

Understanding the Unique Features of the Sattriya Tala System

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Abstract

Sattriya dance and music have a unique tala technique- which differs from both the North Indian i.e., Hindustani as well as the South Indian i.e., Karnataki tala techniques- particularly in the sphere of its practical use. Though the Bhatkhande style is followed while rendering notations of the Sattriya tala, there exist some fundamental differences between the Sattriya tala system and the Hindustani and Karnataki tala systems. The techniques applied in Sattriya tala are unique and not matched with any other Indian classical tala technique. In this paper, the author tries to bring out the uniqueness of the Sattriya tala system.



Key words: Sattriya dance, Sattriya tala, Hindustani tala, Karnataki tala etc.

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Introduction:

Sankaradeva, the great saint of medieval Assam, rejuvenated the entire environment by introducing Neo-Vaishnavism- a way to pray a single deity- 'Krishna' through 'Sravana' i.e., listening and 'Kirtana' i.e. congregational prayers. To spread his 'Ek Saran Naam Dharma', Sankaradeva created *Ankiya Naat* in 15th century for propagating Neo-Vaishnavism among the masses. It is worth mentioning here that Sankaradeva gathered vast knowledge during his long years of pilgrimage to the important religious places of India. Mixing this huge knowledge that he gathered from different religious places with his immense creativity, Sankaradeva created the whole gamut of *Sattriya* culture i.e. music, dance, drama, art & craft etc. His unique creation has been *Ankiya Naat*- which is full with music, dance and drama. The *Ankiya Naat* has been the seedbed of present *Sattriya* dance (J. Mahanta 2016, 44). Later, Madhabdeva- the chief apostle of Sankaradeva had introduced some more dance numbers which are independent in the sense that it can be performed independently outside *Ankiya Bhaona* (J. Mahanta 2016, 45). The *Sattriya* institutions of Assam took the lead in preserving and propagating this cultural tradition for centuries together. As an outcome of relentless effort by numerous numbers of monks as well as scholars, academicians and performers, *Sattriya dance* received recognition as a classical dance form of India in the year 2000.

However, the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha (one of the largest non-governmental organisation of North-East India) in Assam has been trying to designate this dance form as Sankari dance.

Sattriya dance and music has unique *tala* technique- which differs from both the North Indian i.e. *Hindustani* as well as the South Indian i.e. *Karnataki tala* techniques- particularly in the sphere of its practical use. Though the *Bhatkhande* style is followed while rendering notations of the *Sattriya tala*, there exist some fundamental difference between *Sattriya tala* system and *Hindustani* and *Karnataki tala* system. The techniques applied in *Sattriya tala* are unique and not matched with any other Indian classical *tala* technique. As for example, in *Sattriya tala* system, more than one *tala* is used in a single dance number. Again, in the *Hindustani tala* system same mnemonics are used in songs (Geeta), instruments (Badya) and dance (Nritya). But in *Sattriya tala* system, different mnemonics are used in songs (Geeta), instruments (Badya) and dance (Nritya).

The objectives of the present study have been-

- a) To find out the unique features of the *tala* used in *Sattriya* dance.
- b) To analyse the distinctive characteristics of *Sattriya talas* which are used in *Sattriya* dance
- c) To analyse the practical use of different *Sattriya talas* in songs and dance.

For the study, data has been collected from both primary as well as secondary sources. The primary data is being collected from *Sattriya* dancers, singers (Gayana) as well as *Sattriya* instrument players (Bayana). Moreover, primary data is also collected from noted experts in *Sattriya* culture. A personal investigation has also been carried out to get some primary data. The secondary data are collected from various books, journals, internet sources etc.

Tala: An Introduction to Indian Tala System:

Tala plays an important role both in music and dance. As Dance consists of sequences of body movements, *tala* makes these movements beautiful and as well as dynamic.

Tala, in Indian tradition embraces the time dimension of music, the means by which musical rhythm and form were guided and expressed. Generally, the generic name for rhythm patterns is called '*tala*'. It has been a 'rhythmic pattern' or 'time cycle' made up of a number of beats. 'Time cycle' implies precise location and length of a sound or silence. Thus, *Tala* refers to musical meter in classical Indian music as *Amor Kush* mentioned- "*Tala Kala Kriya Manam*" (Barthakur 2004, 21).

Narahari Chakraborty in his *Bhakti Ratnakar* mentioned that as the beauty of garland depends on beauty of flowers, attractiveness of dance depends on elegance of *tala*. ("*Nritya tala yukta, tala bina sudhi noi, Joisey korno dhara bina nouka toise hoi.*")

Sangeet Ratnakar, a classical text on Indian music and dance also mentioned about *taal*. It says that as the unit metre is used to measure length of an item, in music and dance *taal* is used to measure time. It says in the following words-

“*Talasthola protisthamiti dhatoghajye smrita,*
Gitang badyang totha nrityang jotasthale protisthitom.” (Barthakur 2013, 71)

Thus, *tala* has been an indispensable element of music and dance. It has been an ancient music concept which can be traced from the Vedic era. The *Samveda* mentioned *tala* as method of singing Vedic hymn.

The North Indian *tala* system: An introduction

In the last part of the eighteenth century and the initial years of the nineteenth century, a new chapter started in Indian music with the emergence of Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar in the field of North Indian music. Both the legend revolutionised the notation system by giving scientific treatment in it. Thus, a new notation system emerged which has become very popular as *Bhatkhande* style- following the name of Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. The style of notation developed by Vishnu Digambar Paluskar has come to be known as the Vishnu Digambar notation system. Table-1 shows the design of the Bhatkhande style of notation while Table-2 shows the design of Vishnu Digambar notation system.

Table-1

Bhatkhande style of notation		
Number	Name of <i>Anga</i> (part)	Symbol
1	Sam	X
2	Khali	0
3	Tali	2,3,4,5....
4	Vibhag	l
5	Matra	⌒
6	Abograha	S
7	Number of Matras	1,2,3,4,5.....

Table-2

Vishnu Digambar notation system		
Number	Name of <i>Anga</i> (part)	Symbol
1	Sam	1
2	Khali	+
3	EkMatra(Tala)	—
4	Dui Matra (Tala)	~
5	Adha Matra (Tala)	0
6	One fourth of one (Ek) Matra (Tala)	⌒ 1/4 th (use of ‘’ under each letter)
7	One eight of one (ek) Matra (Tala)	≡ 1/8 th (use of ‘’ under each letter)

8	One third of one (ek) Matra (Tala)	⌞	1/3 rd (use of ‘’ under each letter
9	One sixth of one (ek) Matra (Tala)	⌘	1/6 th (use of ‘’ under each letter

The South Indian *tala* system: An Introduction

The south Indian *tala* system is also known as *Karnataka tala* system. This system of notation is far complex then the Bhatkhande or Vishnu Digambar style of notation. The prime musical instrument used in this *tala* system has been *Mridanga*. In ancient times, there were all total 108 *talas* in this *tala* system. But presently, only seven (7) *talas* are found and are being used. These seven *talas* are known as ‘*Saptatala*’. However, each *tala* has five (5) *Jathis* and thus a total of thirty-five (35) *Jathis* are there in *Karnataka tala* system. The table-3 shows the name of the *Anga* (part or limb) as well as the number assigned to that *Anga* and the symbols used to identify the *Anga*. Table-3 shows the number and symbol assigned to different *Anga* in *Karnataka tala* system

Table-3 (Sarmah 2013, 122)

Number and symbol assigned to different *Anga* in *Karnataka tala* system.

<i>Anga, number assigned to the Anga and the symbols used identify the Anga in Karnataka tala system</i>			
No	Name of Anga	Number	Symbol
1	Anudrutam	1	⌞
2	Drutam	2	0
3	Loghu	4	
4	Guru	8	S
5	Plutam	12	Ś
6	Kakapadam	16	+

The Sattriya *tala* system: An introduction

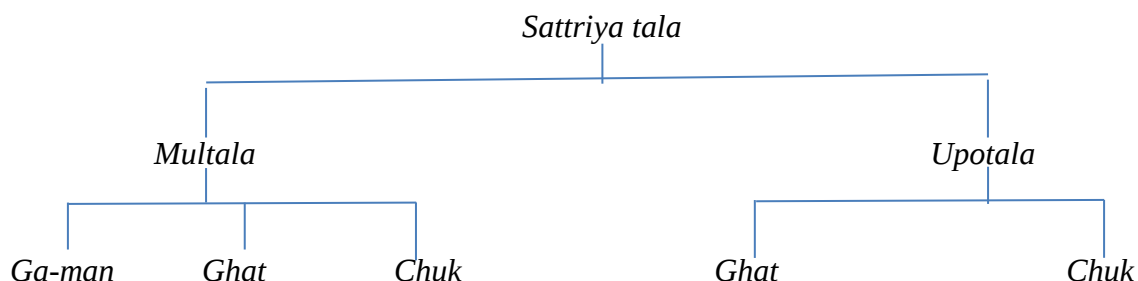
Sattriya dance and music have unique *tala* technique which was developed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdeva and other monks of later years. The *Sattriya tala* system differs from both the North Indian i.e. *Hindustani* as well as the South Indian i.e. *Karnataka tala* techniques- particularly in the sphere of its practical use. *Sattriya tala* has been classified into two types-

- 1) *Multala* (Basic *tala*)
- 2) *Upotala* (Sub *tala*)

Multalas (Basic tala) are those *talas* which are used in songs (geetas). Examples of *Multala* have been - *Pori tala*, *Ektala*, *Rupaktala* etc. *Multala* is further classified into three- *Ga-man*, *Ghat* and *Chuk*.

Upotala (Sub tala) are those *talas* which are often seen in the midst of songs (geetas). Example of *Upotala* are- *Thak*, *Birup*, *Dewaj* etc. *Upotalas* are further classified into two- *Ghat* and *Chuk*. The Figure-1 shows the classification of *Sattriya tala*-

Figure-1-classification of *Sattriya tala* (Bora 2021, 47)



For Example:

Multala:

Ek tala

Matra-24, Tali-4, Khali-4, Bibhag-8

Ga-man Part:

Matra -	1	2	3		4	5	6
Bol -	Tau	S	S		Dhei	Tat	Khiti
Symbol -	X				0		
Matra -	7	8	9		10	11	12
Bol -	Dau	S	Khiti		Ta	Dhi	Nak
Symbol -	2				0		
Matra -	13	14	15		16	17	18
Bol -	Dhei	S	S		Dhei	Tat	Khiti
Symbol -	3				0		

Matra -	19	20	21		22	23	24
Bol -	<u>Dau</u>	S	S		S	S	S
Symbol -	4				0		

Ghat Part:

Matra -	1	2	3		4	5	6
Bol -	<u>Tat</u>	<u>Ta</u>	<u>Khiti</u>		<u>Ta</u>	<u>Dhe</u>	<u>Nita</u>
Symbol -	X				0		

Matra -	7	8	9		10	11	12
Bol -	<u>Khiti</u>	<u>Ti</u>	<u>Tadhe</u>		<u>Ni-</u>	<u>Ta-</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	2				0		

Matra -	13	14	15		16	17	18
Bol -	<u>Dhe</u>	<u>Ne</u>	<u>Titau</u>		<u>Ta-</u>	<u>Dhe-</u>	<u>Niti</u>
Symbol -	3				0		

Matra -	19	20	21		22	23	24
Bol -	<u>Tau</u>	S	S		<u>Dhi</u>	<u>Na-</u>	<u>Dhei</u>
Symbol -	4				0		

Chuk Part:

Matra -	1	2	3		4	5	6
Bol -	<u>Khiti</u>	<u>Dher</u>	Khita		<u>Khiti</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	X				0		

Matra -	7	8	9	10	11	12
Bol -	<u>Dhi</u>	<u>Na</u>	<u>Khita</u>	S	<u>Ta-</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	2			0		
Matra -	13	14	15	16	17	18
Bol -	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	3			0		
Matra -	19	20	21	22	23	24
Bol -	<u>Dhina</u>	<u>Na</u>	<u>Khita</u>	S	<u>Ta-</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	4			0		

Upotala:*Thak tala* (Borah 2006, 282)

Matra-28, Tali-10, Khali-8, Bibhag-14

Ghat Part:

Matra -	1	2	3	4
Bol -	<u>Tadhe</u>	<u>Nita</u>	<u>Khiti</u>	<u>Dau</u>
Symbol -	X		2	
Matra -	5	6	7	8
Bol -	<u>Tata</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Jidhi</u>	<u>Nadhi</u>
Symbol -	0		3	
Matra -	9	10	11	12
Bol -	<u>Nau</u>	<u>Tadhi</u>	<u>Nau</u>	<u>Drik</u>
Symbol -	4		5	

Matra -	13	14	15	16
Bol -	Thei	S	Tat	Khiti
Symbol -	0		6	
Matra -	17	18	19	20
Bol -	Tadhe	Nita	Jidhi	Nau
Symbol -	0		7	
Matra -	21	22	23	24
Bol -	Tadhi	Nau	Tata	Tadhi
Symbol -	0		8	
Matra -	25	26	27	28
Bol -	Nau	Thei	Dhei	S
Symbol -	9		10	

Chuk Part:

Matra -	1	2	3	4
Bol -	Dher	Khita	Dher	Khita
Symbol -	X		2	
Matra -	5	6	7	8
Bol -	Khita	Khita	Dher	Khita
Symbol -	0		3	
Matra -	9	10	11	12
Bol -	Dher	Khita	Dher	Khita
Symbol -	4		5	

Matra -	13	14	15	16
Bol -	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	0		6	
Matra -	17	18	19	20
Bol -	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	0		7	
Matra -	21	22	23	24
Bol -	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>
Symbol -	0		8	
Matra -	25	26	27	28
Bol -	<u>Dher</u>	<u>Khita</u>	<u>Dhei</u>	S
Symbol -	9		10	

It is to be mentioned here that though the *Sattriya* tradition has unique *tala* system, music as well as unique musical instruments yet *Bhatkhande* style of notations have been followed by it.

Dance and music are co-related and hence one cannot ignore music while focusing on dance. The *Sattriya* dance has come from *Ankiya Naat* and *Ankiya Naat* is full with music and dance. In *Ankiya Naat*, it is found that Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva created eight (8) *talas-Ektala*, *Poritala*, *Rupaktala*, *Jyotitala*, *Chutkalatala*, *Bishomtala*, *Dumanitala* and *Khormantala*. However, Maheswar Neog and Keshav Changkakoti in their work '*Sattriya Nritya Aru Sattriya Nrityar Tal*' mentioned that the Saint created nine (9) different *talas-Ektala*, *Poritala*, *Rupaktala*, *Jyotitala*, *Chutkalatala*, *Bishomtala*, *Dumanitala*, *Khormantala* and *Manchuktala*. In later years, Sri Sri Madhabadeva and other disciples of Srimanta Sankaradeva had created some more *talas*. At present, there have been thirty six (36) numbers of *Multala* (Basic *tala*) in Kamalabari *sattri* circle, fifteen (15) numbers of *Multala* (Basic *tala*) in Bardowa *Sattri* circle and eighteen (18) numbers of *Multala* (Basic *tala*) in Barpeta *Sattri* circle.

Uniqueness of *Sattriya tala*: An analysis

It is already mentioned that the techniques applied in *Sattriya tala* are unique and not matched with any other Indian classical *tala* technique. The uniqueness of the *Sattriya tala* system is analysed here in the following four spheres-

a) Use of more than one *tala* in a single dance number:

In *sattriya tala* system, more than one *tala* is used in a single dance number. As for example, both *Thukuni* and *Chutatala* are used in *Ramdani* part of the *Jhumura* dance while both *Joti* and *Pori tala* are used in *Mela* part of the *Jhumura* dance. Similarly, both *Thukuni* and *Chutatala* are applied in *Ramdani* part of the *Sali* dance while both *Ektala* and *Pori tala* are applied in *Geeta* part. Likewise, mixers of many *talas* are found in *geeta* part of both *Nadubhangi* and *Bahar* dance. The *Ramdani* part of the *Jhumura* dance can be cited as an example.

Thukuni Tala (Goswami 2020, 91)

Matra-3, Tali-2, Khali-0, Bibhag-2

Jhin		Thak	S
⏟		⏟	
X		2	

Chuta Tala (Goswami 2020, 92)

Matra-4, Tali-2, Khali-2, Bibhag-4

Khita		Jiddhei		Nadhei		Tani
⏟		⏟		⏟		⏟
0		X		0		2

b) Use of different mnemonics of a *tala* in different purposes:

Another peculiar feature of the *Sattriya tala* system is that different mnemonics of a particular *tala* are used in different purposes like songs (Geeta), instruments (Badya) and dance (Nriya). But in *Hindustani tala* system same mnemonics of a particular *tala* are used for all the purposes like- songs (Geeta), instruments (Badya) and dance (Nriya). As for example, when *Dharamjyoti tala* is used in the song ‘*Uddhabo Salahoo Gokule Lai*’, the mnemonics are as under-

Dharomjyoti Tala: (Changkakoti 2008, 226)

Matra-14, Tali-8, Khali-6, Bibhag-14

Mnemonics used in *Jhumura* dance (in Geetar part)

<u>Ratanita</u> X		<u>Khititak</u> 0		<u>Ratanita</u> 2		<u>Khititak</u> 0
<u>Ratanita</u> 3		<u>Khitidau</u> 4		<u>Khitadhei</u> 0		
<u>Dhinanita</u> 5		<u>Khitadhei</u> 0		<u>Dhinanita</u> 6		<u>Khitadhei</u> 0
<u>Dhinanita</u> 7		<u>Khitidau</u> 8		<u>Khit</u> 0		

Again, if the above mentioned same *tala* is used in *Bargeet* or *Ankiya geet*, the mnemonics gets change. However, the *matra*, *tali*, *khali* etc. remains same. As for example, the same *dharamjyoti tala* while used in song 'Koutuke Rukmini' of the Ankiya Naat 'Parijat Haran', the mnemonics gets change. The mnemonics is as under-

Dharomjyoti Tala: (Borah 2006, 234)

Matra-14, Tali-8, Khali-6, Bivag-14

<i>Ga-man</i> — <u>Takdhei</u> X		<u>Dididhei</u> 0		<u>Takdhei</u> 2		<u>Dididhei</u> 0
<u>Didididi</u> 3		<u>Dhei</u> 4		<u>Khit</u> 0		
<u>Takhitini</u> 5		<u>Tinitini</u> 0		<u>Takhitini</u> 6		<u>Tinitini</u> 0
<u>Khitatakhi</u> 7		<u>Tau</u> 8		<u>Khit</u> 0		

c) Same *tala*, different *matras* and *mnemonics* in different *Sattr* circles:

The unique character of *Sattriya tala* is seen in another sphere. The same *tala* has different *matra* as well as different *mnemonics* in different *Sattr* circles. As for example, the *poritala* is used in 14 *matras* in Bardowa *sattr* circle, while the same *poritala* is used in 21 *matras* in Kamalabari *Sattr* circle. Here are the mnemonics-

Bardowa Sattr circle:

Pori tala

Matra-14, Tali-4, Khali-2, Bibhag-6

<i>Ga-man</i> —	Tau Takhi X		Tau Khiti 2		TakDhei 0	S
	DheniTadhi 3		Nau S 4		S S S 0	

Kamalabari Sattr circle:

Pori tala

Matra-21, Tali-6, Khali-3, Bibhag-9

<i>Ga-man</i> —	Tau S X		Tau Khiti 2		TakDhei 0	S
	DheniTadhi 3		NauKhiti 4		TakDhei 0	S
	Dhina Tata 5		Tau S 6		S S S 0	

Thus, the above mentioned two mnemonics of the same *tala* used in two different *Sattr circles* show it clearly that in *Sattriya tala* system, the same *tala* has different mnemonics as well as used in different *matras* in different *Sattr circles*.

d) Unique Layakari in Sattriya tala:

In the mnemonics of *Sattriya* dance, a unique *layakari* is used named- ‘*Upakjuwa*’. The *layakari* in Hindustani *tala* system is known as ‘*Ardi laya*’. Sankaradeva used the term ‘*Upakjuwa*’ to give it a local flavour.

An Example of ‘*Upakjuwa*’ *layakari* used in *Mela* part of the *Rajaghariya Sali* dance is mentioned below-

Chutatala:

STanita		Khitanita		STanita		Khitanita
0		X		0		2

Conclusion:

Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Sri Sri Madhabdeva created *ankiya naat* in the medieval Assam to propagate *ek saron naam dharma*. It is already mentioned that the *ankiya naat* has been the seedbed of present *sattriya* dance of Assam (J. Mahanta 2016). In *ankiya naat*, Srimanta Sankardeva mixed everything- dance, drama and music. He developed a unique *tala* pattern- which is different from both *Karnataki* and *Bhatkhande* style. Sankardeva developed this unique *tala* system in order to give it a local flavour. Though Srimanta Sankardeva created only nine (9) numbers of *talas*, his disciples including Sri Madhabdeva added some more numbers of *tala* in the *sattriya* kitty. In this study, we have taken into consideration of the three prominent *thuls*- i.e. Kamalabari, Bardowa and Barpeta and it is found that altogether 69 numbers of *multalas* are being practiced in these *thuls*. It is also observed that all the characteristics- which are essential to get recognition as a *tala* system are present in *Sattriya tala* structure. It is worth mentioning here that *sattriya* dance has its own *tala* structure, peculiar style of singing and music playing- which has been a living tradition for nearly six hundred years. Though the *Bhatkhande* style is being used to render notation of the mnemonics of the *Sattriya tala*, it neither means that *Sattriya tala* pattern has proximity with the *Bhatkhande tala* pattern nor the present (*Bhatkhande*) style of notation should be taken as the ultimate way for rendering notations of *Sattriya talas*. It is necessary to understand the unique features of the *Sattriya tala* system and to use traditional knowledge created by both the *Gurus* in rendering notations of *Sattriya tala*.

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