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### The Historical Genesis and Development of Sattriya Nritya

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#### Abstract

This research paper deals with the historical genesis and evolution of Sattriya Nritya. Sattriya Nritya is an integral devotional dance tradition of Assam, which was one of the significant contributions made by the eminent Bhakti Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva during the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a part of his Neo-Vaishnavism which is also known as Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma. This dance form is performed with the aim to show Bhakti (devotion) to the Divine. It depicts mythological narratives through its performance in a delightful and engaging manner. Sattriya Nritya is performed mesmerizingly accompanied by Borgeet in the background. It can be classified into two styles such as Paurashik Bhangi which is the Tandava or Masculine style and Stri Bhangi which is the Lashya or Feminine style. Popular instruments such as khol (drum), taal (cymbal) and bahi (flute) are played in the performance of this enchanting dance form. In contemporary times, instruments such as harmonium and violin began to be played in Sattriya Nritya performances. This research paper examines the historical background of Devadasi and Ojhapali traditions of Assam and their influence on Sattriya Nritya. It also analyzes the historical genesis and development of Sattriya Nritya. It is qualitative in nature and is based on secondary sources such as books published by various authors, journal articles and internet resources.

**Keywords:** Sattriya Nritya, Srimanta Sankaradeva, Historical Genesis, Development, Satras



Figure 1: The above photograph depicts the author as a Sattriya dancer

**Introduction:**

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a revered *Bhakti* saint, cultural architect, social reformer, poet, philosopher, composer and playwright from Assam. He sowed the seeds of *Bhakti* (devotion) in Medieval Assam by pioneering the Neo-Vaishnavism which is also known as *Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma* during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries within the broader framework of the *Bhakti* Movement of India. Srimanta Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism is a strictly monotheistic faith in which he instructed the followers to fully surrender themselves to and has belief in one Supreme God, Lord Sri Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Srimanta Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism significantly reformed the spiritual and cultural life of the people of Medieval Assam by creating an egalitarian society which is free from caste-based discrimination. It focuses only on the worship of Krishna and not Radha-Krishna. While, the worship of both Radha-Krishna is an important characteristic of other Vaishnavite Schools of India. The *dasya* form of worship is an important characteristic of Neo-Vaishnavism in which the devotees regard themselves as the servants of Lord Sri Krishna (Baruah 17).

Srimanta Sankaradeva highly contributed to the cultural development of the people of Assam by introducing a unique form of devotional dance which is known as *Sattriya Nritya*. This dance form is complementary to the rich cultural heritage of Assam. *Sattriya Nritya* developed as a significant part of the *Satra* culture. The rich cultural heritage of Assam comprises of the earlier dance traditions such as *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* dance forms. These dance traditions are associated with the cultural background of Assam and specific aspects from their artistic expressions are reflected in *Sattriya Nritya*. This research paper is an attempt to analyze the historical genesis and development of *Sattriya Nritya* with special reference to the influences of *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions.

**Objectives:**

1. To examine the historical background of *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions of Assam and their influence on *Sattriya Nritya*.
2. To analyze the historical genesis and development of *Sattriya Nritya*.

**Research Methodology:**

This research paper is qualitative in nature and is based on secondary sources such as books published by different authors, journal articles and internet resources.

**Research Questions:**

1. How did *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions of Assam influence *Sattriya Nritya*?
2. How did *Sattriya Nritya* originate and develop?

**The historical background of *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions of Assam and their influence on *Sattriya Nritya*:**

Since ancient times, Assam consists of a very dynamic and enchanting dance tradition in both classical and folk style. In relation to this, adequate evidences can be found in the numerous literatures, architecture, sculptures, paintings and other historical sources (Kandali 11). During the 7<sup>th</sup> century, in his royal court, King Kumar Bhaskarvarmana amused the great Chinese traveler Hieun Tsang with music and dances regularly for a period of one month. The Dubi and Nidhanpur inscriptions of Bhaskarvarmana support the fact that the King offered patronage to both music and dance by which a dynamic and mesmerizing dance tradition became prevalent in Assam. Banamala Barman, King of Kamrup, rebuilt the Hatakasulin temple and worshipped Lord Shiva with dance and song

performances is mentioned by a 9<sup>th</sup> century inscription found at Tezpur. Terms such as *Duluhangana* which means devadasi or deodhani and another term such as *Devapalivi* meaning *Ojhapali* are included in the copper plate. King Ratna Pal showed respect to the celestial dancer, Nateswar Sankar, who was known for presenting *tandava* style in his movements and there are records of this fact in the Bargaon plates of King Ratna Pal of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The references to the tradition of dance, music, instrumental music etc in ancient Assam have been mentioned by the Kalika Purana of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Kandali 12).

The Dance figures playing musical instruments such as flute, drum, *beena*, etc can be identified in numerous temple sculptures of ancient and medieval Assam. That Assam had a historical background of dance tradition are reflected by the numerous icons of Nataraja in Sivasagar, Vishnu icon of 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, the Venugopala sculpture and the dancing sculpture of the Kamakhya temple of Guwahati, Madan-Kamdev near Guwahati, and others. Before the emergence of Sattriya Nritya there were other dance traditions prevalent in Assam such as *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions. *Devadasi* is a temple dance of Assam. In numerous places of Assam such as Hajo and Dubi in Kamrup, Dergaon in Golaghat, and Biswanath in Darrang, this dance tradition developed (Kandali 12).

Similar to the other areas of India, the dances devoted ritualistically were performed mainly at the Shiva temples. The *Devadasi* tradition originated in ancient Assam during the 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and it was completely evolved during the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century as stated by Paban Bordoloi. During the reign of Ahom Kings such as Rudra Singha (1696-1714) and Shiva Singha (1714-44), the *Devadasi* dance reacquired a new life. In A.D. 1583, the King of Kamrup Raghudevanarayana rebuilt the Vaishnava temple of Haigriv Madhab at Hajo. The *Devadasi* dance which was also called *Deva-nati* or *Nati nach*, was presented in the temple likely in the year of its renovation. Through the *Devadasi* or *Nati* dance, temples such as the Biswanath Shiva temple (700 A.D., rebuilt in 1685), the Dergaon Shiva temple (700 A.D., rebuilt in 1800), the Da-Parbatia (around 600 A.D.), the Hatakasulin Shiva temple (900 A.D.), Dubi's Parihareswar temple (900 A.D., rebuilt in 1770 A.D.) and others had a tradition of showing devotion to the Divine (Kandali 13).

Similar to the other regions of India, the *natis* of Assam did not marry and completely devoted their lives to the Divine. Into three categories, the *Devadasis* or *natis* were classified such as the first category consists of temple dancers who dedicated their lives to the temple and through their dances, they showed respect to the Divine, the second category was well-versed in both dance and song and her responsibility was to apply fan to the deity, and the third category consisted of the normal dancers who amused the common people. The Gayan (singer) and Bayan (instrumentalist) accompanies the *Devadasis* or *natis*. *Devadasi* dance includes all the classical aspects. In it, numerous aspects of Natya Sastra and Abhinaya Darpana can be visible and numerous acrobatics or yoga poses are also visible. Lord Shiva and Vishnu are glorified by the rhythmic songs and music. In Assam or other regions of India, the *Devadasi* or *Nati* dance could not survived and as a result it started to decline eventually. As an art, this dance is performed on the stage at present (Kandali 14).

Another indigenous dance tradition called *Ojhapali* has continued to remained famous and dynamic till present times. In this dance tradition, the *oja* (main dancer) tells a mythological tale combining dance, music and drama. In all the aspects, the *oja* is well-versed. The *Ojhapali* can be classified into three categories such as *biyah gowa Ojhapali*,

*sukananni Ojhapali* and *ramayani Ojhapali*. The *oja* is helped by a *daina pali* (second leader) and other *palis* (supporters) for the purpose of choral singing in *biyah gowa Ojhapali*. From Mahabharata, the *biyah gowa Ojhapali* conveys the narratives. It is associated with the old tradition showing devotion to Lord Vasudeva. The tradition was present during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century. At present, it is still in practice in some temples such as Hayagriv Madhav Sukleswar, Aswaklanta and Mayong in Morigaon district. During the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century AD, the *Sukananni Ojhapali* began in Assam which is connected with the worship of the serpent Goddess Manasa. It also comprises of one *ojha*, *daina-pali* and other *palis*. The *Sukananni Ojhapali* is rooted in some classical and traditional aspects including body movements completed by *taal* and *raga* pattern. The *Ramayani Ojhapali* is specifically rooted in the Assamese adaptations of Ramayana (Kandali 14-15).

The influences of both *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions are visible in Sattriya Dance (Lahkar 2). With *Devadasi* dance, most of the poses of *mati-akhoras* (basic exercise patterns and grammar) of *Sattriya Nritya* are similar, some of the difficult poses of *mati-akhora* of *Sattriya Nritya* such as *thiyo lon*, *aathu lon* and others are identical to poses or movements used in *Devadasi* tradition. In addition to it, the *ora*, *phul ora* and others which are the simple poses of *Sattriya Nritya* also have similarities with *Devadasi* tradition. Again, between both the dance traditions, most of the foot positions, movements, explanatory *hastas*, *hastas* are also identical. As a result, we can presume that from *Devadasi*, Srimanta Sankaradeva learned and explored some poses. Apart from *Devadasi* tradition, most of the *abhinaya hastas*, *drishti*, the structure of *abhinaya*, foot movements, body movements of pre-Sankaradeva era *Ojhapali* dance tradition are reflected immensely in *Sattriya Nritya* (Kandali 30).

### **The historical genesis and development of Sattriya Nritya:**

*Sattriya Nritya* is a devotional dance tradition created by the great Bhakti Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva during the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Assam for the dissemination of his Neo-Vaishnavism which is also known as *Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma*. Initially, Sattriya Dance was performed inside the premises of the *Satras* (central Vaishnavite monasteries) only by the *Bhakats* (monks) but eventually this tradition came to the forefront and developed as a remarkable form of dance.

From the *nator nach* or dances of the Vaishnava theatre known as *Ankiya-Bhaona*, *Sattriya Nritya* developed. During the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva, terms such as *nartaka* and *nattuwa* was utilized which implied actor-cum-dancer. Hence, it can be said that the *Ankiya-Bhaona* is a dance drama in which dance plays a significant part. The complete performance of an *Ankiya-Bhaona* from starting (*gayen-bayan*) to the ending (*kharmanar nach*) can be defined as a vibrant display of numerous dance numbers. *Ankiya-Bhaona* serves as the foundation and one of the significant sources for the development of Sattriya dance (Kandali 25-26). Additionally, numerous dance numbers outside the sphere of dramatic performances were created by Sri Sri Madhavadeva. In this direction, the dance progressed as an unique type of dance and then it was divided into two categories. The first category is the dances developed from theatrical performances and the second category is the dance numbers which are separated from the drama (Kandali 20-21).

*Sattriya Nritya* is primarily based on Bharata's text *Natya Sastra*. Moreover, other texts such as *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangeet Ratnakara* and others also served as important for *Sattriya Nritya*. Srimanta Sankaradeva learned and examined the text *Natya Sastra* as this is the most notable text of Indian classical dance, drama and others. Almost all the *Angika*

aspects found in Natya Sastra are presented in *Sattriya Nritya* like other classical dances. We can identify the structure of the *mati-akhora* (basic exercise patterns and grammar) of *Sattriya Nritya* with the *cari*, *karana*, *khanda* and *mandala* of Bharata's text Natya Sastra. Moreover, apart from Bharata's text Natya Sastra, Abhinaya Darpana and Sangeet Ratnakara were also learned by Srimanta Sankaradeva. In *Sattriya Nritya*, most of the aspects of Abhinaya Darpana are reflected. For instance, the characteristics of *vegini cari* of Abhinaya Darpana are found in the *cereki pak* (spins) of *Sattriya Nritya* in which the dancer moves very fast on toes and again in the *thita pak* (spins) the dancer moves on sole. Furthermore, in *Sattriya Nritya*, some of the *surabhedha*, *grivabhedha*, *hastas* and others from the text Sangeet Ratnakara can be identified (Kandali 26-29).

Srimanta Sankaradeva also learned Yoga Sastra and gained sufficient knowledge on yogic practices. Hence, we can presume that Srimanta Sankaradeva had incorporated some of the elements from the yogic poses of Yoga system or Yoga Sastra. Because he knew very well that exercises are important for any dancer to achieved body flexibility. Hence, with the yogic poses, most of the poses of *mati-akhora* are identical. For instance, with the yogic pose *padmashan*, the *kasobandh* of *mati-akhora* is identical. Again, with the yogic pose *sirsasan*, the *oodhalon* of *mati-akhora* is identical (Kandali 29-30).

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Sattriya Nritya* originated in the *Satras* (central Vaishnavite monasteries) (Vajiram Content Team). It is a very significant performing art form of the *Satras*. The dance form is an indispensable part of the *Satras* as it has been progressing over almost six hundred years through the *Satras*. The *Satras* provided support to this dance tradition in order to developed as an integral art form. *Sattriya Nritya* is performed in the religious festivals and cultural functions conducted by the *Satras*. As this dance tradition developed and became a vital part of the numerous spiritual activities of the *Satras*, the *Satra* community took an initiative for the purpose of teaching and learning *Sattriya Nritya* with the help of *gurukul* system (Kandali 21). At present, the Barpeta *Satra* comprises of a *Sattriya* cultural music school which provides training to the students on *Sattriya Nritya* and others.

Srimanta Sankaradeva incorporated both classical and folk components in developing the *Sattriya Nritya*. For instance, *ulaha* (wavy body movement), one of the unique body movement characteristics of *Sattriya Nritya* is identical to the body movements of numerous folk traditions of Assam. Moreover, *posola tola* (*mati-akhora*) of *Sattriya Nritya* is also identical to one of the body movements of the *kherai* dance of Bodo community. On the other hand, with the *hastas* of *bihu* dance, the *madan hasta* of *Sattriya Nritya* is identical. With the *bihu* dance of Mising community, the *hayre* or *Khirkhir hastra* of *Sattriya Nritya* is identical (Kandali 30).

Many stated that *Sattriya Nritya* was developed by Srimanta Sankaradeva in an instead diverse style with elements obtained from numerous sources collected during the time of his pilgrimage (Kandali 31). On 15<sup>th</sup> November 2000, *Sattriya Nritya* received national recognition as one of the 8 classical dance forms of India by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (Deka 89). Later *Sattriya Nritya* began to be performed by both male and female dancers on the modern stage.

### **Conclusion:**

It can be concluded that although some elements of the *Devadasi* and *Ojhapali* traditions, classical texts, and folk dances can be seen in *Sattriya Nritya*, the revered Bhakti Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva created and refined *Sattriya Nritya* with his own innovative skills,

developed it through his artistic vision and added an original and distinctive dimension to it. The Saint added life, identity and purity to the dance form by blending *Bhakti* (devotion), artistic expressions, beautiful hand movements and variety of emotions together. *Sattriya Nritya* is closely associated with *Ankiya-Bhaona* because the dance form was initially an indispensable part of it. The dance form also developed from *Ankiya-Bhaona*, achieved a new direction from it, and later *Sattriya Nritya* became popular as an independent dance tradition. From the perspective of the evolution of this dance form, the *Satras* have played a notable role, as they have made significant efforts in order to popularize this living dance tradition. Hence, Srimanta Sankaradeva not only created *Sattriya Nritya* but also enriched it with divinity, grace, righteousness, spiritual dedication, humanistic ideals, and a spiritual depth so that people are able to connect themselves with this integral dance tradition, experiencing it as a source of peace and therapy for both the eyes and the mind.

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