

The Journey of Sattriya Dance through Time and Space

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In November 2000, a five centuries old ritual dance form Sattriya Nritya became the eighth Indian classical dance form to be recognized by Sangeet Natak Akademi. Until then Sattriya Nritya was practiced and performed as a daily ritual, a mode of worship by celibate monks inside the Satra (monasteries) of Assam. Sattriya Nritya is a living ritual form that is still performed inside the Satra, and now on the proscenium stage by both male and female dancers. This relatively recent change of status of the ritual performance form, along with the inclusion of female dancers in the proscenium space has simultaneously brought about numerous changes in the cultural ecology of the Satra; its ritual dance Sattriya, allied rituals and customs as well as to the inhabitants of the space - monks. Although much has been written about Sattriya Nritya - the classical dance, very little is known about the journey the form has made towards receiving recognition as a major classical dance of India. This paper will attempt to build an analytical ethnographic narrative that critically investigates the transition of the form from a

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daily ritual practice within the Satra to a classical dance form of the stage while providing a visual dossier of changes in costumes, make-up, and aesthetics. This paper will also briefly discuss the present status of the dance form in today's technology-oriented world.

[**Keywords** : *Satra* system, Ritual, Classical dance, Representation, Belief, Nostalgia, Modernity, Invention of Tradition]

1. Introduction

Sattriya Nritya or the *Sattriya* dance is the recently recognized 'classical'¹ dance of India, whose performers - largely female dancers - have worked hard to make the form popular among the audience within and outside India since the early 1990s. The *Sattriya* dance in its form of ritual performance evolved in the precincts of the *Vaishnavite Satras* (monasteries) of Assam in the 15th century. It is a form practiced by the monks as a mode of worship of the principal deity Krishna/Vishnu and as a style of imparting mythological teachings to the people immediately and enjoyably. Among many ritual-art practices learned by the monks, this all-male dance form primarily began as an accompaniment of the *Vaishnavite* saint *Sankardeva's ankiya nat* (dramatic practice). *Sattriya* dance is the most well-known among all the *Satra* art forms. It is learned and practiced in a *gurukul* format (an education system wherein the student lives with the teacher, learning from him while helping him with his everyday chores). This format of learning by the monks is handed down along with orally transmitted ritual knowledge, without the involvement of any written text from one generation of monks to another. The form moved out of the *Satra* premises in the early 1950s. Women dancers already trained in other forms of classical dance played a major role in the process of popularizing the form.² As the first generation of teachers (mostly male) of the dance form altered and restructured its vocabulary, presentation, and theme to suit its new learners and audience, a new teaching and learning format emerged, and along with it a new presentational aesthetic, in anticipation of newer expectations of the changing space. Over the next fifty years, until it was given recognition from *Sangeet Natak Akademi* as the eighth 'classical' dance of India, the form became more structured and codified in its presentation.

However, inside the *Satra*, the presentations of the dances were done differently; each *Sattriya* dance piece has a specific time and

occasion for its performance as they are modes of worship. The monks learn these dances and other ritual arts of the *Satra* from a very young age, as a part of their lifestyle. All ritual arts, customs, and daily duties of the monks are inseparable from one another, and together they form the *Sattriya Sanskriti* (Sattriya culture). These dances and other *Satra* arts are generationally transferred ritual knowledge which doesn't involve any written text. It is an oral tradition; literally, the word-of-mouth phenomenon that preserves the history and appears in all disciplines of arts.³ This knowledge of *Sattriya* is embodied. The presence of the monks in *Satra*; the way they live by the rules and regulations of the *Satra*, and their relationship – proximity to, and distance from the outside world, the way they present themselves, etc. can be seen as a performance. All the rituals and customs are rooted in their way of living; from the start of the day till its end, there are rituals that the monks have to periodically perform. Their bodies are the archives of this knowledge system, and the performance of this knowledge system by them gives us (outsiders) a visual entry into the functions of *Satra* which have been successively running for many generations. These *Satra* institutions are the foundation of the Assamese culture and society as we know it today; they play a central role in the integration of numerous tribes, and communities that construct the Assamese identity. They have been the conservation hubs of the religious and cultural heritage of the state, and the monks are the inheritors and propagators of this heritage. They live a life performing dedicated to the integrity of this institution, and this provides the outsiders with perceptible knowledge of the traditions and culture of the *Vaishnavite* religion. Therefore, when Diana Taylor writes, "*Performance also functions as an epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices offers a way of knowing*" (Taylor 2003 : 3). The everyday ritual performances of the monks become our entry into Vaishnavism and, the performance that we see on stage by the female dancers is the 'constructed' (Taylor 2003 : 3) form. It is a representation of a tiny fraction of the ritual *Sattriya* which we see on the secular stage.

The transformation of the ritual dances into a dance form of the stage most likely began in the early 1900s, when a young monk named Raseswar Saikia Borbayan defied his boundaries as a celibate

monk and moved out of the *Satra* to teach the living art of the *Satra*—the *Sattriya* dances, to women and men alike outside the *Satra* premises.⁴ Unlike today where women are allowed inside some parts of the *Satra* premises, earlier this was not the case. Women were not only barred from entering the *Satra* premises but, the ritual arts of the *Satra* were also limited within its four walls, they were partially available for viewing by outsiders during religious occasions. In 1955, the *Sattriya* dance was presented on the National stage for the first time in the National Dance Festival, where a group of monks from *Kamalabari Satra* demonstrated the various aspects of the form as performed in the monastery. In the first-ever All India Dance Seminar held in Delhi in 1958, monks from the old *Kamalabari Satra* performed the *Sattriya* dance presenting many dances that required them to impersonate female characters as well.⁵ This particular period was an exciting time for *Sattriya* dance, as many artists, performers, scholars, and intellectuals were taking an interest in this ritual form of dance, and doing their best to explore and expand this dance on the local as well as national platforms. These initiatives and events mark the beginning of the journey that the ritual dances of the *Satra* made to become one of the classical dances of the nation.

2. Methodology

This paper follows an interdisciplinary approach of historiography and ethnography. I have tried to historically and socially place *Sattriya Nritya* in its past and present locations by creating a historical/historiographical analysis of its past (from 1950 - 2000) to be able to locate the push and pull from within and outside that generated its historical journey towards aspirations and acquiring of a “classical” status. Extensive interviews with monks, dancers, and performers, and field visits to Majuli (esp. Uttar *Kamalabari Satra*) have been critical in building this analytical narrative. Books and articles by Dr. Maheswar Neog, Dr. Sunil Kothari, Professor Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, and others are important sources for this paper.

3. Monks and Artists who made History

While researching about the time *Sattriya* first came out of the *Satra* premises, I met with Sri Druno Bhagawati, an art connoisseur, a friend of Raseswar Saikia, and a Block Development Officer of Majuli

in the 1950s. The 1950s Majuli Island was nothing like today. Communication and traveling to the island was limited, access to modern resources were scarce. The *Satra* structures were rigid, the ritual arts were restricted to the *Satra* premises and, more precisely, to men. Women could only be observers of these arts from an appropriate distance and their communications with celibate monks were limited. Druno Bhagawati informed that, it was during this time that the young celibate monk Raseswar Saikia became his acquaintance. Saikia also came in contact with other like-minded officials who encouraged him to explore and expand the horizon of his art practices of the *Satra*. Saikia, who used to volunteer in welfare work in his village, gradually took an interest in teaching Sattriya dances to both men & women. This invited trouble his way, and he was summoned for a hearing in the *Satra*, where elderly monks, *Sattradhikar* (Head of the *Satra* institution) and others forbade him from teaching the arts of *Satra* to women.⁶ Perhaps, it was the influence of his new acquaintances, along with his aspirations of broadening the field of *Satra* arts that prompted Saikia to leave the celibate *Satra* order after he refused to oblige by the norms of the institute.⁷

In the then *Satra* system, formal education was not given much importance and neither was any professional job. A monk was supposed to beg, cultivate a piece of land or rear cattle to fulfill his livelihood requirements.⁸ This kind of living ceased to exist when many Ahom rulers became patrons of some *Satra*. However the Kamalabari⁹ *Satra* did not receive any such patronage and continued to follow the ascetic lifestyle. After Independence many young monks like Raseswar Saikia aspired to lead a better life, acquire higher education, flourish in their art practices, and have a professional career. Yet, it wasn't until Raseswar Saikia led the way to a world of arts outside the *Satra* premises, that monks gradually started moving away from the *Satra* tradition to explore the world outside.¹⁰

Among many monks Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Borbayan was noticed by the connoisseurs outside the *Satra*, even though he never moved away from the *Satra* tradition. He was the Adhyapak (teacher) of Raseswar Saikia and Ghanakanta Bora Borbayan, another talented monk who trained many male and female dancers outside the *Satra*. Maniram Dutta Muktiyar, along with Dr. Maheswar Neog conducted research into *Satra* melodies and

rhythms and later producing many audio recordings and publications.¹¹ Dutta was a scintillating performer and a dedicated teacher. His contribution towards propagation and dissemination of the Sattriya arts is profound and well known.

In the following years scholar and dance critic Sunil Kothari visited Kamalabari *Satra* with the help of Dr. Neog (1966). This was an important moment in the journey of the *Sattriya* dances with Sunil Kothari there to document the dances of the *Satra*, which he later edits into a special issue for Marg Publications, in the series of issues on other dance forms such as *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak*, and *Manipuri* among others. Kothari a dance writer and cultural historian played a major role in discovering and introducing many dance forms to the national platform. His regular newspaper columns, articles, reports on cultural festivals, and a few dozen books on Indian culture and dance surely assisted in the process of classicization of certain traditional forms. The modern patron state creates such 'experts' like Kothari to justify and construct the categories of forms and sometimes, even justify their cultural policies. Therefore, his visit to the *Satras* was a turning point in the journey of the *Satra* dances.

Mr. Kothari visited Majuli twice, and during his second visit to Kamalabari *Satra* in 1971, he was accompanied by Dr Neog and Dr Richmond Farley from Michigan University USA. These scholars witnessed several performances of the *Sattriya* repertoire, and were drawn by various elements which according to them qualified Sattriya as a classical dance.¹² From this time onwards artists, writers, academicians, politicians, and dancers came together and sought to represent *Sattriya* on the world platform, and to publicize and promote the form. Under the joint initiative of artist Rudra Baruah, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, and Jogendra Nath Saikia (MLA) Sattriya was performed in Indonesia in 1975. Deepali Das and Sharodi Saikia were the first female dancers to perform *Sattriya* abroad along with monks from both Uttar and Natun Kamalabari *Satra*.¹³ This was an important direction for the dance form.

With *Sattriya* dance reaching new platforms for presentation, the inclusion of female dancers in the male-body centric ritual dance form brought about many changes, modifications, eliminations, and additions of various aesthetics, thematic and choreographic elements. This further pushed the evolution of a ritual form of dance to become a dance form for the proscenium stage. Kalaguru Bishnu

Prasad Rabha¹⁴ collaborated with Raseswar Saikia and together they developed *abhinaya* on *Shlokas* which was not present in the *Satra* dance system before. It was in 1967 that Saikia also inscribed beats to the *Mati Akhara* (warm-up exercises performed on the ground before dancing)¹⁵ for the first time. With the efforts of Saikia, a systematic vocabulary of the *Sattriya* dances began to grow, which made the dances more presentable for the stage format. The collaborations between Saikia, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, and his student Sri Jatin Goswami¹⁶ shaped many *Ankiya Nat* where many female dancers and actresses took part.¹⁷ By now many dance schools had started teaching the *Sattriya* to female dancers coming from various communities in Assam. Raseswar Saikia established *Sangeet Satra*, a *Sattriya* dance & music school in Guwahati, and gradually many other schools were also established.

4. Socio-political Scenario of Assam and Sattriya Nritya

While studying the evolution of ritual *Sattriya* as a classical dance, one has to take into consideration the socio-political context of Assam during that particular time. The demand for classical recognition came from the artist fraternity, monks and the bureaucratic community of Assam after Independence, at a time when Assam, the former province of the British Government was facing political unrest from 1962 onwards with the Indo-China war, and the administrators in Delhi deciding to abandon Assam to the Chinese aggressors. It was also a time when the vast territory of Assam was divided into new states. The Assamese-Bengali language divide and student led Assam movement from 1979 to 1985 was a period of grave political unrest with the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh,¹⁸ which still continues. The early 1990s saw the emergence of the infamous insurgent organization, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which demanded separation from the Indian state. Within this backdrop of unrest and chaos, came the demand for classical recognition of *Sattriya* dances of the *Vaishnavite* monasteries of Assam. Even after multiple attempts *Sattriya* did not receive classical recognition until 2000. However, there were small efforts to pacify the growing mistrust of the Assamese people towards the Indian State by presenting SNA awards to artists Mitra Deb Mahanta in 1961 and Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Borbayan in 1962. Scholar Arshiya Sethi writes that these efforts were attempts at appeasing the

Assamese community by making a special arrangement for *Sattriya* in the section of 'other traditional dances'¹⁹, as in those days the SNA awards were given to artists who were considered to be experts of forms that were already recognized as 'traditional' or 'classical'.

It was only after 15 years of signing the Assam Accord in 1985, and clause 6 of which clearly stated that: "Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards will be provided for the preservation, promotion and upliftment of culture of the people of Assam", that the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra was established along with institutions such as the Jyoti Chitraban Film Studio²⁰, and on the 15th November, 2000 *Sattriya* finally received its due recognition. Sethi in her article *An overlay of the political : the recognition of Sattriya* (2015), describes the inclusion of *Sattriya* among the classical dance forms of India as less of a recognition of artistic endeavour by the artists and scholars of Assam and more of a political agenda of the Indian state, to lull the growing anger of the Assamese people towards the biased functioning and decision making of the authorities in Delhi. While this may appear to be true given the context of Assam's socio-political development, one cannot deny the persistent efforts of the broader artist community of Assam, and many supportive bureaucrats towards making *Sattriya* a classical dance form of India. This was not just recognition of a dance form, but the recognition of the larger Assamese cultural identity. In a country like India, with multiple nationalities²¹ and diverse cultural identities, the cultural consciousness that developed with the rise of post-independence nationalism was the prime factor behind the relentless struggles of the people of Assam to secure a visible position in the national platform. In a regional context nationalism meant protecting one's unique cultural identities and traditional homeland,²² which was threatened within the new sovereign country. However, the sub-nationalist tendency that Assam showed provided very few benefits. Thus, belonging to a larger community of states, earning visible recognitions in cultural forums etc. became more apparent and led to the stalling of the separatist ideas. Additionally, many economic benefits too came with the integration with the mainland India, than striking alone.

Correspondingly, the rising cultural nationalism in many other states of independent India, which encouraged artists, connoisseurs, and generations of litterateurs and scholars to revive and revitalize past art traditions, meant that Assam did not want to stay behind in

this race. Therefore, many efforts were made to revitalize the traditional arts which in this framework included Sattriya dance. Scholars like Dr. Neog undertook an exploratory journey, particularly of the available *Vaishnavite* literature composed by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and found rich associations with traditional texts. Along with other litterateurs and artists Dr. Neog also promoted the entire gamut of *Satra* arts under the name of 'Sattriya' and after nearly 40 years of deliberations since its first demand for classical recognition in 1958, the dance form got its desired recognition.

However, these ritual dances did not have a simple, linear journey in order to become a classical dance form. It had to include female dancers in an all-male form, it had to find affiliations to traditional texts such as *Sri Hastamuktavali* by Subhankar Kavi, *Bharata's Natyashastra*, and the *Abhinayadarpana*, and transform the ensemble ritual dances into a solo form. While, Sankardeva used his creative genius to integrate many ethnic rituals and cultural elements into the Vaishnavite art forms and create its vocabularies – gestures, foot works etc. from vernacular languages which are self-explanatory and orally transmitted, the new form on the other hand had to adapt new changes in teaching and learning methods, aesthetics and presentational styles.

5. Aesthetic Changes, Training, and Performance of Sattriya Dance on Stage vis-a-vis Satra

Aharjya – costumes and make-up, plays a significant role in the ritual performance of the *Satra*. Though the monks do not dress up or apply make-up in their everyday ritual performances, they have specific costumes and make-up for every dancer-actor in *nat*/drama and independent dance numbers which are followed strictly while performing on occasional ritual festivals and events. In the *Satra*, the principle of using *Aharjya* is similar to that of the *Natyashastra*; however, *Satra* has its own assortments which are influenced by indigenous designs, motifs, and patterns.²³ As an important visual marker of a dance form, it was the costumes that underwent major change and re-structuring while the form moved from the *Satra* to the stage. In the *Satra* the costumes and make-up are usually prepared from locally sourced and affordable materials, but the costumes and make-up of stage is couture and made from expensive fabrics. Smt. Gorima Hazarika, an already established *Odissi* dancer who later

learned *Sattriya* from Raseswar Saikia suggested the use of Pat silk textile to make the costumes for the stage. This costume had a special significance for the dancers, as it gave them a 'look' that could be specifically recognized. Today we find the use of other textiles of similar texture in making the costumes. But, in the *Satra* whenever the monks wear costumes during special occasions, their costumes are made out of affordable Chiffon, Satin, Nets, and Velvet like materials. Another difference between stage and *Satra* pertains to the make-up used by the artists. In the *Satra*, they apply heavy and elaborate make-up which is different from the make-up used by the dancers of stage.

Jagannath Mahanta in his book writes, "...*certain colours represent certain characteristics and moods' is followed in the Satra with intense inclination and due care. Usually the colour patterns are determined here on the basis of gender, class (devata, manushya etc.) caste (Brahmana, ksatriya etc.) and behavioural aspects of the characters*". This is similar to what Bharata writes about *alamkaras* in *Natyashastra*. Besides, in the earlier performances of the *Satra*, there was a lack of elaborate lighting during performances, therefore, the use of extravagant make-up helped in making the expressions of the performer clearer and more visible to the crowd. Although the dancers of the stage follow the same principle and format of applying make-up, it is different from the *Satra* style. For stage, they hire professional make-up artists, apply modern and expensive products. Furthermore, in *Satra* there is a designated make-up artist known as a *Khanikar*, who is trained in the art of painting, making costumes, mask making and effigy making. He is proficient in the production of colours from natural materials as well. However, a stage performer does not require an expert *Khanikar*, since artists and professionals are hired for production and execution of a performance. With the presentation of dances on the proscenium stage, not only did the scale of performance, production quality, costumes, make-up and other presentational aspects become more glamorous and grand, but the stage performers started to experiment with the themes of performance as well.

In today's *Satras* we now also see changes in terms of using easily available ready-made make-up products and costumes, modern lightings inside the Naamghar to make the performance look more impressive. We see changes in presentational styles as well, which are influences of secular presentations of stage.



Figure-1 : Dancer Ranjumoni Saikia in Sota Posture. This is the dress for Jhumura Nach on stage, made out of cotton, affordable silk and velvet like material. (© Ranjumoni Saikia)



Figure-2 : This costume is made out of Gadi diya Pat or Nuni Pat. It is a cheaper alternative of Pat silk, similar to the cotton fabric. (© Ranjumoni Saikia)



Figure-3 : Dancer Sharodi Saikia in a Sota Posture. The costume she is wearing was the revised costume made using Pat silk for Chali nach. Every item of cloth that the dancer is wearing is made out of Pat silk. And all ornaments are native to Assam – Gamkharu (bangles) Gol Pota, Dhul Biri and Dug Dugi as necklaces. (© Ranjumoni Saikia)



Figure-4 : Dancer Mridusmita Das Bora as Arjun in the abhinaya piece 'Krishna Arjun'. For this performance the dancer has experimented with the costume; she is wearing a dhoti and a blouse which is heavily ornamentalized and the fabrics used are silk, chiffon, and net. The Jewellery is also different from the usual range of Assamese jewellery; she is wearing different neck and head accessories from the usual ones. (© Mridusmita Das Bora)



Figure-5 : Mridusmita Das Bora performing at Moghai Ojah Srijan Award Event 2018. The costume she is wearing is a version of Assamese silk. In Sattriya dances, the dancer does not wear colourful costumes other than dresses made out of white Pat silk fabric with different patterns in red, yellow, green, and blue colours at the border of the dress. (©Mridusmita Das Bora)

Figures-1, 2 & 3 present the change of textile of the Sattriya costume. As the dances became more accustomed to the stage format, the costumes visibly became more glamorous. The Figures-4 & 5 are from Moghai Ojah Srijan Award Event 2018. This event was organized by dancer Mridusmita Das Bora and her Guru Sri Ramakrishna Talukdar. Like many *Sattriya* dance performances of current times, the key performance of this event was an abhinaya piece 'Krishan Arjun'. The performance also included other pure dance numbers from the repertoire of Sattriya dances. This entire performance experimented and explored with the music, costumes, lights, and the overall presentation of the performance.²⁴

6. Training & Presentation of the Sattriya Dances

The training of the dance differs in both the spaces, as the purpose of performance, and the function of the dance differs in different spaces. *Sattriya* is the mode of worship in the *Satra* and, seen as a way of surrendering, gifting oneself to the God. It is an intense process of training and practice that the monks have to undergo in order to become an expert in the dance and allied practices. *Sattriya* for the monks is a part of their daily life activities. All rituals,

customs, activities of the *Satra* are seen as a whole; the dances and music, playing of instruments, learning to read the scriptures, mask making, performing nat on special occasions, performance of the daily prayers etc. everything together is the 'Sattriya culture/Sattriya tradition'²⁵. Therefore, for the monks the training in the ritual arts is an intense internalized process wherein they learn to make these art forms a part of their daily routine from a very young age. When a young boy arrives at the institute he is gradually initiated into the daily practices by his caretaker—like attending the *puwageet* (early morning songs) sessions, assisting other monks in cleaning the *Naamghar* (prayer hall) and the *Satra* premises, then practicing the *Mati Akhara* and steadily moving on to practice other dances. In the evenings they have separate sessions of training in playing *Khol*, learning *Borgeets* (devotional songs) and *Bhatima* (songs about life and works of Srimanta Sankardeva as composed by Madhabdeva) etc.²⁶ This holistic training, it prepares the young boys for 'monkhood' or life as celibate monks, learning, performing, teaching, and following the rituals and customs of the *Satra* order.

Unlike the monks, the professional dancers of the stage have a different format of training. It does not involve knowing all the arts of the *Satra* and students only learn the dance in a specific arrangement designed to complement the stage, to appeal to the audience. Despite the fact that the dancers work hard to perfect each and every move, gestures and postures and endure long hours of strenuous practice, the intensity of the training in each space is different. The dancers of the stage prepare to present a performing art form to an audience that might be completely unaware of the *Satra* and its tradition. For the audience it is a dance performance; a mode of entertainment, of recreation which they hope will give them a glimpse of the 'traditional Indian culture'. The professional stage dancers are considered the ambassadors of a higher Indian culture, and hence, they have to be very careful about the presentation of the form. They need to make the form look more spectacular and refined, in order to keep the audience fascinated for the duration of the performance. The goal of both the monks and the dancers of the stage are different and so is their training process.

Nrityacharjya Sri Jatin Goswami, points out two basic differences in the *Sattriya* training for both the monks and the stage dancers (who are mostly female) : a) the first difference is in the

training of *Mati Akhara*. The first ground exercise is Dondabod/Khosoka, where the Guru/*Adhyapak* makes the student lay face down, flat on the ground and massages the entire body with his feet. This is done to open up the student's body. This exercise is skipped by the male Guru while training the female dancers, who begin with the second *Mati Akhara* i.e. Ora (the basic stance of the form) b) In the *Satra* format of training, the monks learn to play the Khol (drums) along with learning the dances. It is compulsory for them to become a Bayan (singer and instrumentalist) but outside of the *Satra* this is not compulsory for either female or male dancers. Learning the Khol is considered a separate art from outside the *Satra*.²⁷

While speaking to dancers Mridusmita Das Bora and Anwesa Mahanta, both *Sangeet Natak Akademi* and Yuva Puraskar awardee, who had formerly learnt *Bharatanatyam* before learning *Sattriya*, each revealed that learning another classical dance form had already given them the basic ideas about alignment of the body, breathing, how to hold postures etc. Consequently, when they started learning *Sattriya* it was easier for them to understand and learn the new form, as it was gradually growing into a codified structure. They started learning *Sattriya* in the early 1990s when it was not yet recognized as 'classical'. They were training under renowned Gurus, and therefore had a systematic approach to their training; Mridusmita Das Bora trained under Guru Ramakrishna Talukdar, an SNA awardee who is also a Kathak dancer. Dr. Anwesa Mahanta trained under *Adhyapak* Ghanakanta Bora Borbayan who was instrumental in teaching many young *Sattriya* performers when the form had just moved out of the *Satra*. Despite the fact that both these female dancers were trained under different Gurus, and had different training environments, one element which was common in both their trainings was the rigorous understanding of body, and body memory. Like the *Satra* training which doesn't involve any written text, outside the *Satra* many Gurus follow a similar format focusing on the concept of embodiment through repetition of the steps, or a movement continuously, until the movement is internalized and comes naturally to the student. The movement of the form outside of the *Satra* affords a certain amount of flexibility in the pedagogic process. The rigidity of the ritual is relieved and newer technologies can be used according to convenience – students are provided with written notes, recorded music, and videos. Some students learn just a few dance and *abhinaya* pieces to perform on stage, unlike the years of systematic, rigorous

training that the monks as well as many dancers of stage go through before performing in front of an audience.

Today visible changes are also seen in the presentation of Sattriya on the stage, the dancers of the proscenium today are experimenting with various themes and choreographies. Sattriya and Odissi dancer-scholar Dr. Mallika Kandali has been experimenting with Sattriya dances for quite a while. Her repertoire of work includes many pure dance performances, *bhaona*, solo abhinaya performance, and experimental choreographic pieces. Some of her experimental pieces are — '*Daivaki Kheda Vandana*', an abhinaya piece choreographed by her, script by Mukunda Pathak Sharma and performed by Mirnanda Borthakur. She has also experimented with feminist themes — '*Mandodari Puse Ravanak*', in which she wrote the script herself in Brajawali language (literary language based on Maithili, with the writing system in Assamese), where Mandodari, wife of Ravana questions him, why he abducted Sita when he already had her as a wife. Dr. Kandali believes that there is a need for dance to make active political statements along with presenting our traditions, and make commentaries about issues, and problems prevalent in our contemporary society which can also be traced in our Epics. According to Kandali, "Classical dance is regarded as superior to folk forms and has the ability to attract important spectators, since the form is presented and showcased in platforms accessible to administrators, politicians, policy makers, optimising the chances of the problems being recognized and addressed"²⁸. '*Katha Ek Jajabar Ki*', another experimental performance uses the Sattriya idiom to talk about Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's²⁹ life and his works. The artist mentioned other experimental performances including, *Mahila Bhaona* (All women bhaona) by dancers Ranjumoni and Rinjumoni Saikia and '*Rituranga*' performed by dancer Anita Sarma, based on the play '*Sunit Kowari*' by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

On the other hand, inside the *Satra*, the performances even today are strictly spiritual in nature. From *puwageet*, *Gayan-Bayan*, *Naam Loguwa* (initiation of Naam Kirtan/devotional songs), Charit Path (memorized recitation of complete biographies of the Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and the 12 principal disciples), Sattriya dance, *Bhaona*, and *Ankiya Nat*, each and every ritual performance is directed towards God. The performative ritual practices inside the *Satra* are modes of evocation of the divine. As Remo Guidieri in his article *Statue and Mask : Presence and Representation in Belief* writes

about evocation in context of masks, where masks are 'signs for' something and not just 'signs'. He writes, 'Evocation' is constituted on a stage where something that we call "belief" is played out, so as to be inaugurated, maintained, restored, or yet, recalled. "To cause to believe" (1983). although, evocation can be different in different spaces; in context of the *Naamghar*, the ritual arts evoke religious belief; the monks perform the ritual arts in order to maintain the sacredness, sanctity of the rituals in the *Naamghar*, and continue with the traditions of Vaishnavism.

However, on the stage the ritual arts become mere dances, and devotional songs that represent, or recreate the 'real' belief and point towards something authentic, and yet the intention is not authentic itself. It is not the divine that is evoked on the stage but, the symbolic representation of the 'real'³⁰ that is evoked - as its double. This space of the stage is the profane space (Mircea Elide, 1957) as it is unreal or pseudo real where belief is played out or performed. This performance space includes both female and male artists, along with monks who have partially relocated themselves outside the *Satra* in search of alternate careers such as – dancers, artists, scholars, and educators.

7. Dancing, or reaching out to God? : Reminiscence of a Ritual Post-classicization of the form

As the ritual dances of the Vaishnavite monasteries relocated to the proscenium stage, the female dancers became the flag bearers of the form. The all-male form got transformed into a dance form with the women performers at its centre. An already institutionalized form gets co-opted into its second phase of institutionalization with the dances getting transferred out of the *Satras* and recognized as a 'classical' form by SNA. In this shifting and changing of Sattriya dance; the newly constructed form has to continuously prove itself, while the 'old' form must cope with the 'new' in order for the two genres to exist simultaneously in the socio-cultural space. I would argue that the relationship between the old ritualistic form and the new performance-oriented form is not only of simultaneous existence but also a symbiotic one, where the old form receives publicity and visibility – a reverse acculturation happens within the *Satra* which has increased career options for the monks as teachers, performers/ practitioners. The new form on the other hand, has had

a range of practitioners who in effect, try to create the 'traditional' for the audience.

Subsequently, after its classical recognition, *Sattriya Nritya* has evolved in many different ways; competing, representing and maintaining its status among the seven other classical dances. In the process, the ritual dances inside the *Satra* have not remained untouched. In order to be more popular, more widely acceptable and more available for generating economy through tourist consumption, the ritual arts are changing rapidly. The naturalization of the performative elements of the stage has created more emphasis on performance than on the actual ritual process. The dance form moves from one space (*Satra*) to another (stage) and back to the *Satra*. The monk, the inheritors of the *Sattriya* dance in *Satra* accepts the 'female body' to receive and revive it; the 'body' then becomes both the initiator and recipient of the cultural evolution and processes of classicization. Again, the monks appropriate the classical dance of the stage, and gradually take them back to the *Satra* format. This reverse acculturation is the result of the insecurities that the neo-liberal market economy creates. This economy thrives through tourism and internet trends and expectations; it disenfranchises traditional practitioners, and creates obscure definitions of what is authentic and traditional. Therefore, it is these uncertainties that drive the community of monks to adapt certain crafts and formats of the stage and bring it back to the *Satra*, and be relevant and be able to compete against the new and glamorous form and its practitioners. However, there are internal committees in *Satra* for safeguarding the sacred aspects of rituals and customs. These committees work towards warranting the essential elements of a ritual presentation are not corrupted. These include timing, music and beat, lyrics of the songs, gestures and footwork etc. When a monk performs outside in a secular setting, the committee guarantees his performance respects the *Satra* guidelines. If he is found tampering with them, he is held accountable and has to pay certain compensations.³¹

In recent years, many young monks have moved out of the *Satra* to pursue higher education, alternative careers. They are exposed to the art world outside the *Satra*; a world of glamour and recognition as artists, along with funding and scholarship. Moreover, with social media opening up alternate platforms the monks are able to expand their art practices and make them accessible to new viewers, the Gen Z, and the millennial, are attracting more viewers

and followers. While this young generation of monks are expanding their performance spaces, styles and themes, they try to hold on to their rituals, and ritual spaces, only partially opening them up for online viewership through live streaming of rituals and sharing videos and photographs of rituals. Through this complex process of holding on to some ritual elements and letting go of others, we see an evolution of a hybrid form of the *Sattriya* dance, which simultaneously exists in multiple spaces. It is available inside the *Satra*, on the stage, and on the internet as ritual dance partially available to online viewers, classical dance on the stage, online festivals, workshops, and as music videos based on the *Sattriya* dance for online consumption. This evolution of the *Sattriya* dances is inevitable in a world which is governed by social media.

The hybrid form that *Sattriya* dance is acquiring is necessary for its survival in the 21st century preoccupied by the internet in which the audience is the receiver. The form no longer remains solely the mode of worship oriented towards God. It is now oriented towards its viewers who assume the position of 'God'. The road that the form is taking spreads out into different avenues as it emigrates from a sacred, restricted space accessible only to Vaishnavite monks of the *Satra* to a world of secular social media, accessible to billions of people.

8. Conclusion

Sattriya Nritya has trekked a long way, facing numerous challenges, encountering countless changes and modifications to reach a position of recognition in the national platform among the seven other classical dance forms. With the rise in cultural nationalism post India's independence, a generation of artists began to revive, revitalize, and sanskritize India's lost cultural heritage. We see the revitalization and sanskritization of *Sadir* or the dances of the *Devadasi* to become *Bharatanatyam*. Similarly, *Odissi* and *Kathak* have comparable journeys. But, as this paper has shown, *Sattriya Nritya* has had a different story. It was brought out of the monasteries and handed out to female dancers for the stage, and therefore its struggles have also been different. Tracing this non-linear journey of *Sattriya* dance from the monasteries to the proscenium stage and delineating its history is essential to understand the struggle of recognition and survival of this form. To do so, a detailed description of the process of classicization was necessary for this paper. As a

result, important aspects of the history, structure, vocabulary and pedagogy of the *Sattriya* dance have been highlighted along with the contributions of key personalities instrumental in its nation-wide recognition. As things stand now, multiple dancing bodies of *Sattriya* are constantly getting created which reform, restructure, and negotiate with the needs of particular space, time and audience. What will the form endure in future, and how it will survive the test of time, will be another remarkable journey to study.

Footnotes

1. Indian Classical Dances as a category draws their characteristics from a set of aesthetic properties, linkages to traditional textual-philosophical traditions, and rooted in the corporeal transfer of knowledge through *guru-shishya-parampara*. From a talk by Anurima Banerji at JNU 2017 – The Performative Politics of Indian Classical Dance
2. Kothari, Dr Sunil (ed.), *Sattriya : Classical Dance of Assam*, Mumbai : Marg Publications, 2013, 8-15.
3. Asante, W. Kariamu, "Commonalties in African Dance : An Aesthetic Foundation", Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (eds.), *Moving History/Dancing Cultures : A Dance History Reader*, Middletown, Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press, 2001, 144-152.
4. Author's conversation with Sri Druno Bhagawati at his residence in Maligaon, Sector I, Guwahati. 29/11/2017
5. Kothari, Dr Sunil (ed.), *Sattriya : Classical Dance of Assam*, Mumbai : Marg Publications, 2013. 14.
6. Author's conversation with Sri Druno Bhagawati at his residence in Maligaon, Sector I, Guwahati. 29/11/2017
7. Years later, Raseswar Saikia shared this incident with his daughter Ranjumoni Saikia as an anecdote. She also thinks that her father might have thought about the *Sattriya* dances in the long run and believed that for *Sattriya* to survive the test of time, it needs to be shared with women, who could keep this tradition alive by becoming its caretakers & nurtures. (Ranjumoni Saikia shared this during a conversation with the author at her residence in Hengerabari, Guwahati. 22/11/2017)
8. Sri Jogen Dutta Bayan, an erstwhile monk of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* who moved out of the *Satra* in the 70s narrated this in an interview with the author. 10/09/2021 at his residence in Majuli. Dr. Maheswar Neog also mentions about this act of begging by the monks in his book *Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaisnavas*. Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta 1982.

9. The Kamalabari *Satra* is one of the most prominent celibate *Satra* of the Neo-Vaishnavite order. It was established by Sri Badalpadma Aata, a disciple of Sankardeva. This *Satra* has two divisions,—Natun Kamalabari *Satra* and Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*.
10. Interviewee Sri Jogen Dutta Bayan spoke at length about how he was forbade from completing his schooling by senior monks at the *Satra* and disheartened he even eloped to Barpeta for a few days. Finally, under the request of his mother and senior monks he left his schooling and completely focused in learning the *Satra* arts. He shared that even to date many monks from older generations still believe that learning the *Satra* arts is enough to make a living and lead a comfortable life, without ever stepping in a formal school. 10/09/2021.
11. Pranavsvarup Neog, “Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Borbayan”, Special Issue, *Nartanam : A Quarterly Journal of Indian Dance*, XIII(2), April-June 2013.
12. Kothari, Dr. Sunil (ed.), *Sattriya : Classical Dance of Assam*, Mumbai : Marg Publications, 2013, 12.
13. Author’s conversation with Sri Jogen Dutta Bayan at his residence in Majuli. 10/09/2021 Jogen Dutta Bayan was a part of the contingent of performers to Indonesia in 1975. There were 16 performers in the group which comprised of monks from both Natun and Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, and dancers Sharodi Saikia and Deepali Das. He narrated the grandeur of the performance; how they had rehearsed for almost a month in Kolkata for this performance, and their presentation was received very well in Indonesia. They performed Rambijoy Bhaona which had to be cut short by quite some time to fit in the allotted time slot. Along with this there was Gayan Bayan performance, Dasaavatar performance by Bijoy Krishna Goswami of Natun Kamalabari *Satra*, dances like—Chali and Jhumura were also performed by Karuna Bora of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*. Raseswar Saikia played the role of Biswamitra in Rambijoy Bhaona, and Jogen Dutta himself played the role of Sutra Dhar. Bihu, one of the folk dances of Assam was also performed.
14. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was one of the prominent cultural figures of Assam. He is known for his contributions in the fields of music, dance, painting, literature as well as for his political activism. It is because of his multi-faceted talents that people of Assam called him Kalaguru (the master of the arts).
15. The starting of Sangeet Sattria, training and Pedagogy (Sangit Sattrar Arambhoni aru Sikhadanor kotha) written by Raseswar Saikia Borbayan — “In 1967 when we came to Guwahati, The institute Soumarajyoti Kala Parishad invited us to a Sattriya dance and music training institute at Parbati Prasad Bhawan. In this institute, we performed Ankiya Bhaona -

Rambijoy. Before the starting of Bhaona, Dr. Maheswar Neog asked us to perform a few Maati Akhara in front of the audience. We did around 15 selected Maati Akhara and with the advice of Sri Jatin Goswami, we included Bol/Bajna in the Maati Akhara and performed. After this performance the trend of playing Bol/Bajna along with Maati Akhara started.” – published in Korapat. (This paragraph is orally translated from Assamese to English for the purpose of this paper only. Information shared by Jatin Goswami during interview with the author on 30/10/2017)

16. Sri Jatin Goswami is a dancer, choreographer, and a prominent exponent of Sattriya Nritya.
17. Details shared by Sri Jatin Goswami (Interview, at his residence in Guwahati. 30/10/2017)
18. Letter by Governor S. K. Sinha to the President of India, 8 Nov. 1998 https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm
19. Arshiya Sethi, *An overlay of the political : the recognition of Sattriya, WHY DANCE?* a symposium on the multiple trajectories of Indian dance tradition. Seminar. 676, 2015. http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/676/676_arshiya_sethi.htm
20. Assam Accord and its Clauses, Clause 6 – Constitutional, Legislative and Administrative Safeguards <https://assamaccord.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-accord-and-its-clauses>.
21. In the essay Cultural Nationalism in a Multi-National Context: The Case of India, 2006 Subrat K. Nanda explains multi-nationality in a country as, “a country which consists of people belonging to culturally diverse nationality groups. Such countries all over the world experience differing levels of identity, which, in turn, create competing claims upon the loyalty of their people. Normally, in these countries, people’s loyalty to their overarching nation/state competes with the loyalty to their respective nationalities. Stated differently, people in such cases wish to cling to their civil-political identity without shedding or tampering their specific cultural identity and the notion of ancestral homeland”..... “In other words, in the multi-national states, nation emerged as a political entity at the common political level and as a cultural entity at the specific cultural level”.
22. Subrat K. Nanda “Cultural Nationalism in a Multi-National Context : The Case of India”, *Sociological Bulletin*, 55(1), January-April 2006, 24-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620521>
23. Jagannath Mahanta, *The Sattriya Dance of Assam : An Analytical and Critical Study*, Guwahati : Sattriya Kendra, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2016. 265.

24. Details shared by Mridusmita Das Bora. (Conversation with her at her residence in Guwahati 26/02/2018).
25. Conversation with Jadab Borah, Assistant Professor at Dibrugarh University and a monk from Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, 26/6/2017.
26. Ibid.
27. Interview with Sri Jatin Goswami at his Maligaon residence, Guwahati. 30/10/2017.
28. Conversation with Mallika Kandali at her residence in Guwahati, on 19/7/2017.
29. Bhupen Hazarika, widely known as Sudha Kontho of Assam, was a musician, singer, filmmaker and politician. He was one of the most prominent personalities of Assam. His songs and music are marked by the themes of humanity and universal brotherhood.
30. Mircea Eliade elaborates that the profane space is the unreal or pseudo real space. He writes that sacred space in primitive society is equivalent of power and reality and hence, naturally, man wanted to be in its proximity; participate in the reality and be merged with power.
31. Sir Jadab Bora Bayan who is a monk in the Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* and a professor at the Dibrugarh University, Assam shared this anecdote. He believes these measures are necessary in order to keep the ritual tradition alive Interview at Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* Majuli, 12/09/2021.

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