


Original Article

# ŚAṆKARADEVA AND SATTRIYA DANCE OF ASSAM: A STUDY ON DIFFERENT DANCES OF AṆKĪYĀ NĀṬ

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## ABSTRACT

Sattriya, a living dance tradition of North-East India, Assam, is deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural fabric of the region. The saint and reformer Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva erected the Sattriya dance as a medium for disseminating the teachings of Vaishnavism through performance arts. This paper explores the historical genesis and evolution of Sattriya, tracing its transformation from a ritualistic practice to a recognized classical dance form. It also examines the socio-religious context of the contributions of Śaṅkaradeva and Madhavdeva, the structure and role of satras, and the stylistic features that define the dance. Drawing on archival sources and field studies, this research underscores Sattriya's enduring relevance and its contribution to India's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Sattriya, Śaṅkaradeva, Bhakti Movement, Satra, Madhavdeva

## INTRODUCTION

The North-east India, Assam is a land of spectral beauty that highly enriched with various dance and music. Mentions of this ancient Assam which was known as the Pragjyotisha or 'the eastern land of astrology' is also referred as the 'land of dance and music' in the earliest dramaturgy like the 'Natyashastra' (2nd BC to 2nd AD) by Bharata. 'Odramagadhi' is the term used to indicate a division of Pravritti that distinguishes the region with specific styles of dance, costumes and music. The practises of music and dance is also found in the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata as the story of 'Mahiravana Badha' where Betal Chandi, a folk deity was worshiped by him as an evidence of worship of such deity is present in southern Kamrupa of Assam i.e. the Chandika Devalaya at Chhaygaon and also the Kamakhya Devalaya the famous shakti shrine in the North-East India Das (2022), p. 41). In Mahabharata period, the story of Usha and Anirudha, a famous couple of their time are seen as evidence in the Tezpur, Assam. However, the practices of the traditional rituals of the tribal inhabitants with festivals and celebrations and the tantric practices fills colour to the entire region. And Sattriya is a dance of ritualistic art form that performs as a part on Satra festivals as the tithis or death anniversaries or Guru-kirtans of the three saints i.e. Śaṅkaradeva, Madhavdeva and Badala Padma Ata and also in the Rasa Utsav in the premises. This paper tries to explore about the origin of the Sattriya dance form of Assam and also tries to study about different dance numbers that are present in the Sattriya dance tradition through recorded videos and live performances and historical survey of different Satras of Assam.

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## IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Sattriyā dance form of Assam does not have a long history as a secular performing art. But it was practiced and performed as a means of worship for more than half a millennium in the secluded monasteries. The art was developed and practised by monks centring incarnation (Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa) particularly from texts such as the Bhāgavāta. But it has been found that a few studies have been conducted on the importance of this dance form in the Performance aspects. Today, we found a verity of performance composed and choreographed in the mythological stories that are taken from the Assamese literatures text like Prahlād-Charit, Gagendra Upakhyan etc. and also the Āṅkīyā Nāṭ and Jhumuras of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva (1489–1596), and his followers. Therefore, this study is very significant for the performance perspectives i.e. how the dances are preserved in the satra tradition of Assam. In addition, most of the practices in Sattriyā dance are found in oral form and very few studies have been conducted by the researchers in the subject. So, this study is very significant for academic discourse.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Sattriya dance is mainly on expressive gestures through different parts of the body and unique rhythmic syllables. This study has some objectives as:

- 1) To explore the historical background of Sattriya Dance and Śaṅkaradeva
- 2) To study the different dance numbers that are drama centred.
- 3) To record some of the rhythmic syllables of different characters of the dance.

## DISCUSSION

In the 15th Century a new form was introduced as a means of worship by Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmānta Śaṅkaradeva, the Vaiṣṇavite saint and reformer. He was a great artist; Cultural leader who lived about 120 yrs (1449-1568AD) and founded a school of specific religion named as Neo-Vaiṣṇavism also known as Ekaśaraṇa Harināma Dharma among the people in Assam. The advent of the saint may be regarded 'as the most significant event in the annals of the entire north-eastern India on the bank of the Karatoyā river and extending to and bounded by the springing branches of the Himalayas and the Borail ranges of the extreme north-east and south.' Barua (2011), p. 1) His tenets of the religion are simplified to the extent of being extremely bare. During his times, Assam was darkened with superstitions, social evils, sacrificial of animals and tantric or black magic practices too. Along with these, there are a large number of races and tribes. The heterogeneous cultures and beliefs belonging to different linguistic group practices differed with their traditional beliefs. Edward Gait states that in those days the tribal community people specially the Chutiyas (the curious one) worshipped various forms of Goddess Kālī with the aid of their tribal priests or Deoris and not by Brāhmans. The important form of worshipping their deity was that of Kēcāi khātī (the eater of raw flesh) and to whom human sacrifices were also offered Gait (1926) Second Edition, p. 42). The other sacrificial include buffalo, goat, duck, etc for practises connected with Saktism or Tāntricism and Saivism or Vaiṣṇavism. Thus, people suffered economic hardship for the performance of Brāhmānical religio-rituals in the name of offering prayer to idols and so drifted away from Sanātana Dharma. Over viewing the Socio-religio-economic condition of the people, Śaṅkaradeva made a bold attempt for the replacement of polytheism, tantrism and animism of the tribes into monotheism or Ekaśaraṇa or surrender to one God. He developed Bhakti Dharma with strict monotheistic view: eka deva seva eka bine nāhi keva (One God, one shelter, none else but one) Barua (2011), p. 7), which took a missive change among the people of Assam. At his very early age, he wrote his first poetic literature that starts with the praising of God as

"Karatala kamala kamala dala nayana..."

as "the palm is like the lotus, eyes are like the lotus petals".

In Performing Arts, Śaṅkaradeva, a person with deep understanding of Shastras, systematized art forms to popularise among the illiterate masses by introducing dramas and expressive dancing (nṛtta, nāṭya and nṛtya) as a form of community religious art for emotional devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa. He followed the model of Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy Nāṭyaśāstra, and also other text as Abhinaya Darpana, Śirhastamuktāvalī, Saṅgīt Ratnākara, Kālikā-purāṇa, Daśarūpaka etc of ancient and medieval India with addition of folk elements, for innovating and creating the new form of dance-dramas popularly known as Cihnayātrā (seven-layered heaven staged) at Tembuwani (Bardowa) in 1468 also termed as Āṅkīyā Nāṭ. The other six plays as Patni Prashād, Kāliyādamān, Keligopāl, Rukmini Haran, Parijat Haran and Ram Vijaya. These dramas were the composition of Nāndi Śloka, Atha Bhaṭimā, songs, music interpreted with short dialogues that connects with explanatory matters. The sole characteristics of these dramas are the inclusion of songs and dance section at large in the play by each character to explain the act more accurately. The dances were such as Gāyan Bāyanar Nāc, Sūtradhārī Nāc, Gosāi Nāc, Gopī or Śtrī-Prabeśar Nāc, Prabeśar nāc etc. These songs or gīts that were contextual relevance with the dramas known as Āṅkar gīt or Nāṭ ar gīt.

Moreover, Mādhavdeva adds more dramas in the Sattriya tradition as Jhumuras, and other different dance numbers that are performed only for devotion as a surrender to the almighty Vishnu-Krishna. Maheswar Neog in his works has classified the Sattriya dance traditions in two parts Neog (1975), p. 15) excluding Sattriya Ojapali as.

- 1) Dances of dramatic representation or Drama Centered dances as Sūtradhārī Nāc, Gosāi Nāc, Gopī or Śtrī-Prabeśar Nāc, Prabeśar-prasthanar nāc, Yuddhar nāc, etc.
- 2) Independent dance numbers or the dance numbers that are used only to offer prayers in the Sattrā premises as Jhumurā nāc, Behār nāc, Nadubhangi nāc and Chāli nāc.

### SATRA AND SATTRIYA DANCE

Sarma states that within the two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established the Vaiṣṇavata faith as the supreme religious order in the entire Brahmaputra Valley and evolved an institution known as Satra which began to serve as an instrument of spreading the faith and also to help in sustaining and stabilising Vaiṣṇavism through making it as part and parcel of Assamese social life [Sarma \(1966/2016\), Reprint \(2016\)](#), p. 1). The word “Sattriā” is denoted from “Satra” i.e., the Hindu monasteries of Assam. Satras is a place for social get-togethers for manifold purpose. It has a nām-ghar or Kīrtan-ghar as a prayer-hall with a maṇikuṭ. Four hātis in four directions as pub-hāti, posim-hāti, uttra-hāti and dakṣiṇ hāti (east, west, north and south) with bahā, residence of the bhakats or the devoties with Sattradhikār’s residence. The Kīrtan-ghar is structured as large open rectangular hall shaping with gabled roof where the devotees take the holy name as self-surrendering to the almighty. Along with the prayer-hall services, it is also known as village court where the villagers make their decisions for the governing the society. It generally points east and west, the maṇikuṭ in the eastern end of perpendiculars where the holy epic Bhāgawat and Guru Ashana or thāpanā or Simhasana are kept. Kīrtan-ghar is also use for the open-stage performance. It is use for the dance-dramas and Sattriya ritual dances as a performing art, living tradition proclaimed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva.

### DANCES OF DRAMATIC REPRESENTATION

Sūtradhārī Nāc or Dance of Sūtradhāra [Figure 1](#): Sūtradhāra is the chief actor of Āṅkiya Nāṭ. It is said that Śaṅkaradeva had borrowed this character from the Sanskrit drama but there is vast difference with the Sūtradhāra of Āṅkiya Nāṭ. In the Āṅkiya Nāṭ, Sūtradhāra enter with beautiful bowing posture, knee touches the ground and hands up to elbows and then passes through the agnigarh. He is covered by a white curtain called ‘ārkapur’ held by two people ‘ārdhara’ side by side. He performs pure dance with rhythmic syllables which is basically divided into four different parts. (i) Pravesar nāc (ii) Ragar nāc, (iii) Gatar nāc and (iv) Slokar nāc followed by nandi sloka and bhaṭimā. After the pure dance or pravesar nāc, he sings raga Sāreṅ with a melodious voice, opens the play by reciting the nandi sloka, announces the subject matter and chants Bhaṭmā and then he performs ślokar nāc. This is the sequential order of performing Sutradhari nāc in Kamalabari Sattrā. Some of the syllables of ślokar nāc are:

Dhekṛik Dhekṛik dheī | dhagutām tagutām |  
 Dhekṛik Dhekṛik dheī | dhagutām tagutām |  
 Adidām dididām didānti dām dām |  
 titinīti titinīti titinīti thenā thenā dheī || [Neog \(1975\)](#), p. 475)

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1 Sri Haricharan Bhuyan, Sattriya Exponent in Sutradhara Posture**

### Gosāi-nāc or Dance of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma:

This is the dance of the hero or the icon character of the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva as he composed dance numbers against each actor in his plays. This is the entrance dance performed by Lord Kṛṣṇa or Rāma to the audience that termed as gosāi-nāc or gosāi praveśar nāc. A curtain (ārkapur) is held aloft, the entrancing song (praveśar gīta) is chanted and finally amidst peals of chanting holy names or rejoicing names and deafening sound of dabā (big drum) and then the Lord makes his appearance. After the pure dance the dancer performs ślokar nāc. One of the phrases as:

Ṭṛutaṁ ghṛutaṁ prakaṭita sthitaṁ | atigati galitaṁ praṇītaṁ nītaṁ |  
ṭṛutaṁ ghṛutaṁ prakaṭita sthitaṁ | atigati galitaṁ praṇītaṁ nītaṁ |  
tribhuvana kamalaṁ caraṇatu varaṇaṁ | tribhuvana kamalaṁ caraṇatu varaṇaṁ |  
Caraṇaṁ smraṇaṁ taraṇaṁ khagavatī | ta SS || Neog (1975), p. 483

### Gopī nāc or Female Dance:

The appearance of Vraja Gopīs is called gopī nāc or gopī praveśar nāc. It is a pure dance woven with lāsya techniques. In the Aṅkīyā Nāṭ, the characters like Satyabhāma and Rukminī along with the other female dancer of the play perform this dance style. Praveśar gīta is sung by describing the appearance, costumes and the mood of the character to enter to the audience. Mahanta (2016), p. 124) The so-called ślokar nāc is also performed by the dancer. One of the śloka sung as:

Śrīmaṅghri kamalaṁ namah ki namataṁ |  
govinda mukunda pada bināyaka bṛindaṁ |  
Śrīmaṅghri kamalaṁ namah ki namataṁ |  
govinda mukunda pada bināyaka bṛindaṁ |  
tāpita vepita bepita brejeniti trāṇaṁ | tā SS khit SS || Neog (1975), p. 487

The other praveśar nāc are: Rajā praveśar nāc (this dance is again divided into four character dance style as described by Bharata as Dhīrodhāt, Dhīrapraśānta, Dhīralalita, and Dhīroddhata) Mahanta (2016), p. 302), Bīra-praveśar nāc, Devatā praveśar nāc, Ṛṣi - muni praveśar nāc, Duta- praveśar nāc, Rākṣasa-praveśar nāc, Bāndara praveśar nāc, Garuḍa praveśar nāc etc. The hand gestures and foot works are employed accordingly with bhāva-rasa.

For example, one rhythmic syllable of Rajā praveśar nāc:  
Khitak | jiddhei | tadhina | Jiddhai | Dhetak | jiddhei | takdhei | dau  
For example, one rhythmic syllable of Ṛṣi -muni praveśar nāc:  
JidS | dhei takhiti | takhiS | DauS takS | Neog (1975), p. 489

**Yuddhar nāc:** It is the dance of fighting scene, Dhanu-Yuddha, Gadā Yuddha, Yāthi Yuddha, Bāhu Yuddha etc are some of it. Hand gestures like Patāka, Śikhara, Kapittha Haṁsamukha, Dhanu and Muṭhi are employed. Since these dances are based on the rasa the gatis Mahanta (2016) are also used accordingly.

For example, one rhythmic syllable of Dhanu-Yuddha as  
Tatau Tatau | takhiti khita | tatau takhiti | tau SS |  
Dhina dhina dhina | Didhina dhinau | tatau S takhiti | Tau SS | (Neog, 1975, p. 493)

**Kharmānar nāc:** This is the concluding dance of the Śaṅkaradeva's play. All the characters along with the Sūtradhāra perform this dance in Kharmāna tāl with Kalyāna or Puravī or Syāma rāga. Both male and female characters together participate in the dance. Jalak, Caṭā, Baṁśī, Praṇāma, Calanā are some of the hand gestures used here.

For example, one rhythmic syllable of Kharmānar nāc:  
Rata | tak S | Dhei | dhei | dhi | nau | khit |

Dance forms like Gopabālakar nāc, Gītar nāc, Ślokar nāc, Bhaṭimāra nāc, Bhaṅgī-nāc does not have any vast difference found regarding hand gestures and foot works, off course difference are seen in the rasa or bhāva when it is performed.

Further, more dances are in vogue in the Sattriya schools which are being preserved and practiced by the Adhyāpakas (Sattriya exponents) in various Sattras such as Natuwa nāc, Bhortāl, Apsarā or Indrabhīṣeka nāc, Daśavatār nāc, Kalir Śīra nāc etc.

### CONCLUSION

Sattriya dance tradition is as old as 550 years and got its recognition only before 25 yrs. Śaṅkaradeva enriched the tradition with different elements that includes performance theories as codified art form of Bharata's Nāṭyashastra and other relevant text of dance in Indian context, the folk elements present in the state as local variant and inclusion of spreading religious motives becomes a cultural heritage of North-east India. The inclusion of dance numbers in the dramas, the specific language i.e. use of Brajawali and

the preservation and transmission through oral form makes the dance form as unique dance tradition among the other dance tradition of India.

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