

The Sattriya Music of Assam

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Introduction: The Sattria Institution at a Glance

“Where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God, where nine-fold *Bhakti* prevails, that supreme place adored by Gods and Vaishnavas is called a *Sattria*” - Bhatta Deva.(Quoted in ‘Shankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam’ - Dr. Maheswar Neog.)

In Sanskrit literature, the term *Sattria* implies a sacrifice performed by an assembly of sages lasting for a year or more. Likewise, the *Sattria* institution of Assam resembles to a certain extent, the Buddhist *Matha* institution of the medieval period. In the early stages of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* Movement in Assam, the word *Sattria* was used to denote a religious sitting or association where the *Bhagavata* was read. In their works on *Vaishnava* Movements in Assam, two eminent Assamese scholars and researchers, Dr. Maheswar Neog and Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarmah respectively, also opine that the term *Sattria* seems to have been adopted from the *Bhagavata Purana*.

There were no permanent structures of a *Sattria* earlier than the 18th Century. According to Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarmah, the *Sattria* institution was instituted by *Srimanta Shankardeva*, the greatest exponent of *Bhakti* cult in Assam. During the time of *Madhavdeva* and *Damodardeva*, his two disciples, *Sattria* institution became a permanent and regular feature and took a monastic form. In the later part of the 17th Century, the *Sattria* institution acquired royal patronage and this offered the *Sattria* a sound economic footing.

A permanent *Sattr*a consists of a *Namghar* or a *Kirtanghar*, which is the central prayer hall of the *Sattr*a; a *Manikuta* attached to the central prayer hall on the eastern side, where the idol of the Deity is kept on a decorated *Simhasana*; a *Pada-silar-ghar*, a small structure adjacent to the *Manikuta*, to keep the relics of the early preachers and also foot impressions of early religious heads; a *Batsora*, a small open gate at the entrance of the *Sattr*a, where the visitors are received and then escorted into the interior of the *Sattr*a; and finally, rows of residential huts known as the *Hatis* surround the entire enclosure of the *Sattr*a. The clerical devotees live in the *Hatis*.

The residents of a *Sattr*a are the *Adhikara* - the supreme religious head; the *Deka Adhikara* - the next supreme head and the heir to the *Adhikara*; and the *Bhakat* or *Bhaktas* (the monks). The *Bhaktas* hold ecclesiastical office of the management, observe celibacy and perform the religious tenets and practices within the campus. They are recruited in their childhood from the villages and trained to be the *Bhaktas*. Lay devotees or *Shisyas* generally live in the villages or the towns and lead a family life.

Then there is the *Deuri* or the *Bardeuri*, the in-charge of the *Manikuta*; the *Bhagawati*, the in-charge of the devotional functions held every day, also known as *Namlogowa* in some *Sattr*as of Upper Assam; the *Pathak*, the reader and the interpreter of the *Bhagavata Purana*; the treasurer called the *Dhanbharali* and the in-charge of the store, the *Chaulbharali*. The contact between the disciples living in the villages and the towns and the *Adhikara* is managed through the *Rajmedhi*, the *Barmedhi*, the *Satola* and the *Pachoni*.

Majuli is one of the nerve-centres of *Sattriya* culture of Assam. In the 16th century, it was at *Majuli* of present Jorhat district (then known as *Dhuwahat*, *Ahom* territory) that Mahapurusha *Srimanta Shankardeva* met his foremost disciple and apostolic successor, *Madhavdeva* for the very first time. This event, referred to as *Manikanchan Sanyog* is the single most epoch-making event in the

history of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* Movement. It is said that Srimanta Shankardeva established the first *Sattrra* here by planting a Bilva tree and naming the place *Belguri*.

The Sattriya Music of Assam:

Srimanta Shankardeva, the founder of the *Sattrra* School of dance and music, was a well known *Vaishnava* saint and reformer of Assam. To propagate the *Mahapurusha* cult of *Vaishnava* religion among the *Tantra-cult* ridden Assamese folk, *Srimanta Shankardeva* introduced *Vaishnava* music, dance, dance-dramas and plays. He taught and explained the doctrinal truths through entertainment and dramatic performances consisting of music, dance and plays. It is the creativeness of *Srimanta Shankardeva*, the versatile genius, that for the first time the *Mridanga*, a prevalent musical instrument was replaced by the wooden or earthen *Khol*, an instrument typical of *Vrindavan*. He also introduced the *Bhortaal* (big Cymbal) and *Pati-taal*, (small Cymbal). The present day Assamese form of dance and music owes much to the master mind of *Srimanta Shankardeva*, who opened up new vistas. The devotional compositions - the *Bargeet* and the *Ankiya geets* are his greatest contribution to music. He also composed *metres* such as *Dulari*, *Chabi* and *Pada*; Hymns such as *Totaya* and *Bhatima* (Prasastis of God Vishnu or Krishna, Guru or king) etc.

From the time of *Srimanta Shankardeva*, music has been considered one of the important devotional functions in the *Sattrra* institution held every day. The *Sattrra* musicians, selected from among the *Bhaktas*, give musical performances and dance and dramatic representations during regular services. These musicians are called *Gayana-Bayanas*. The *Gayana-Bayanas* include drummers (*Khol* Players), singers and cymbal players. The *Natuwas* (dancers and actors) present dance and dramatic performances. The chief *Natuwa* is known as the *Sutradhara*. A *Sutradhara* is a trained musician right from his childhood and the most

intelligent and literate person of the village. Just before the recitation of the *Nandi* (an *Invocation* or the prayer song in honor of the Deity) by the *Sutradhara*, a group of *Bayanas* present *Bar-Dhemali* by playing on the *Khol* (Mridanga) and the *Taal* (Cymbal). In addition to the *Bar-Dhemali*, there are two other *Dhemalis* (musical Preludes), *Saru* (minor)-*Dhemali* and *Nat-Dhemali*. With some *Dhemalis*, verses are also sung. These are known as *Ghosa-Dhemali*. In the *Ghosa-Dhemali*, the head musician displays *hasta mudras* to signify the different incarnations of Lord Vishnu and also meditation, salutations etc. and resorts to a brief *abhinaya*. With the *Ram Dhemali*, a group dance is performed in accompaniment with music and songs. In all, there are twelve *Dhemalis* held in the *Sattras*, even though, all of them are played and sung only on *Srimanta Shankardeva's* Death Anniversary.

The *Sattras* School of music is tremendously rich in its tune and variety. The two variations tuned to Ragas are the *Bargeet* and the *Ankiya Geet*. The songs particularly used in the plays are the *Ankiya Geets*. These two types of songs are sung in particular Ragas and the name of the Raga fixed for a particular song is mentioned before each song. The *Ankiya Geets* are sung in particular talas and the names of the talas are also mentioned. However, *Bargeets* are sung in no particular talas. A shrewd singer can sing the same song in different talas.

A *Bargeet* can be compared to a *Prabandha* or Dhrupad style of singing. To some extent, it has some characteristics similar to the Dhrupad style such as the four parts – *Asthayi*, *Antara*, *Sanchari* and *Abhogi*; characteristics like masculinity, slow tempo, gravity, religiousness etc. The *Bargeets* are religious in content and devotional in purpose like the Hindi Bhajans of North India and the Marathi *Abhangas* of Tukaram. Most of the compositions of *Bargeet* relate to the childhood of Lord Krishna. In its musical execution, the *Ankiya Geets* are similar to the *Bargeet*, except the fact that the *Ankiya Geets* are always accompanied with tala and are particularly used in the dramas. At the end of the

second line of each *Bargeet* or *Ankiya Geet*, the syllable *Dhrum* is placed, which indicates that the first two lines of the song constitute the *Dhruva*, and are to be repeated from time to time in course of singing the succeeding verses, called *Pada*, which consist of a few couplets. In the couplets we generally find the name of the writer.

Srimanta Shankardeva and his eminent disciple *Madhavdeva* enumerated the following Ragas in their *Bargeets* and *Ankiya Geets* – *Asowari, Dhanashri, Sri, Gauri, Malhar, Nat-Malhar, Suhai, Mahur, Basant, Kedar, Ahir, Kalyan, Bhupali, Sindhura, Kanhara, Kau, Belowar, Barari, Bhatiyali, Poorvi, Gandhar, Nat, Shyam, Kamod, Shyamgara, Kau-Kalyan Sindhura, Sri-Payar, Tur-Bhatiyali, Sri-Gauri, Tur-Basant, Sri-Gandhar, Kau-Kalyan* and *Mahur-Dhanashri*.

The talas used are – *Ektali, Parital, Jauti, Unjauti, Rupak, Bisam, Dharamjauti, Rup-Ganjali, Dahbari, Sutar-Ganjali, Bar-Bisam, Mathjauti, Rasak, Sutikala or Talcuta, Athtala, Domani, Yatiman, Kharman* and *Mansok*.

A copy of manuscript on Timing in Music by one *Subhankar Kavi*, probably written between the 13th to 17th century and discovered in the *Aauniati Sattra*, and edited and reviewed by Dr. Maheswar Neog, states that good music consists of the union of singer, instrumentalist, dancer, timing on Cymbal and Mridanga:

*“Gayaka Vadaka Nrityakarta Kanthitala,
Mridanga sahite pancha sangeet bhala.”*

The writer of the script has explained twenty-six talas namely, *Vipancha, Satapancha, Arayati, Pratimatha, Dasatala, Rupak, Ektali (Vipula), Ektali (Chandrika) Ektali (Rama) or Dasawari, Bisama, Viraja, Domani, Athtala, Dhaja, Bar-Bisama, Dharamsoka, Viyati-Samata, Vitalari, Yati or Prauhri-Yati, Mathayati, Gunjala, Swartala, Matha, Sutikala, Thangyatata* etc.

The *Kamalabari Sattra* of the Jorhat district which seems to present the norm in the matter of Vaishnava music and dancing still possesses twenty-six

talas: *Ektala, Kharman, Sutikala, Dasbari, Domani, Dharamjauti, Vara-jauti, Vara-bisama, Saru-bisama, Paritala, Rupaka, Astola, Unjauti, Rup-Ganjol, Sutar-Ganjol, Raktatala, Mathjauti, Tak-tala, Virupa-tala, Brahmatala, Sarikhaniya, Khan-jauti, Tinimani, Sarimani, Pansmani* and *Dovaj*.

According to the *Ghatas* or the Bol-compositions, these talas have been classified and explained as *Laghu, Guru, Chat* and *Chapar* (stroke), *Ghat* (time-measure), *Kala* and *Ghatani*.

To Sum Up:

Srimanta Shankardeva employed various techniques to improve the *Sattriya* form of music. To ensure an effective communication with a larger mass through song, dance, masks, puppets, dialogue, theatre and stagecraft, he innovated an artificial language called *Brajavali* or *Brajabuli* - an amalgamation of Hindi dialects and Assamese, in which he and his disciples wrote the lyrics of the plays, the operettas and the songs. With his music, the dance and the drama, *Srimanta Shankardeva* united the various sects of Assam and established a universal social brotherhood. With this, Assam developed its own form of *Vaishnavism*, which is the predominant faith even today among the Hindus.

Today the *Sattriya* music of Assam has made its journey from the sanctified interiors of the *Sattras* to the spaces of the common folk, the stages outside the Indian mainland. *Sattriya Nritya* or *Sattriya Dance* is one among eight principal classical Indian dance traditions. Even then, its strict adherence to the principles of the *Sattras* and thereby maintaining its pure form is what makes the *Sattriya* music an integral part of the Assamese culture.

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