his work in progress. Scholars like Ananda Mohan Bhagawati, Jogen Saikia, Rudra Baruah and performers like Manirām Datta Muktiyār, Padmasri Ghanakanta Barbayan also joined them. Raseswar Saikia established "Sangeet Sattras" institution to publicise the Performing Arts of Sattras. It was his initiative that Sattriya was included as a subject in the curriculum of Bachelor's degree of Assam state music college. This initiative made the common people and Sattriya lovers to take keen interest on Sattriya. Govinda Saikia, Sailen Saikia, Dr. Jagannath Mahanta, Durlabh Saikia have come out from the Sattras to dedicate themselves in the development of Sattriya. The voice rose for the recognition of Sattriya as classical dance have become stronger and stronger.

Renaissance & contemporary approach

Till 1958, Sattriya was confined within the four walls of Sattras because of the conservative attitude of the religious Sattras community. However, due to its classical elements, the Sattriya has started to come out breaking the barrier of Sattras with the help of some progressive Sattriya lovers and exponents.

Finally, it got recognized as a classical dance on 15 November 2000. The process of transformation as principal medium of Preaching Vaishnava Religion to Performing Art began. An ocean

like changes and modifications took place in its transformation. The changes have included performance style, presentation, theme, costumes and everything. Since Sattriya was performed in Nāmghar - the prayer hall of Sattrā, in front of worshipping place, the audience used to sit on remaining three sides. Hence the each movement of every item of Sattriya usually was done for four times, each for one direction. But on stage, the need is not felt to do the same movement for four times. Here the dance is presented as performing art to the audience sitting in the front only. Musicians, who used to stand and follow the dancer as he/she moved, were now seated on a flank of the stage to the right of the dancer. The sitting position is popularly known as 'Guru Sthānam'. The softer violin and flute have been added to the orchestra. Most of the marathon items were reduced to shorter duration. Earlier only male dancers were allowed to perform Sattriya irrespective of both male and female centred items. But in modern times, the entry of female performers has changed the entire scenario. Hence, the beautiful, gorgeous, eye-catching and heavy costumes took the place of very simple and plain one.

Above all, the approach to the dance was bound to change in an entirely different context, the dance now being repositioned on the proscenium by persons not born to the tradition. The gurus, after initial hiccups, had adjusted to the new environment and adapted themselves to teaching students from varied backgrounds. The main technique of the dance movements, though change has taken place over the years, has remained more or less the same.

CONCLUSION

The Sattriya dance today stands at the crossroads of past and future, tradition and modernity, devotion and display, sacred and secular. The traditional exponents trained under the tutelage of Sattrā maestros and imbibing a devotionally inspired rigour of the religion, try to retain the traditional nuances; while the young generation of artistes being trained outside the monasteries are more interested in taking up the discipline purely from the perspective of 'performing arts' bereft of the philosophy of religion or its sacred associations. No wonder, in its new incarnation, it has carved out a niche for itself on the world platform, thereby earning a lot of adoration, praise and recognition.

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