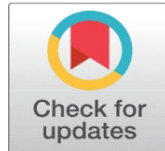
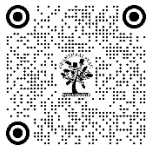


# A STUDY ON THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF SATTRIYA DANCE IN ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

Sattriya dance was established in the 15th century A.D. by the Vaishnava saint Mahapurusha Sankaradeva as a vital means of propagating the Vaishnava faith. It has been maintained, as a unique dance form, by the Sattras or Vaishnava monasteries for centuries, hence the name. The tradition is strict on the principles of hand gestures, footwork, costumes, and music. It mainly consists of two streams of Bhaona repertoire such as Gayan-Bhayanar Nach and Kharmanar Nach and independent dances such as Chali, Rajagharia Chali, Jhumura, and Nadu Bhangi. Chali is characterized by grace, while Jhumura is characterized by vigor and grandeur. Sankaradeva integrated his new form of art with elements from other treatises and local folk dances. Even before the neo-Vaishnava movement, Ojapali and Devadasi dances were prevalent in Assam to infuse classical elements to the Sattriya. While both Ojapalis-Sukananni and Vyah Goa Ojah are still performed, Vyah Goa Ojah is now an integral part of Sattras rituals. Devadasi influence can be seen in rhythmic syllables and postures. Assamese folk dances, such as Bihu and Bodos, have also influenced Sattriya, with some very visible similarities in gestures and rhythms.

**Keywords:** Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankaradeva, Sattriya Dance, Ek-Saran Naam Dharma

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India, a land rich in cultural diversity and religious traditions, is located in South Asia. It has been the historical setting for ancient epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata and was revered as a sacred place during the Vedic period. Today, India stands as a secular, democratic republic, celebrated for its vibrant cultural tapestry, which includes arts, architecture, performing arts, attire, cuisine, and languages.

Dance, an essential part of India's cultural identity, is a powerful performing art. It involves rhythmic body movements that evoke joy and happiness. Before language existed, people communicated their thoughts and emotions through gestures, particularly with their hands. Archaeological findings suggest that dance predates language, offering a unique insight into early human expression. Through dance, prehistoric people could convey thoughts and sentiments, making it one of the earliest forms of non-verbal communication.

Sattriya, at its core, is a Vaishnavism-rooted dance with a well-forged history from way back in Assam. A revived approach to Vaishnavism, as introduced by Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva among the common people, came Sattriya dance as a direct yield of the process.

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The article investigates the rich historical background of Sattriya dance, examining its origins and the various stages of its development over time. It provides an in-depth look at how Sattriya has evolved, shaped by cultural influences and historical events, and how it has been preserved and adapted to remain relevant in the modern era. By tracing its journey from traditional roots to contemporary practice, the article sheds light on the enduring significance and transformation of Sattriya dance in Indian cultural heritage.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The work will follow the descriptive analytical method of Historical enquiry. Primary and secondary sources would be subjected to both external and internal criticism. The primary source has been obtained through official reports, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, and other sources. While the secondary sources included books, journals, etc.

## 4. DISCUSSIONS

Srimanta Sankardeva popularized Vaishnavism, or Neo-Vaishnavism, in Assam. However, Assam already had a tradition of literature, music, and dance along with the existence of Vaishnavism that dates back to the 4th or 5th century. During the same period, elements of Gupta-era Bhagawat Dharma also came to Assam. It was in the 7th century that Bhaskar Verma, a scion of Mahabhati Verma, called himself a "Param Bhagawat" in a stone inscription belonging to the 6th century (Krishna, 2020). The Kalikapurana confirms that Vaishnava Dharma existed in Assam up to the 12th century. By the 13th century, Pancharatra-based Bhagavat worship was widely practiced in Assam. The first phase of Vaishnava Dharma here was centered around statues and ritual worship, as noted by Srimanta Sankardeva in the "Avatar Barnan" and "Oresha Barnan" sections of his "Kirtan Ghusha" (Beohar, 2015). Neo-Vaishnavism, popularized by Sankardeva, emerged as the dominant faith. During this period, people practiced various religions, and Sankardeva sought to bring them together under Sanatan Dharma, for which he undertook a 12-year pilgrimage.

He conceptualized three primary principles culled from diverse sources *sat sang* borrowed from Bhagavata, *naam* borrowed from Sahasranam, and *ek saran* inspired by "Gita" (Krishna, 2020). These constituted the foundation on which he tried to establish the Ek-Saran Naam Dharma. This religious system has four components: Naam-the divine name; Deu-the deity; Guru-the guru; and Bhakat-the disciple. There are nine distinct modalities of devotion- *Sravan* (listening), *Kirtan* (chanting), *Smaran* (remembering), *Padsevan* (serving the feet), *Archan*(worship), *Bandan* (obedience), *Dasya* (servitude), *Sakhya*(friendship), and *Atmanivedan* (self-surrender). Among these modalities, the importance *Sravan* and *Kirtan* assume within the context of *Ek Saran Naam Dharma* (Goswami, 2018).

During that period, Assam faced challenging situations as people practiced varied worshipful acts, often involving animal sacrifices. Against this backdrop, Saint Srimanta Sankardeva founded Neo-Vaishnavism, known as *Ek-Saran Naam Dharma*. His aim was to connect people with God through *Naam-Kirtana* that is, the recitation of the holy name and emphasize that devotion serves as the most direct and important path to divinity (Krishna, 2020). Vaishnavism presents the idea where Lord Vishnu is the single deity, and Sankardeva wanted to unite mankind according to the bhakti principle. To gain followers for Vaishnavism, he introduced new practice. During the 15th to 16th centuries Vaishnavism initiated its spread of religious, cultural, and literary consciousness throughout medieval India. In Assam, the Vaishnavite or Bhakti movement, led by Srimanta Sankardeva, was not only a religious reform but also a great revolution. Sankardeva helped popularise Vaishnavism in Assam under the banner of *Ek-Saran Naam Dharma* or *Ek-Saraniya Dharma*, commonly known as *Mahapurusiya Dharma*, which marked the beginning of the Neo-Vaishnavite era in Assam (Goswami, 2018). The "Sattri" institution became a founding component of Neo-Vaishnavism, with the Ahom and Koch kingdoms becoming its strongholds. However, Sankardeva did face strong resistance in disseminating *Ek-Saran Dharma* because of opposing sections of society. At this time, the Brahmaputra Valley had an extremely stratified caste system and many people, again, particularly the lower castes suffered through disrespect and lessened economic levels. In a notable distinction, *Ek-Saran Dharma* embraced adherents from diverse backgrounds, dismissing the necessity of high-caste lineage (Krishna, 2020). Moreover, Sankardeva personally acknowledged disciples from various castes and tribes, inviting them into the *Namghar*.

## CREATION OF SATRIYA DANCE

Sattriya dance is more or less attached to religion (Saikia, 2019). It was founded by Srimanta Sankardeva. He created *Ankiya Naats*, but it comprised a range of religious aspects to foster spiritualism. During that time people were

worshiping different religions and killing animals as an offering before God. Sankardeva, having studied the *Sastras* and visited many holy sites, returned with the vision to spread Vaishnavism and unite people under the fold of *Ek-Saran Naam Dharma*. In this tradition, Lord Krishna or Vishnu is worshipped through *Naam Kirtana*. For contacting the feelings of the people, Sankardeva—accepted to be a preacher, poet, playwright, philosopher, reformer, and artist—used different communicative media as interpreted ways with people. His *Ankiya Naats* successfully integrated song, dance, *Votima*, and *Slokas* into the sentiment of devotion.

Sankardeva's philosophy emphasizes unity through devotion (bhakti), promoting *Ek Saran Naam Dharma* as a means of worshiping one God through Naam Kirtana. In spreading this message, he creatively engaged Karmamarg, using drama (Ankiya Naat), songs (Borgeets), and dance as appealing media with the same spiritual goal. The concepts of Satah, Rajah, and Tamah further illustrate this philosophy. Satah represents the ideal balance and destination, overseen by Lord Vishnu, Rajah is the force of creation under Brahma, and Tamah signifies the destruction of evil by Lord Shiva (Krishna, 2020). These elements together uphold the balance of Satah, symbolizing the meditation of each god upon the others. In his teachings, Sankardeva revered Krishna as the manifest (sakar) form of God, emphasizing Sattriya as a classical art form that doesn't use idols but invites worship through other mediums (D. B. Borbayan, 2019).

After completing his student life, Srimanta Sankardeva devoted himself to the study of sastras (canons), Sankardeva wrote the Chihnayatra Naat, a dramatized performance illustrated through paintings. He fashioned instruments such as the Khool (a traditional drum), Taal (cymbals), created prepared masks, taught the art of Natua dance, composed Slokas, *Votima*, and *Geet* (songs), and was even training disciples in these disciplines, including the role of Sutradhara (narrator). He also trained Ketekha Ram, Assam's first Bayan or percussionist and composed many Dhemalis or rhythmic musical patterns. The Bhuyans pitched tents and made preparations for lighting by Mota (torch) and Aariya (oil lamps) to light up the play. The plays of Chihnayatra continued to run for seven days and nights among huge crowds, who were mesmerized by this divine portrayal. This was the be-ginning of Assam's Bhaona culture, and it served as a starting point for establishing Bhaona sanskriti in Assam (Krishna, 2020). It has been written that soon after this, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva scripted six plays called Ankiya Naats, full-length dramas based on the adult life of Lord Krishna. Through these Ankiya Naats, Sankardeva spread Ek-Sarana-Hari-Nama Dharma (Mahapurusha Dharma), a monotheistic Vaishnavite faith devoted solely to Krishna, insisting on the utmost devotion to him. His message of liberal, humanistic approach to bhakti (devotion) reverberated throughout Assam and strictly discouraged the worship of anything except Krishna. Through various audio-visual and performing arts, he traveled extensively to spread the Neo-Vaishnavite movement (Krishna, 2020). Sankardeva brought in a new form of stage presentation called Ankiya Bhaona to make Bhakti reach the different diverse classes of people. As Dr. Pitambar Deva Goswami, the satradhikar of Sri Sri Auniati Sattri says, ". giving up one's own state to bring to life the state of another, making it come alive through artistic beauty and giving vigor to the sensitive soul" (The Many Dimensions of Bhakti as Performance: A Case Study). Ankiya Bhaona was a combination of music, dance, and drama. It was shastric and popular at the same time, drawing from local traditions. In Ankiya Naats, Sankardeva took 25 ragas, including *Xuhai*, *Sindhura*, *Kanara*, *Mahur*, *Dhanashri*, *Gouri*, *Tur*, *Turbhatiali*, *Kalian*, *Axuwari*, *Sri*, *Beluwar*, *Shyam*, *Srigandhar*, *Basanta*, *Purbi*, *Kou*, *Bhatiali*, *Ahir*, *Molar*, *Saranga*, *Sripoyar*, *Kedar*, *Naat*, and *Karunya Kedar*. Some of these ragas—such as *Dhanashri*, *Axuwari*, *Bhatiali*, *Basanta*, and *Sareng Kalyan*, bear the same name as the Hindustani ones, but the style is different (Krishna, 2020). In Ankiya Naat, Sankardeva used 10 taals: *Ektaal*, *Poritaal*, *Jotitaal*, *Rupak*, *Bixam*, *Sutkola*, *Suta Taal*, *Dumani*, *Joti Jaman*, and *Khormaan*, whereas *Jaman Taal* formed a part of other taals rather than a separate taal. He taught Ketekha Ram (Bayan), Assam's first percussionist, Sut Dhemali, Bor Dhemali, and Deva Dhemali (Krishna, 2020).

Sankardeva also relied on the Natya Shastra, as in the Aarkapur school, for instance: "miraculous actions in perfect poses, when Lord Srihari first entered." Such an amalgam of art and devotion has left a deep print in the cultural genefunction of Assam. *Prabud Chandrudoy* was the first Assamese Bhaona, produced in the reign of Niranjan Deva Goswami of Auniati Sattri. Assamese Bhaonas were influenced by Ankiya Bhaonas, and now there is a revival of interest in performing Ankiya Bhaona Nach.

Another significant disciple of Sankardeva was Mahapurush Madhabdeva, who also composed six plays called *Jhumuras*. These shorter plays depict the young life of Lord Krishna and abound with dance sequences. Thus, there is a vast repository of film dances tailored to various characters and situations. Sri Madhabdeva also propagated some other forms of dances other than dramatic ones. The two Purusha and Sattradhikars followed the tradition. They wrote their own Naats in the style of Ankiya Naats. During this period, the dance emerged as a special style. They can be broadly categorized into two groups: (a) dances taken from the theatrical presentations, and (b) independent dance numbers (Krishna, 2020).

The sacred space of the Sattrā, the monasteries established by the Neo-Vaishnavite saints, saw the evolution of the Sattriya dance tradition where every performance was a ritual being executed in the course of prayer offerings. In it, there came a collection of varied art forms that became a tool for spreading the ideals of Vaishnavism and nurtured an enduring platform for social, cultural, and religious renaissance. The dances associated with Ankiya Naats are categorized into ten distinct parts (P. J. Goswami, Sattriya Dance, 2018): *Gayan Bayanor Nach*, *Sutradharir Nach*, *Gosai Nach*, *Stri Prabexor Nach (or Gopi Nach)*, *Bhaoriya Prabexar Nach*, *Solonar Nach*, *Praxadiki (or Apekhiki Geetor)*, *Bhav Prakaxak Nach*, *Juddar Nach*, *Bhangi Nach*, *Kharmanor Nach*. These dances incorporate both Nritya (pure dance) and Nritya (expressive dance). During their early history, all of these forms were collectively referred to as Sattrar dance, but over time, the term Sattriya became more commonly used (Krishna, 2020). The term Sattriya is a modern designation applied to this traditional dance form, which is still ritually practiced within the Sattrā institutions as part of various prayer sessions. Unlike some classical Indian dance traditions, Sattriya has remained a living tradition, deeply embedded within the Sattrā framework envisioned by the apostles of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. This institution serves as a repository and preserver of the dance, religious learning, and various art forms that emerged from this cultural renaissance. Rooted in democratic values, the Sattrā fosters solidarity and a sense of trusteeship between the preceptor and the community. It has preserved, through the ages, the new social order and the composite culture promoted by Sankardeva's movement (Krishna, 2020).

Sattriya dance is a creation of Sankardeva, blending elements of sattriya, desiya, and his own creative imagination. Dance serves as a medium to spread Bhakti among the people. Historically, God has also used various mediums to guide humanity. For instance, in the Mahabharata, Krishna imparts lessons from the Srimad Bhagavatam to Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war. Although it may seem unusual for spiritual teachings to be delivered in the midst of battle, this illustrates how divine messages can be conveyed through different mediums (Borah, 2022). Similarly, Sankardeva employed various forms to promote the *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*. Sattriya dance, akin to Kuchipudi and Kathakali, has its roots in dramatic tradition. It is a vibrant dance form of Assam, traditionally performed in monasteries known as Sattras for centuries as part of ritual performances.

In contemporary times, Sattriya dance is performed both in Sattras as a medium of worship and on stage as a performing art. Like other classical dance forms, Sattriya encompasses the elements of *Angika* (physical expression) and *Abhinaya* (the art of expression), which are detailed in various ancient treatises (Krishna, 2020). The Sattriya dance form evolved into a significant art form over the centuries, supported by enthusiasts both within and outside the Sattrā premises. As it developed into an essential part of various rituals and prayer services in the Sattrā, the community established a structured system for teaching and learning, which was transmitted orally through the gurukul system. Consequently, artists and connoisseurs, along with academic circles, began to refer to this comprehensive dance tradition as Sattriya dance, encompassing all contributions from Srimanta Sankardeva to later composers. As the dance flourished within the Sattrā, the term Sattriya became an appropriate name for it. The practitioners of the Sattrā introduced innovative elements, enhancing the form with more variety and colour (Borah, 2022). Through this evolution, what began as a theatrical tradition transformed into a vibrant art form rich in all its components.

Sankardeva's *Naats* include: Patni Prasad - Belaguri, Patbaushi, Dhuwahat, Parijat Haran - Patbaushi, Kaliya Daman - Patbaushi, Bordua, Rukmini Haran - Patbaushi, Keli Gopal - Patbaushi, Ram Vijay - Patbaushi (Krishna 2020). At the age of 35, Sankardeva undertook a 12-year pilgrimage, during which he is popularly believed to have created Sattriya as an integral component of *Ankiya Nat*, drawing from his experiences and the various elements he encountered during his journey. The resources and insights that Sankardeva gathered during his pilgrimage, alongside the classical elements from the "Natya Shastra" a foundational text of Indian performing arts laid the groundwork for the Sattrā tradition of Sattriya dance. Under the guidance of his teacher Mahendra Kandali, Sankardeva studied the Natya Shastra, as well as the Vedas and Upanishads, integrating these teachings into his artistic vision (Borah, 2022). In addition to classical characteristics, Sattriya dance reflects the influence of Assam's traditional and folk dances, as well as its sculptural art and imagery. The vibrant cultural elements from various tribes and ethnic groups in Assam, such as the Mishing, Bodos, and Deuris, can be observed in Sattriya (Krishna, 2020). Folk characteristics like hand gestures from Mishing dances, unique footwork and body movements from Bodo dances, and the rhythmic patterns (*gati*) from Deuri folk dances enrich the Sattriya repertoire. Moreover, the influence of earlier performance traditions such as *Devdasi* and *Ojapali* can also be seen in Sattriya, indicating a continuity and evolution of cultural practices. The Natya Shastra categorizes these diverse dance and music elements as "*Desi*," emphasizing their role as pure entertainment for the general populace, while contrasting them with the more spiritually enlightening "*Margi*" elements found in pan-Indian traditions. This blending of *Desi* and *Margi* elements contributes to the richness and depth of the Sattriya dance tradition, making it a unique expression of both spiritual and cultural identity in Assam (Krishna, 2020). It was initially confined only to the Sattras,



but now is different because Sattriya Nritya is spreading its reach outside these institutions and is coming within easy reach of many more people. The above development suits Sankardeva's objective, that is, the unification of human beings in the form of a common cultural and spiritual entity. He designed a Sattriya Culture by fusing the sacred with the local and made it accessible and intelligible for common people (Borah, 2022).

From the time of Ahom King Rudrasingha outside cultural influences began to creep into the Sattria culture. Among these, one such example was found in 'Rajaghariya Sattria' through the incorporation of 'Dhulukor Bajana Nach' and 'Bengali Songs' into those common practices in these Sattria sections. But these could not overrule the very basics of Sankari or Sattriya culture because they were still well-rooted in their original ethos (Krishna, 2020). By its versatility of adaptability, Sattriya dance might assimilate influences from innumerable sources without losing the very identity it holds—a vividly expressive ever-changing art form. It reflects the fact that it would be contemporary and its utility would be magnified through the unification of the Assamese people in common culture and a sense of community (Sharma, 1993).

After the passing of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, it was witnessed how the Sattria Institution was changed many times, developing into four smaller sects, with different personalities and followers (Krishna, 2020). These four sub-sects are:

**1. BRAHMA-SAMHATI:** Formed by followers of Damodardeva, a Brahmin disciple of Sankardeva. After Sankardeva declared Madhavdeva to be his successor, Damodardeva separated himself from the larger faction, which led to the formation of Brahma-Samhati. The Sattras that are constituted of his and that of Harideva's followers. The split takes sharp contours after Madhavdeva's death, revealing conflicting interpretations and claims over leadership within the Vaishnavite fold in general.

**2. KAL-SAMHATI:** This line is ascribed by one of the chief disciples of Madhavdeva, named Gopal Ata, who doubted the supremacy of Mathuradas Burha Ata. Therefore, he declared that he was the supreme authority and it was through him that Madhavdeva had invested him. Accordingly, Gopal Ata establishes his own line, which has come to be called Kal-Samhati. He constructs twelve Sattras in two sets of six in the hands of Sudra's and six in the hands of Brahmins. The difference is stark within the Vaishnavite tradition.

**3. PURUSA-SAMHATI:** It was established by the descendants of Sankardeva, more particularly by his grandson Purushottam and Chaturbhuja. The Purusa-Samhati wanted to continue the teaching and practices of Sankardeva even when divisions started appearing among his disciples. This sect believes that it has continued the same teaching and practices that began with the movement of Neo-Vaishnavite.

**4. NIKA-SAMHATI:** A more puritanical movement was the formation of Nika-Samhati under the leadership of Mathuradas Burha Ata, who tried to preserve the authentic tenets of the Vaishnavite faith in such an atmosphere. He was the head of the main branch after Madhavdeva's death and introduced some regulations for the continuation of the traditionalism and thus formed this sect that was separate yet belonged to the big stream of the Vaishnavites.

The reason behind the division into these sub-sects is because of the above causes, which are comprised of Differing Interpretations: The quarrels over the leadership and different interpretations related to the teachings caused the development of those groups. Claim to Succession: Some of the disciples, such as Damodardeva and Gopal Ata, felt that they were the only successor of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and thus developed into new sects. Retention of Tradition: As these splits were against the holiness of Vaishnavite religion, these heads such as Mathuradas Burha Ata wanted that laws be formed so the fundamental nature of the religion and traditions remained the same (Krishna, 2020).

This branching, accordingly, represents the post-Sankardeva period and is very reflective of the dynamic nature of religious and cultural practices that evolved within the Vaishnavite tradition in Assam, whereby different groups sought to interpret and continue the legacy of their revered founders while adapting to changing circumstances and the needs of the community. Some dances are also called as Sattriya dance and practiced in some Sattras as well as outside the Sattras. Those dances were not conformity with the structural format of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. These dance numbers have a doubtful integrity. These have to be studied under the dances of doubtful origin. These dances are virtually creative dances based on certain degree of Sattriya style of dancing (Borah, 2022)

## 5. CONCLUSION

The influence of Srimanta Sankardeva lives on in Assam as a religious, cultural, and artistic renaissance. He brought Neo-Vaishnavism, or Ek-Saran Naam Dharma. While Vaishnavite practices were present in Assam, it was Sankardeva who revitalized this faith, giving it a central, inclusive character that placed everyone at par through the mandate of bhakti or devotion. He eventually developed a theological structure in the form of a framework that revolved around Naam-Kirtana—the collective chanting of the divine name. This made the purest form of worship, which reformed the landscape

of Assamese spirituality and drew communities away from ritualistic practices such as animal sacrifice toward a philosophy grounded in devotion, unity, and accessibility.

Two of Sankardeva's creative contributions include Ankiya Naats and the Sattriya dance form, where he creatively combined drama, music, and dance to make bhakti more appealing and accessible to all social classes. The Sattriya dance performed in the monasteries or Sattras symbolized this art and spirituality synthesis as it served both as a ritual and as a pedagogical tool. His successor, Madhavdeva, added more artistic riches through his own compositions and consolidated Sattriya as an enduring cultural practice. The sects Brahma-Samhati, Kal-Samhati, Purusha-Samhati, and Nika-Samhati developed after Sankardeva's death. Each sect interpreted his teachings differently, a method of organization around the versatile Neo-Vaishnavism thrust against varied socio-political contexts. But despite these divisions, Sattras institutions maintained a cultural and spiritual unity across Assam, retaining the ethos of Sankardeva. Today, Sattriya dance and Neo-Vaishnavism are thriving with the ideal of an Assamese identity united under devotion and cultural expression, living.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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