

CULTURAL TRADITION OF KAMALABARI SATRA: A STUDY

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Abstract- Sankaradeva has propagated the neo vaisnavite movement in Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries. Before Sankaradeva Assam was under the influence of sakta dharma the prevalence of Tantricism. He has introduced the philosophy of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma where he signifies that Krishna is the only God to whom the neophyte must pay homage. The Sattra institution is a socio-religious and cultural organization of Assam which is a product of neo-vaishnavite movement initiative by Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva tried to his best moral effort for transforming the Assamese society. Besides activities like namprasanga, nritya and geet other activities like acting (bhaona), art and sculpture and study of Sanskrit are also regular activities of satra such as to recite and listen to prayers to the Lord, and participate in religious and cultural activities. He tried to awaken the moral and spiritual thirst of the common people through Ankiya Bhaona, dance, songs, acting etc. Sankaradeva- the propounder of neo-vaishnavism in Assam and later, his disciples selected some particular regions and established the Sattra. Culture is the most direct, alluring and rooted expression of one's aspiration and feelings. Sattras of Assam has a rich bunch of cultural practices and this comprehensive bunch is popularly known as Sattriya Culture.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Eka sarana, Sattra culture, Ankiya Bhaona, Sattriya dance, Sattriya culture.

INTRODUCTION:

In Assam Sankaradeva propagated neo vaisnavite movement in Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries. His philosophy may be said to have been influenced by Vedanta philosophy. Prior to the arrival of Sankaradeva, Assam was overrun by the Sakta religion, which was characterised by a strong Tantric influence. Religious strife and ethnic conflict were common during the period. Superstitions and strange ideas abounded in the community.

Later he has introduced the philosophy of *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* where he signifies that Krishna is the only God to whom the proselyte must pay homage. His "*Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma*" does not support the worship of any other gods and goddesses but Krishna, the supreme reality.

Sattra is a traditional socio-cultural institution of Assam, functional since the 15th century. Sankaradeva- the propounder of neo-vaishnavism in Assam and later, his disciples selected some particular regions and established the Sattra. It was introduced to propagate the ideals of neo vaishnavism among the masses. Besides activities like namprasanga, nritya and geet other activities like acting (bhaona), art and sculpture and study of Sanskrit are also regular activities of satra such as to recite and listen to prayers to the Lord, and participate in religious and cultural activities. The satradhikar is the principal spiritual guide and preceptor; he initiates disciples and conducts key religious functions.

In Vedic period the term 'Sattra' was used in the sense of sacrifice. After that the term of 'Satra' is used first Bhagavata Purana in the sense of discussion or seminar and some sacrifice. At the beginning time, Satra has not a specific form like present style. Sankaradeva built devagriha. According to the Carit puthi, after the death of Sankaradeva, the new religion made divisions, which called four Sanghati. There are four-

Sanghati sattras is namely –

- i) Brahma Sanghati
- ii) Purusa Sanghati
- iii) Nika Sanghati
- iv) Kaal Sanghati

Vaishnavite sattras were a gathering place for diverse communities. Mainly satra was the centre of the vaisnava saint. **Namghar, Monikut or Bhajghar, Karapat or Batcara, Boha or Hati**, are the main part of the satra institution.

Culture is the most direct, alluring and rooted expression of one's aspiration and feelings. Sattras of Assam has a rich bunch of cultural practices and this comprehensive bunch is popularly known as Sattriya Culture. The paper will focus on the cultural tradition of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra of Majuli the documentation of Ankiya Bhaona and some dances which are only being practised within the boundaries of both the Sattras.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- This paper aims to focus the role of Sankaradeva and his Vaisnavism in resurrection the Assamese people's faith, culture & conscience.
- This paper focuses on the advent of Satra in the light of Neo Vaishnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva

- To know the origin of Kamalabari Satra and its impact among people through religious and cultural aspect of Sankaradeva during the time of instability.
- To explore and study about the uniqueness of Ankiya Bhaona created by Sankaradeva.
- To explore the bunches of the dance tradition of Kamalabari Satra and its various dance elements.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on secondary data collected from secondary sources i.e., books, research paper, newspaper, magazine, articles, dissertations, reports etc. published in journals, periodicals, thesis and few websites in the internet. Some information is also taken from books written about Sankaradeva & Madhabdeva. The paper is descriptive in nature which is based on historical method of research.

a. ORIGIN OF KAMALABARI SATTRA

Kamalabari Sattra was established by Padma Ata (also known as Badala Ata), taking the leadership in Eastern Assam and Majuli. Padma Ata was initially a swordsman in the army. In 1595, Badala Ata established a Sattra in the Orange Orchard of one of his disciples- Purusottama Barua in Majuli. When Bodola Aata came to expand his religious ideas in Upper Assam, he established Shri Shri Bodola Satra, Shri Shri Belguri Satra etc. at several places. Finally he established an independant Satra in a swampy rice field of a person named Purushattam Barua at Majuli. This is the youngest and the present day Satra of Aata at Majuli. The Satra was established in the year 1595, on the day of the Shukla Ekadasi Tithi, Assamese month of Aaghun. The Satra was named as – ‘Shri Shri Kamalabari Satra.’ The Satra was named Kamalabari- Kamala literally means Orange and Bari means Garden in Assamese.

Over the years, the Kamalabari Sattra has become a centre of art, cultural, literary and classical studies with inmates devoting their lives to the devotional path pursuing celibacy, Kamalabari Sattra further split into three Sattras, today known as Purana (meaning old) Kamalabari Sattra, Natun (meaning new) Kamalabari Sattra, and Uttar (meaning north) Kamalabari Sattra. The last one is shifted and re-located in Titabor near Jorhat, in mainland Assam. Majuli, being a shrinking island due to heavy soil erosion, the original Sattra got swept away by the river Brahmaputra in 1972. This natural disaster forced it to get re-establish the Sattra community in the new habitat. (Personal Communication and Observation) Kamalabari group of Sattras has been a home to legendary musicians since its early years and performers till the modern time including Late Maniram Dutta Mukhtiyar Bayan and Raseswar Saikia Barbayan of great repute in recent years, who contributed immensely towards the conferment of the classical status to the “Sattriya” Dance.

Branches of Kamalabari Sattra

- (i) Kamalabari Sattra, Titabor Mahima
- (ii) Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Majuli
- (iii) Natun Kamalabari Sattra, Majuli
- (iv) Moidhya Majuli Kamalabari Sattra, Majuli

b. CULTURAL PRACTICES IN UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA:

• ANKIYA BHAONA-

Ankiya bhaona is a product of neo vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam. He was inspired by the Indian classical tradition of drama. Sankaradeva had knowledge of Sanskrit dramaturgy and theatre forms prevailing in some regions he came across during his pilgrimage. Ankiya Bhaona is a popular form of entertainment that attracts people to Vaisnavite Bhagawat Dharma by glorifying Lord Krishna or Bishnu through visual media. Chihna-Jatra is the first play written by Sankaradeva where he has depicted about Sapta Vaikuntha- Sweta Bilas, Santanu Bilas, Pushpa Bilas, Pankaj Bilas, Kanakdanta, Sanatan and Golok. After Chihna-Jatra, Sankaradeva wrote another six dramas which are popularly known as Ankiya Naat or Bhaona for the people of Assam to spread the Neo Vaisnavite movement among Assamese people from time to time. Later he has introduced more plays such as Patniprasad, Kaliyadaman, Keligopal, Parijat Haran, Rukmini Haran and Ram-Vijay. Nritya has a significant role in Ankiya Naat.

The performance of these Ankiya Naat always conveyed a religious message and demonstrated the triumph of good over evil. With the help of legendary characters typically taken from the Bhagavata and the Ramayana, it is a traditional type of theatre that depicts the triumph of truth at the climax. There are several levels of performance can be determined. They are: a) Dhemaali, b) Purvaranga c) Original play acting, d) Conclusion, e) Muktimangal Bhatima performance.

In Ankiya Naat, Dhemaali a prolonged series of dances by the Gayan Bayan team is held before the recitation of Nandi verses. It consists of singing and dancing by gayan bayana with the accompaniment of Khol and Tala. There are different parts of this program and each part has its own name, such as Jorani, Chahini, Saru Dhemaali, Bar Dhemaali, Ghosha Dhemaali, etc.

Once Purbaranga was being performed, the gayan bayan team itself bring the chief character ‘Sutradhar’ carrying of agni-garh, the arch of lights made up of two wooden poles or bamboo sticks joined to the acting area, the stretching of a white curtain known as aar-kapor, into the stage. After that sutradhar begins his dancing, singing and takes the story forward to the audience. Once sutradhar finished his activities, he introduced the rest of the character in front of the audience.

Sankaradeva concludes his plays with muktimangal bhatima where the entire group of artists in singing the Muktimangal Bhatima (the concluding prayer in verse) at the end of the play.

The language is called 'Brajbuli' or 'Brajavali' in the plots, character dialogues and songs used in the plays. Kaliram Medhi argues that Brajbuli is an artificial literary language based on the Maithili literary language. Therefore, it is important to understand the importance of the Brajavali language in the literary language tradition of Assam. In fact, the language is closely related to Maithili, Maghi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Oriya and other languages.

The melodies and lines from the plays have unique qualities and are referred to as Ankar-git and Bhatima. Because each Ankiya git, or dramatic song, has a distinct raga or melody, tala or time measure, and mana or rhythm, it also has a dhuwa, or refrain. The various melo- dies used in the plays are: Ahira, Asowari, Belowar, Bhupali, Dhanasri, Gauri, Gandhara, Deva Gandhara, Kau, Kalyana, Kanada, Kamoda, Kedara, Lalita Mallada, Maura or Mahura, Mahura-Dhanasiri, Nata, Nata-Mal- lada, Puravi, Ramagiri, Syama, Syamagada, Sri, Sri Gauri, Sri Gandhara, Sindhura, Suhai, Tuda, Tuda- Bhatiyali Tuda-Vasanta, Varari and Vasanta. The Bhatimas of the plays serve mainly as epilogues and prologues.

The Bhaona developed into a very well-liked type of entertainment, and they were typically performed in the Namghars' vicinity, mainly in open areas. In Ankiya Bhaona there are dances like Gayan-bayanar-nac of the Purvaranga like a musical prelude, Sutradhari-nac, Gosai-pravesar-nac or Bar-pravesar-nac, Pravesar-nac, Yudhar-nac, Prasthanar-nac, Bhangi-nac, Slokar-Bhatimar-gitar-nac, Jhumura-nac, Bahar-nac etc.

c. DANCES OF KAMALABARI SATTRA

The classical dance developed by the Sattras in Assam is the Sattriya dance. Sattriya dance is a classical Indian dance form developed by Srimanta Sankaradeva to present mythological teachings to the masses. Of the various forms of dances that are taught in the Sattra are sutradhara nach, gosai pravesar nach, gopi pravesar nach, chali nach, behar nritya, jhumura nritya, dasaavatar nritya, mati-akhara and nadu-bhangi. In common parlance these dance forms are collectively called Sattriya Nritya.

I. MATI AKHORAS :

Mati-Akhora means physical exercise done on the ground. 'Mati' means ground, 'Akhora' means practice. The Mati-Akhora are the basic exercise patterns of satriya dance. The 'Mati-Akhora's are two categorized – first is pure exercises and second is basic dance form only. Pure exercises are based on some acrobatic poses and basic dances are the important part of satriya dance. Mati-Akhora has been categorized in eight units. These are like – Ora, Chota, Jalak, Jap, Muruka, Khar, Pak and Lon. In total there are total 64 mati akhoras.

II. DRAMA CENTRIC DANCE UNIT:

This unit directly derived from 'Ankiya Bhaona'. This drama centric dance are–

- **Gayana-Bayan-** Natyashastra included Purvaranga, in other words, before the beginning of the play an act to remove obstacles is performed by the trained percussionists (bayans) which is called Purvaranga and in Sattriya, Gayan Bayan.
- **Sutradhari Naach-** The Sutradhari Nac is the dance of the narrator where he initiates and gives a narrative of a performance mostly at the opening of the Ankiya Bhaona. The Sutradhara enters the stage under the cover of a curtain. The Sutradhara comes up with a bowing posture with his head, hands up to the elbows, and knees fixed to the ground which is known as the jin-thak or the salutation to the Divine and the devotees in the Namghar. The Sutradhar slowly rises and the musicians begin playing the instruments.
- **Gosai Probeshar Naach-** Gosai-pravesar Nac means the Dance of the Entry (pravesa) of the Lord. As the pravesa-gita is sung, Krishna (or Rama) enters the stage in dancing with elegance and solemnity. Krishna's unique hand gesture of playing His flute is unique is used when Krishna enters into the stage. There are two main parts of this dance: *Bajanar Dance and Sloka Dance*.
- **Gopi Probeshar Naach-** This is the dance of the "milkmaids" of the land of Vraja. This is also performed to play the role of Yasoda (Krishna's mother) and other female characters. This number is characterized by subtle but repetitive circular movements.
- **Yudhya (Fighting) Naach-** This number is the "representations of fights between hero and hero or group and group with such accessories as clubs and bows have a strikingly spectacular appeal, being characterized by a number of swift, revolving and to-and-fro movements." Mythical characters such as Narakasura, Mura, Taraka, Marica and other demons and demonesses etc. who have no dialogue or verbal narrative in the performance, perform such a dance.

III. SATRA CENTRIC DANCE UNIT:

After the death of Madhabdeva, Badalpadma Ata and other Gurus who hold the tradition of Kamalabari satra the followers have enriched the old tradition creating new rhythms, songs, dances etc. So, this unit is very important for satriya dance. These are like

- **Rojaghoriya Chali Naach-** This dance was introduced by madhabdeva. There are total 4 numbers of Rajaghoriya chali along with geetor part and mela part. Geetor part was incorporated with Mishra tala, Brahma tala, Xoru Bixom tala. In the geetor nach borgits of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva has been used.
- **Maanchok Naach-** It is a pure dance performance performed by a group of singers with cymbals in hand. The dance is named after a particular tala pattern called Man Chok. At the time of singing of bargitas, the singers perform this dance with tala in hand with the rhythmic timing of Manchok tala provided by the accompanying khol.
- **Bhongir Naach-** It is a pure dance in which some particular poses and movements are choreographed to varied patterns of basic tala. The dance pattern is small but the dancer perform this dance number into different circumstances and situations pertaining to the dramatic theme.
- **Bhortaal Naach-** This dance is performed by a group of people holding talas in their hands. Here the dancers perform various poses and movement wielding their cymbals in different winding manner.

- **Dasavatar Naach-** The ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu namely, Matsya (Fish) , Kurma (Tortoise), Varaha (Boar), Narasimha (the Man-lion), Vamana (Dwarf), Parashurama, Lord Rama, Balarama , Lord Krishna, Kalki is depicted through the dasaavatar dance.

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IV. INDEPENDENT DANCE UNIT:

Some independent dances, which are most popular in the satriya dance. These are –

- **Chali naach-** The chali nach is performed by young bhakats wearing female costumes representing the gopis while in behar nritya the dancing boys numbering 25-30 dress like Lord Krishna.

- **Nadubhangi naach-** Nadubhangi is the dance of Lord Krishna with three pairs of gopas (gopa-a cowherd) and gopis (daughter of a cowherd) in Vrindavan. The costumes of all the three pairs are different. One pair wears the costume of Lord Krishna; the other two pairs wear the costume of jhumura nritya & chali nach.

- **Jhumura Nach-** In some Sattras like Kamalabari, there are a number of dances, Jhumura, performed by boy monks in dresses. The songs for the performances are taken from Madhavadeva's jhumuras and a few from Sankaradeva's plays and from among the Bargits.

- **Bahar Nach-** It is a Tandava-dharmi nac. Bahar-nac or Behar-nac is derived from the Nat Bhojan-behar of Madhavadeva. In this Nat Krishna along with the cowherd boys did various pastime and exploits in Vrindavana and dance with his companions. The dance performed in that drama is called Bahar-nach or Beharnach. This dance has two parts—Ram-dani and Gitar-nach.

CONCLUSION-

Kamalabari Satra is one of the centers of cultural hub. Ankiya Bhaona is a popular form of entertainment introduced by Sankaradeva attracts people to Vaisnavite Bhagawat Dharma by glorifying Lord Krishna or Bishnu through visual media. He composed the plays which includes Gayan Bayan, Sutradhar, Ragas, dances, songs, language. The dances which are incorporated in Ankiya Bhaona later has gained its independent status as a pure dance form. There are many satra centric dances which has been introduced by the followers of Sankaradeva, Madhabdeva, Badala Padma Ata after their demises. Satriya dance is the epitome of renovation of this glorious tradition.

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