SATTRIYA DANCE: AN AESTHETICAL OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic is the pursuits of one's individual mind. The theory or sense of beauty is always in connotation with art appreciation or criticism and is cultivated in the responsive spectators. The aesthetic experience evolve among the sahridaya and varies from person to person depending upon the perception of beauty. Indian Classical Dances are sacred art forms associated with the union of individual soul with the Absolute. They imbibe the spiritual values. Sattriya dance, one of the classical dance form from Assam, created by the great saint Sankaradeva in the 15th -16th century was a product of neo-vaishnavite movement. This form carrying the legacy of living tradition till today is performed in the Sattra precinct as a ritual service to appease the almighty while simultaneously seen performing on stage to appease the audience. This research paper is an attempt to assess the aesthetic qualities of Sattriya dance and to evaluate the aesthetic experience that arise out of the dance form in the minds of the spectators. The paper will be based on secondary sources comprising magazines, books, journals and internet content.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the arts, dance is one of the most sublime beauty. An art has the capacity of creating beauty resulting in aesthetic experience in the minds of the spectators. As aptly says, the beauty of a work of art lies in the eyes of the beholder. Aesthetic is classified under Philosophy. Sattriya dance is rich in its aesthetical aspects as its spiritual qualities lie in the philosophy of Vaishnavite faith.

2. ORIGIN OF SATTRIYA DANCE

Sankaradeva, the great saint and philosopher initiated the neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam in 15th-16th century with the aim of binding the people of the society irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender. The then society was under
the disorder of many evil practices like animal sacrifices in the name of god, casteism, following different religious practices and paying homage to various deities. His faith was *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma*, where single god, Krishna is worshipped. He strongly opine that worshipping Vishnu is the only means of getting salvation and to demolish these evil practices from the society, establishing the paramount glory of Krishna among the masses is the only means. “As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water only at the root of the tree, as the limbs of body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Vishnu (Krishna)” Roychoudhury (2013), P. 111. He believed that instead of providing religious discourses to the people he opted the audio-visual medium and composed various naats, geets, dances and monumental works on religion to make the lay people comprehendible on the importance of Krishna. This medium to propagate the vaishnavite faith provide a fillip to the Bhakti movement. Sankaradeva composed six naats to propagate the vaishnava faith, later known as Ankiya naats. These plays are an amalgamation of dance, music, acting, dialogues and carry the message of Krishna Bhakti to inculcate conscience within themselves. Here it is worth mentioning of the contributions of Madhavadeva, Sankaradeva’s apostle who composed various plays, known as *Jhumura* except one, to spread bhakti and to attract the masses to the vaishnava fold. The dances that are within the theatrical wing along with those outside the theatrical practices are known as Sattriya dance. Due to neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam two significant institutions fostered the way of life of the people. To proselytise the *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma* Sankaradeva established the congregational prayer hall, *devagriha* (Sattra) and mention to be made of Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. Another institution is the *Namghar*, which is the central structure of a sattra. Here, religious discourses, nama kirtan, bhaona performances, are held with the aim of bringing all the people of village irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender. All people are equal in the eyes of law and there is no discrimination while taking initiation into the Vaishnava faith of Sankaradeva is the main motive behind it.

Bharata Natyashastra is considered to be the first work that explains about aesthetics in Indian traditions. Rasa is the soul of any work on art. The word Rasa was borrowed from *Atharva veda* (*Rasan atharvanad api*) Unni (2014), P. 379 to explain the theory of dramaturgy by Bharata in the 6th chapter of Natyashastra as *Rasaadhyaya*. Rasa is spiritual and aesthetic. Visvanatha in Sahitya-Darpana says that “aesthetic pleasure and spiritual pleasure are twin brothers. They are, indeed, not different in kind; and, if at all, they differ in degree, that is infinitesimal and hence absolutely negligible. Aesthetic pleasure, too, like spiritual pleasure, is characterized by disinterestedness and unselfishness” Chaudhay (1991), P. 46. The concept of Rasa plays’s an important role in dance and no dance is justified without the experience and appreciation by the viewers. Rasa is the soul and source of all life. Bharata uses the word rasa in search of true beauty. He enumerated eight rasas: *Sringar, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Vira, Bhayanaka, Bibhastha, Adbhuta*. Later
commentators like Abhinavagupta added one more rasa, Santa making them to Nava rasa Beohar (2015), P. 189. Vaishnavite philosophers like Sri Rupa Goswami in Bhaktirasamretasindhu and Jiva Goswami in Pritisandharva devised the concept of priti as a form of bhakti Bandopadhyay (2010), p. 226. Under bhakti rasa, there are Pancharasa. “The Vaishnavas have considered all the rasas under one basic rasa i.e bhaktirasa or the rasa of devotion. Within this the other rasas exist” Bandopadhyay (2010), p. 226. The five rasas are: Santa, Dasya, Sakhyā, Vatsalya and Madhura. Rasa is based on the four kinds of abhinaya, angika, vachika, Aharya and sattvika. Abhinaya is significant in Indian Classical Dance. It is a medium that bridges a link between the artist and the audience.

To relish the beauty of Sattriya dance, it is necessary to understand the traditional pedagogy and its various aesthetic components that influences the mind of the viewers. In Sattriya dance, other rasas are subservient to bhakti rasa. It is of great importance in Sattriya repertoire. The dancer pays obeisance to the divine through Vandana (prayer to god), depicts stories of the divine and even seen representing the divinity through dance. The composition in Sattriya dance either begins with praising lord Krishna or Guru Sankaradeva or verses from sacred manuscripts written by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. As Sattriya dance plunged from ankiya naats, bhakti is incorporated in the entire naat through songs, dances and dialogues. The Sutradhar keeps on reminding his audience to look (Shravan) and listen (Kirtan) carefully to the naat and keep on chanting Hari’s name to avail salvation.

**Bho bho sabhasadah juyang srinudhwam shradhayadhuna /**

**Rukmini haranang naam natakam mukti sadhakam //**

Sloka of Rukmini Harana naat Goswami (2022), P.34

Another noteworthy is Dasya bhakti and Atma-nivedan in Sattriya repertoire where Krishna is the sole god to be worshipped. In Madhavadeva’s monumental work Namghosa dasya bhakti and atma-nivedan can be seen in the following verses:

**Nuhu jana ami cari jati cari ashrami nuhu aati**

**Nuhu dharmasil danbrata tirthagami /**

**Kintu purananda samudrar Gopibharta pada kamalar**

**Dasara dasa tana dasa borilu ami //** Sankardeva & Madhabdeva (2016), P. 117

I do not belong to the four castes nor I belong to the four ashramas. I am neither a pious, a donor or a pilgrim. But to the lord who is the ocean of joy and happiness I become the servant of his lotus feet.

**He Krishna taju pawe pahilu sarana /**

**Mayi anathoro natha tumi Narayana //** Sankardeva & Madhabdeva (2016), P. 81

Oh lord Krishna being an orphan you are my preserver and I bow down and self-surrender myself onto your feet to take refuge.
The Ankiya naat of Sankaradeva, comes to an end with the note of bhakti rasa. In Ramvijaya naat, when Ram and Parshuram encountered and the latter was defeated, the dramatist give the following bhakti words in the mouth of Parshuram as:

“He Prabhu Sri Rama: Tuhu Parama Isvara
Hamu Tuhari Angsha:
E Najani Darpa Kayolo: Hamaro duho moroho guhai ||” Medhi (1997), P. 270

Merging of the individual self with the absolute (paramatna) is the static aesthetic feeling prevalent in the entire Sattriya repertoire.

Angika abhinaya enhanced the beauty of a dance form. In Abhinaya Darpana, Nandikeshwara described as:

"Where the hand goes, let the glance follow
where the glances lead, there should the mind follows
where the mind goes, the emotion is generated
where the emotion is generated, there is the sentiment delineated”
Ramachandrasekhar (2016), P. 26

The learning of the traditional Sattriya dance form from adhyapak (guru) is always in oral tradition. The use of hastas, pada karma, griva bheda, drishti bheda, siro bheda all makes the Sattriya dance form aesthetically appealing and helps to create a spiritual ambience among the audience. Matiakhoras are the backbone of the dance form. These are taught to new learners to make their body flexible and physically fit. Maheswar Neog cited, according to late Maniram Dutta Muktiyar there are forty-four matiakhoras, but late Roseswar Saikia Barbayan promoted the number to sixty-four. Asom Sattra Mahasabha (association of sattras) stated seventy-three matiakhoras Kandali (2014), P. 34. Gobinda Saikia, mentioned 108 matiakhoras relating to the 108 karanas of Natyashastra Saikia (1997), P. 1. Mallika Kandali stated, “there is no anonymity about the total numbers of the matiakhoras; in other words, the different Sattras advocate different numbers of mati-akhoras” Kandali (2014), P. 34.

The more time a dancer devotes in learning the basics in its pristine form, the more beautiful her dance will be in enthraling the audience. Aesthetic will be more precise when there would be Anga suddhi (the correct depiction of the angas or the body movements of Sattriya dance).

Figure 1

Dandawat or Khosoka

Music and musical instruments are another striking aesthetic component of Sattriya dance. When they are well used in a dance sequence, it will never go astray. It is difficult to separate music from dance and both are intertwined with inner beauty expression. Musical instruments have the capacity to arouse the feeling and mood without verbal association in the hearts of the audience. The use of Brajabuli language by Sankaradeva (admixture of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, Udiya, Newari and Brajabhasa) in Borgeets, Ankiya naats and in his several works could be easy perceivable to the people. The employment of musical instruments in Sattriya dance recital plays a significant role. The main instrument of the dance form is the Khol, which is given a revered position in the society and referred as deva vadya. Along with this, other instruments like taal, banshi, doba, violin, sankha, sitar, kah, ghanta etc. are used to accompany the dance form creating not only religious feelings but also creates spiritualism among the dancer and the viewer.
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Figure 5
(A) Khuti tal  (B) Pati tal

Figure 6
Banshi

Figure 7
Doba

Figure 8
Sankha
The appearance of the dancer also makes an aesthetic statement. She should look slim and graceful, having an appealing effect among the audience. The dancer should feel comfortable, look gracious and dignified. She should not be overdressed but select such costumes that enhance her physical beauty. She should put on clothes that suit the rasaas depicted in the dance sequence. The colour should be in accordance with the emotions and should be pleasant to the eyes. The aharya should be such that it suits not only the dancer but also the choreographic item. The attire not only make the dancer elegant but also aesthetically attractive that they can immediately delight and captivate the eyes of the spectators. In Sattriya dance, two attires are observed: the male and the female costume. Ekharya concept is also observed in choreographic works where abhinaya is profusely depicted. The make-up too plays a distinctive role in adding glamour to the dancer. The makeup differs according to various characters in ankiya naat. It is necessary to keep in mind that besides the two broad divisions of attire mostly seen performance on stage, each dance numbers in the repertoire have different costumes, such as, jumura nac, nadubhangi nac, gopi nac, gohain pravesh nac, chali nac etc.

Figure 9

Figure 9 Female Attire
Artist The author

Figure 10

Figure 10 (A) Male Attire
Artist Niranjan Saikia

(B) Male Attire
Artist Borish Dutta
The use of lighting is another aesthetic feature that meets the need of the dance composition. It enhances the entire atmosphere and ignites the feelings among the audience to relish the rasa. Use of proper and correct light according to the thematic purpose adds beauty to the composition and create captivating and immersive experience for the audience. As Sattriya dance belongs to the theatre performances called *ankiya bhaona*, we can observe while staging the *ankiya bhaona*, the conventional lightening methods were used that enhance the aesthetic spiritual and religious aura of the entire performance arena before the emergence of electric lights. Neog said, “Light is provided on the stage with the help of large chandeliers (*gacha*), each holding about a hundred earthen cups with mustard oil, torches (*arinya*) of burning cloth soaked in such oil, large mustard oil lamps, and brilliant pyrotechnic lights (mahata, mata or mahala), lighted at the time of entrance of the chief actors or at the time of dancing. Gas lights, petromax lamps and electric lights in the last instance have been displacing these old and indigenous lighting arrangements” Neog (1984), P. 9-12. The performers in *ankiya bhaona* pass through an archway of lights consisting of nine earthen lamps representing the nine forms of bhakti, called *Agnigarh*.

3. CONCLUSION

Aesthetic is the art of moving the body rhythmically and links all perplexed meanings in one perfect expression piece. Dance is an art and representation of artist’s inner depth. It is believed, rasa is experienced by those who are emotionally reactive or it is rightly said, beauty is only seen by those audience who can grasp its beauty. Hence, the audience should be *sahridaya*, able to feel or enjoy rasa and it is apparent only when the audience have a knowledge on the pedagogy and understanding of the abhinaya performed in dance. The nuances of Sattriya dance form and the distinct system of rhythm not akin to other forms have given this tradition a separate entity. These all-aesthetic attributes of Sattriya dance form helps the audience to transcend the mind and heart in the ladder of spiritualism.
The audience experience different aesthetic pleasure while watching the Sattriya dance form but they finally merge in the bhakti rasa, which is the significant rasa of the form. The presence of bhakti rasa in Sattriya dance is beautifully witnessed by spectators through its compositions which describes the stories of lord Krishna. The bhakti rasa or bhava is the sthayi bhava in Sattriya dance and a spectator can relish the bhakti rasa present in the dance form only if he has the minimal knowledge on the pedagogy of the form. In one of the borgeets of Madhavadeva, he described:

“Ji Rasa Milise Brindavane /
Ae Sukha Nahike Tribhubane /” Kandali (2014), P.61

The rasa that one experience in Brindavan is the ultimate happiness that cannot be found anywhere else.

Similarly, all the rasas that one experiences while witnessing the dance form finally merge in the bhakti rasa, which prevails throughout the performance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS
None.

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REFERENCES