

A Re-reading of *Sattriya* Dance forms of the Bardowa *Sattra* Circle: An Analytical Study of the *Sutradhari Nac*

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Abstract

The sattriya dance of Assam was created by the medieval Vaishnavite religious preacher Sri Manta Sankardeva and his disciple Sri Sri Madhava Deva within the fold of ankiya naat. He organized a show of his first drama 'Cihna-Yatra' in his birthday place Bardowa. However, in the present sattriya dance tradition, due to many reasons, the dances of the Kamalabari sattra circle have become very popular while the dances of the Bardowa sattra¹ circle have become obsolete. This paper attempts to analyze the sutradhari nac² of the Bardowa sattra circle. It is also tried to scientifically render notations of the rhythms of this dance number.



Keywords: *Sattra, Sattradhikar, Bardowa, Sutradhari nac, Ankiya nat, Bhaona, Notations.*

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1.1 Introduction:

The *sattriya* dance form evolved in the hands of the medieval vaishnavite saint Sri Manta Sankardeva and his chief apostle Sri Sri Madhava Deva for the propagation of *Bhakti* faith- which was the crux of the *Ek Saron Naam Dharma*. It was created within the fold of *Ankiya Nat*³- a unique creation of the Saint to spread New Vaishnavism in Assam. Though Srimanta Sankardeva evolved this dance style in a dance-drama form, Sri Madhava Deva and some other disciples of the Saint introduced a series of dance numbers other than dramatic (J. Mahanta 75). After the death of Srimanta Sankardeva, the Vaishnavite community of Assam was divided into four different *samhati* (schism) - *Purush Samhati, Nika Samhati, Brahma Samhati* and *Kala*

¹ Vaishnavite monastery.

² Dance of the Sutradhara.

³ A peculiar form of one act plays created by vaishnavite saints.

samhati (K. D. Goswami 1). Accordingly, the *sattras* institutions also got classified. Though there have been no fundamental differences between these four categories of *sattras* regarding the Ek Saron Naam Dharma's main ethos, some differences in rituals, music and dances have been seen. Generally, the mnemonics knit of dance numbers differ from *samhati* to *samhati*.

For centuries together, this dance form was preserved, practiced and propagated by the monks of the *sattras*. Over time, the monks of the *sattras* popularized this dance form and eventually came out from the *sattras*. Finally, in the year 2000, it got recognition as the classical dance of Assam.

1.2 Statement of the Problem:

Bardowa, the birth place of the Saint Srimanta Sankardeva, first witnessed the dramatic show '*Cihna-Yatra*'- the first play of Srimanta Sankardeva. The *Guru-carita*¹ of Ramacarana, *Guru-carit-katha*, as well as *Bardowa-guru-carita*, contains detailed accounts of Sankardeva's performance of his first dramatic show (J. Mahanta 20). These sources mentioned that Sankardeva manufactured '*khol*' (a musical instrument), face mask, '*Aria-Mohota*'² etc. in Bardowa to use it in '*Cihna-Yatra*'. It is also found that he prepared a group of artists like Sul Dhora Lakhan, Bolai Gayan, Bhima Bayan, etc. to sing songs and play music in '*Cihna-Yatra*' (K. D. Goswami 110).

All these indicate that a strong tradition of dance, drama and music prevailed in Bardowa during the days of Srimanta Sankardeva. However, after Sankardeva left Bardowa, it not only lost much of its glory but some invaluable dance and music numbers have also gone lost. According to Dr. Keshabananda Dev Goswami, one reason has been that the monks of the Bardowa *Sattras* are married and have family life due to which they couldn't devote much time in practice and propagation of dance, songs and music, etc. Thus, chiefly due to the lack of practice the '*Nadu Bhongi*', '*Jumura nac*', '*Behar nac*', '*Cali nac*' etc. of the Bardowa *sattras* along with the mnemonics of the '*Ramdani*' part had gone lost (K. D. Goswami 28).

However, another important point here is that the first attempt at rendering into the notation of all the rhythms that *sattras* uses in dances and dramas was made by Keshav Changkakati- as he was appointed by the Bargit Research Committee of the Assam Sangeet Natak Akademi to do this job (Neog v,vi) . This investigation ultimately led to the publication of the "*Sattriya Dances of Assam and their Rhythms*" (*Sattriya Nritya Aru Sattriya Nrityar Tal*)- which contains scientific notations of all the rhythms used in dances and dramas of the Kamalabari *Sattras*. However, no such attempt was made to scientifically render notations of *talas* used in music and dances of the Bardowa *sattras*. The absence of such holistic attempt perhaps may also be responsible for the decay of many dance numbers of the Bardowa *sattras*.

¹ The biographies of the Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva.

² Special arrangement made to provide light in the stage of *Ankiya Nat*.

Whatever may be the reason, in the present time the music, dance, songs, etc. of the Kamalabari *sattra* circle has become widely prevalent in comparison to songs, music, dance etc. of the Bardowa *sattra* circle. At present the *sutradhari nac* of the Kamalabari *sattra* circle has become very popular among dance lovers (Mahanta 117).

It is to be mentioned here that Dr. Jagannath Mahanta in his work “The Sattriya Dance of Assam” used the word ‘*sattra* circle’ to refer to different vogues of a particular dance number- which varies from *sattra* to *sattra*.

1.3 Objectives of the Study:

The present study attempts to understand and to analyse the *Sutradhari nac* of the Bardowa *sattra* circle which is still practiced in middle Assam region in Ankiya Bhaonas without scientific notations. Attempts have been made to scientifically render notations of all the rhythms used in the above-mentioned dance number.

1.4 Significance of the Study:

The significance of the study lies in the fact that it has been the maiden study that seeks to scientifically render notations of all the rhythms which are used in the *Sutradhari nac* of the Bardowa *sattra* circle. The study will benefit the learners to practice and perform this vogue of the *sutradhari nac* as a solo dance number outside Ankiya Naat.

1.5 Scope of the Study:

The scope of the present study has been confined to the *sutradhari nac* in general and the *sutradhari nac* in the Bardowa *sattra* circle in particular.

1.6 Methodology and data collection:

Historical, descriptive as well as analytical methods were used in this study. Extensive field surveys were conducted to find out the mnemonics of the dance number and to know about the style of presentation of the *sutradhari nac* of the Bardowa *sattrax* circle. Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study. Primary data were collected from the *Satradhikar*¹s of the Norua and Sologuri *Sattra* of Bordawa, the *bayana*²s as well as renowned old artists of the Bardowa area with an unstructured interview schedule. Participatory methods were also used to get firsthand knowledge about the rhythms of the dance number.

¹ Head of a Sattra.

² Who plays *Khol*.

1.7 Review of early works:

Some scholarly works have already taken place on various aspects of the Bardowa *sattras*. Some important works are as under-

Keshabananda Dev Goswami in his *Sattras Sanskritir Ruprekha* discussed about the unique style of dance, drama, and songs of the *Bardowa sattras*. The author specifically mentioned that the 'Mati-akhara' is known as 'natuanach' in *Bardowa*- which is performed in either 'ektal' or in 'chutatal'. However, the author discussed about the currently available dances only and mentioned that some dances of the *Bardowa sattras* have gone lost.

Jagannath Mahanta in his work *Sattriya Nritya Gita Badyar Hatputhi* tried to present the journey of *sattriya* dance from its inception to the complexities that it faces in present situation. This is a very comprehensive work- which deals right from *Mati-Akharas* (Physical exercises) to *Rasa, Raga, Tala, Hasta, Pada, Angika* etc. of *Sattriya* dance. The work also contains a list of various dances and *bajonas* (mnemonics) practiced in various *sattras* of Assam. However, the work gave simply an outline of the unique style of dance, music and instruments of the *Bardowa sattras* and didn't delve deep.

Narayan Chandra Goswami's *Sattriya Sanskritir Swarnarekha* has been a comprehensive work on every aspect of the age-old traditions followed by the *Sattras* institutions of Assam. This work not only contains discussions on various dance pieces like- *Jhumura, Nadubhongi, Cali Nac, Sutradhari Nac, Sri Krishnar Nac* etc. but also includes details discussion on dress materials as well as presentation style of above-mentioned various dance pieces. However, the work includes no specific discussions on dance tradition of *Bardowa sattras*.

Maheswar Neog and Keshav Changkakoti attempted to present the entire *sattriya* culture of Assam in their work *Sattriya Nritya Aru Sattriya Nrityar Tal*. The work not only throws light in to the origin and development of *sattriya* dance tradition, but also contains scientific notations of music and dances of the *Kamalabari Sattras* and *Auniati Sattras* of Majuli.

Jagannath Mahanta in his work *The Sattriya Dance of Assam: An Analytical and Critical Study* have narrated origin, growth and implications of the Neo-Vaisnavism movement in Assam. The work includes a chapter on performing aspects of *Sattriya* dance. In this work he used the word 'sattras circle' to indicate different vogue of a dance number.

Nirupama Mahanta in her work *Sattras Sanskritir Rup-chaya, Asar-riti aru Utsavanusthan* discussed in details about the four *samhatis*- where the author mentioned about the *Bardowa sattras* and its various traditions, celebrations etc. But it doesn't contain any in-depth analysis of the dance, music and mnemonics of the *Bardowa sattras*.

1.8 The *Sutradhari Nac* of the *Bardowa Sattras* circle:

The *Sutradhari* has been a prime character of any *Ankiya Naat*¹. In Assamese *Ankiya Naat*, the role of *Sutradhara* doesn't remain confined to the performance of the preliminaries alone like the role of *sutradhari* in Sanskrit drama. The *sutradhari* in Assamese *bhaona* has to play a comprehensive role in the sense that the *sutradhari* has to sing, dance and to work as stage director (J. Mahanta 115). According to Jagannath Mahanta, at present, there have been four or more vogues of *sutradhari nac* practiced in different corners of the state. He is of the view that the variant of the Bardowa *sattra* circle is practiced in middle Assam and in the north bank of the river Brahmaputra.

1.9 The Performing Style:

The dance consists of both pure dance and *abhinaya* i.e. acting. After the *Gayana-Bayan* left, the *Sutradhara* enters the stage under the *agnigarha*² in the midst of cheers calling for the victory of God and the sound of big drum called *doba* and *cymbals* called *Bhor tal*. The *sutradhara* presents himself in the stage under the *agnigarha* in kneeling and bowing position behind a curtain pulled by two monks. In *Bardowa*, *nandi sloka*³ is recited when *sutradhara* remains behind the curtain. After completion of recitation of *nandi sloka*, a song usually from the drama (*Anka geet*) is sung in *suhai raag*⁴- which is generally known as *suhai geet*⁵. In the last part of this *suhai geet*, the curtain is pulled. As soon as the curtain is pulled, the *sutradhara* slowly comes to the basic position- '*Ora*' and performs dance by the *bajana* i.e. patterned rhythmic syllables of *khol* set to *tala* (J. Mahanta 117). It is to be mentioned here that the *sutradhar* himself has to recite all these *sloka*, *bhatima* and *gita* (songs). While singing *bhatima*, the *sutradhar* puts extra emphasis on each fourth line and simultaneously the *bayana* plays *gheta*⁶ in *khol* and the *sutradhara* performs a jump in a particular position.

1.10 The notations of the mnemonics of the *sutradhari nac* of the *Bardowa sattra* circle:

The particular dance number was practiced and performed by *guru* late Bhuban Borah in various places of the Nagaon district of Assam without proper scientific notations. In some places of the middle Assam area, this dance number is still performed in *Ankiya Bhawnas*. However, in the absence of notations, the learners have been finding it difficult to present it as a single dance number before the audience. As a student of *guru* late Bhuban Borah, the investigator found the opportunity to learn this dance number. In the absence of the *guru*, some prominent *bayanas* like Hemaram Goswami, Hiranya Mahanta, and Debananda Dev Goswami -

¹ One act plays of Vaishnavite tradition.

² Entrance of the stage.

³ A particular type of hymn.

⁴ A peculiar raga in Satriya music.

⁵ Songs sung in *suhai raga* are referred as *suhai geet*.

⁶ A particular rhythm in *khol*.

Sattradhikara of the *Bardowa sattr* along with Padmashree Jatin Goswami- a prominent figure in sattriya dance, were consulted while rendering notations. For Jatin Goswami, in *Bardowa sattr* the *sutradhari* dance is performed in *Ek Tala*- which consists of 6 *Matra*¹s. The *Sattradhikara* of the *Bardowa sattr* and other *bayanas* also acknowledged this view and accordingly notations are rendered in 6 *Matras*. After rendering notations, the *bayanas* played *khol* according to the notations and a group of dancers headed by the investigator practiced and finally performed this dance number in *Bardowa sattr* on the occasion of the Holi celebration in the year 2021.

Tala: Ek Tala**Matra: 6**

<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dau</u> du		<u>Kh</u> it	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dau</u>		<u>Dau</u>	<u>Kh</u> iti	<u>Tak</u>
<u>Tau</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>Thei</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>
<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Thei</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>Thei</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dha</u> S
<u>Thei</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Dau</u>	<u>Dau</u>	<u>Ta</u>
<u>Tau</u>	<u>Kh</u> rir	<u>Kh</u> rir		<u>Kh</u> itau	<u>Tak</u>	<u>Tau</u>
<u>Tak</u>	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Dau</u>	<u>Tak</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhei</u>		<u>Ridd</u> hei	<u>Dad</u>	<u>Dau</u>
<u>Kh</u> rin	<u>Kh</u> rin	<u>Tak</u>		<u>Dhe</u> S	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Thei</u>	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Thei</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Thei</u>
<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Thei</u>	<u>Tau</u>		<u>Tau</u>	<u>Kh</u> rir <u>Kh</u> rir	<u>S</u>
<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak		<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak --2times
<u>Kh</u> it	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u> au		<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>S</u>
<u>Tak</u>	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u> au		<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>S</u>
<u>Rin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Dhe</u> idau	<u>Tau</u>	<u>Kh</u> iti
<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak		<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak
<u>Dhe</u> r	<u>Kh</u> ita	<u>Kh</u> ita		<u>Kh</u> it	<u>Dhin</u> a	<u>Dhin</u> a } 3times
<u>Dhe</u> r	<u>Dhin</u> a	<u>Dhin</u> a		<u>Dhe</u> iS	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u> }
<u>Tau</u>	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u> au		<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>S</u>
<u>Kh</u> it	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>Dhin</u> au		<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>S</u>
<u>Kh</u> itdhei	<u>Dau</u>	<u>Kh</u> iti		<u>Tak</u> dhei	<u>Dau</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>Ridd</u> hei	<u>Dad</u>	<u>Dau</u>		<u>Tad</u> hi	<u>Nak</u>	<u>Dhe</u> i
<u>Rin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Dhe</u> idau	<u>Tata</u>	<u>Kh</u> iti
<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak		<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak	<u>Tau</u> tak--4times
<u>Rin</u> dak	<u>Dhe</u> i	<u>S</u>		<u>Dhin</u> adhina	<u>Dhin</u> adhina	<u>Dhin</u> adhina
<u>Dhe</u> ikhitau	<u>Dhe</u> ikhitau	<u>Dhe</u> itata		<u>Kh</u> ita	<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au
<u>Rin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>	<u>Dhin</u>		<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au	<u>S</u>
<u>Ridd</u> hei	<u>Ridd</u> hei	<u>Ridd</u> hei		<u>Dau</u>	<u>Dhe</u> i	<u>Tata</u>
<u>Kh</u> ita	<u>Dhe</u> nita	<u>Dhin</u> au		<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>

¹ Small portion of a *tala*.

<u>Kh</u> ri <u>r</u> kh <u>i</u> tau	<u>Kh</u> ri <u>r</u> kh <u>i</u> tau	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>r</u> ik		<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>r</u> ik	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>r</u> ik	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> tau	} Ga- man ¹
<u>R</u> id <u>d</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> ad <u>d</u> au	<u>Kh</u> ri <u>r</u> kh <u>r</u> ir		<u>T</u> ak <u>k</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>Kh</u> it <u>d</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> ad <u>d</u> au	<u>Kh</u> ri <u>r</u> kh <u>i</u> r		<u>T</u> ak <u>k</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>Kh</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>		<u>Kh</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>T</u> at <u>a</u>	<u>Kh</u> it <u>a</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>R</u> id	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>a</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>Kh</u> it	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>T</u> at <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>	
<u>R</u> id	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>R</u> id		<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>R</u> id <u>d</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> au	
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>T</u> at <u>a</u>	<u>Kh</u> it <u>a</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>N</u> it <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	

(The Ga-man part will be played again and after that the following will be played.)

<u>R</u> in	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>Kh</u> it <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>T</u> at <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>r</u> ik	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>r</u> ik	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> tau
<u>R</u> in	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>		<u>R</u> in	<u>T</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>T</u> he <u>i</u>
<u>R</u> id <u>h</u> in <u>a</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>R</u> in		<u>T</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>T</u> at <u>akh</u> it <u>a</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> ik	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>D</u> au
<u>T</u> a <u>S</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> <u>S</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>G</u> ir <u>g</u> ir	<u>G</u> ir <u>g</u> ir	<u>G</u> ir <u>g</u> ir
<u>T</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>n</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>T</u> ad <u>h</u> in		<u>D</u> au	<u>T</u> at <u>ak</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> tau
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>T</u> at <u>a</u> <u>S</u>	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>		<u>T</u> at <u>a</u>	<u>T</u> ak	<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> -2 times
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u>	<u>Kh</u> it <u>au</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>D</u> h <u>a</u>	<u>T</u> he <u>i</u>
<u>D</u> e <u>i</u> dh <u>in</u>	<u>D</u> h <u>a</u>	<u>T</u> he <u>i</u> kh <u>it</u>		<u>D</u> he <u>n</u>	<u>Kh</u> it <u>a</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>D</u> he <u>i</u> <u>S</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>		<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>S</u>

1.11 Conclusion:

Though many dance numbers of the Bardowa *sattra* circle have become obsolete, some manuscripts are still available that contain mnemonics of some dance numbers. Rendering notations of the mnemonics proves to be helpful to practice and therefore preserve the dance. If in-depth studies are made, some more dance numbers can be revived.

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Note: ¹ *Ga-man* means the mnemonics which are played multiple times in a dance or music.