

**RELIGION, STATE AND NATION:
ASSAM'S SATTRAS AND THEIR DANCE**

by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**RELIGION, STATE AND NATION: ASSAM’S SATTRAS AND THEIR DANCE**”, being submitted by **Arshiya Bawa Sethi** to the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Humanities and Social Sciences, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her. She has worked under my guidance and supervision and has fulfilled the requirements for the submission of the thesis.

The results contained in this thesis have not been submitted in part or in full to any other university or institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about Sattriya, the ritual dance of the Vaishnav monasteries of Assam, a Northeastern state of India. Because of the fact that the dance and its ideology were socially integrative in function, it became reflective of the cultural identity of the Assamese people. The thesis revisits the five-century-old history of the neo-Vaishnav faith called *Ek Saran Naam Dharam* founded by Srimanta Sankaradeva (1469- 1568), at the cusp of the 16th century and the institution of the *sattrā*, or monastery, where the art was born, nurtured, practiced and transmitted. Lying between the temporal and the spiritual worlds, the *sattrā* is a liminal space, where dance is used as ritual and as part of its evangelical programme.

Though almost 500 years old, this dance was recognized formally as an Indian classical dance, only in 2000, with which it acquired a state-sponsored stage life in addition to its life as a ritual sanctioned by custom. Thus it inhabits two worlds and lives a dual life. Today because of binary pulls from differing agendas, the dance has a near schizophrenic existence often demanding uneasy adjustments and compromises.

Through a study built on a diversity of sources, both in the field and in the archives, using the field view and the book view, this thesis, in answering the research question “How did a ritual dance of Assam become, over the years, such a strong signifier of regional cultural identity”? explores the links between politics and the dance, in the light of the different contexts of patronage over the centuries. It studies specifically the role of the modern nation state in this transformation, which is of special interest given the background of the Ahom patronage. With the ethnographic present as the starting point, it looks retrospectively at how this little known dance form, once the

exclusive preserve of rural, male, monk dancers, transformed into its present status as a concert performance, danced largely by urban women, on the secular stage.

It also seeks to demonstrate why the faith gave performance a prominent ritual role, endowing it with evangelical power. It highlights the contestations between this new faith and different religions and political groups in Assam, not just in its early years but through its existence. This contextualization is a prerequisite to understanding the landscape in which the neo-Vaishnav movement came into being as the ‘Big Idea’ of the time. Because some of its novel features, ideology and practices appeared threatening to the established religious, social and political orders, its journey was chequered, especially as it was caught in the uneven patterns of patronage from the Ahom royalty. For a variety of political benefits that came unexpectedly to them, thanks to the ideology of this faith, the Ahom kings institutionalized support to select sections of the neo-Vaishnav movement. This support allowed the *sattras* institutions the leisure and resources to pursue the performative practices, developing them into works of fine artistry. In these performances, the performer became a living text and the context of his sacred art provided the matrix of meaning.

The *sattras* kept alive the cultural tools, and provided the environment, to ensure inter-generational continuation of cultural values, skills and a supporting lifestyle. The very way of life in the *sattras*, with the duties, daily rituals, and the practice of arts, crafts and performance by the monks, is built into the regular schedule. The ideological, corporeal and locational contexts, centers the ideal of *bhakti* (devotion) to which life and thought at the *sattras* subscribed, and which informed the nature, text and didactic context of performance. The multiple codes of covert communication, and the overt messages of the dramatic narratives and songs, in the ritual of

performance, were all examples of encrypting *bhakti* on the body and reinforcing it in thought a vibrant living cultural tradition.

In its practice, the dance of the *sattras* incorporated the challenge of mastery of multiple arts that included i) multiple performance skills, ii) artistry that covered both gender roles, and iii) the practice of art without ego. It was made possible through a training of great discipline, personal, spiritual and artistic, which was more a way of life and worship. As this particular dance form is ‘non-texted’, teaching and pedagogy has been through oral transmission, and memory has been the key-conserving factor.

However, in the years after independence, the *sattras* themselves underwent a triple impoverishment, that included the loss of local status, loss of lands and a loss of cultural property, in the wake undoubtedly of modernity, but definitely with the active agency of unfavourable state policies, that failed to recognize their role as cultural crucibles. This role was central to the creation of the Assamese identity, for Assam was a mosaic of many ethnicities which could have remained fragmented, were it not for the fact that the neo-Vaishnav ideology, reinforced by the *sattras* and their artistic practices, served an integrative function and created the Assamese people out of the many ethnic groups that called Assam home. One of the most significant laboratories in medieval Assam to develop the Assamese language were the *sattras* a seminal source of ongoing literary activity, which included the generation of literary texts for performance. Language is an essential aspect of Assamese identity. Colonialism had imposed Bengali on Assam, and encouraged demographics to change, which had compromised the sense of identity and self. The Assamese reasserted their cultural identity through literature, history, and Sattriya culture.

After independence, the influx of refugees from Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, falling socio-economic indicators, lack of investment and infrastructure development,

balkanization, ‘Cinderella’ treatment within the region and internal and external security tensions, became reflective of the neglect of Assam in the national paradigm, which fed Assamese sub-nationalism. A large-scale student protest broke out, with all signs of escalating, when on 15 August 1985 in Delhi, the Government of India, and the Government of Assam signed the Assam Accord, with representatives of the students groups. Article Six of the Accord, promised “to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.”

Within Assam, the dance was already recognized as a signifier of state identity. Continuous efforts had been made since the first decade of India’s independence, to have their dance recognized as classical, and through it, their identity recognized nationally. In the spirit of the Assam Accord, on 15 November 2000, more than four decades after it had first made its case, the dance of the *sattras* was recognized as a ‘major dance tradition’ of India. It was a classic appeasement effort, driven less by artistic dimensions and more by political strategy. In the process the dance was objectified.

The commonly subscribed binary of classical and folk, or even the amorphous term of ‘major dance tradition’, is irrelevant in the case of Assam, because Sattriya is a living tradition. So while many in Assam look upon this as another milestone of identity assertion, implicit in this ‘recognition’ is an urgent need to correspond to canons of classicism, a pattern which other dances of India have employed in their journey towards national recognition. In the process, much of what is uniquely Assamese in the form, most of its old vernacular glory, and a considerable part of the living tradition of the *sattras*, has been put at risk. Already noticeable are marked changes in the dance, its agenda, traditional sites of practice and its practitioners. Richard

Schechner's theories of performance as 'restored behavior' constitute the theoretical model adopted to study this exciting 'living laboratory' aspect of Sattriya.

Among the recipients of the cultural wealth of the *sattras*, in recent years, have been the many women dancers who thronged the cultural scene, soon after the stigma against women dancing, receded as a result of the extension of women's choices, and in the face of the modern nation's twin processes of what Amrit Srinivasan calls "reform and revival" of the dance. That this links to the "reform and revival" experience of other dances is already well documented in an impressive body of academic work produced by Indian and international scholars. It also allows for a comparison of the circumstances of two best-known sacred performers from India, the *devadasi* and the monk, taking forward the influential body of work by Srinivasan and others. Though, like the *devadasi*, the monk was a dedicated sacred performer, accepting sexual restrictions as a mark of his dedication, he was fortunate to have avoided the stigma associated with the *devadasis*, a relief that probably emanated from his gendered position. This same gendered position resulted in his marginalization in the scheme of the new dispensation.

This pattern of the marginalization and disenfranchisement of traditional communities, and a simultaneous encouragement and nurturance of new practicing communities, while being common to most nationally recognized dance forms, causes an irrefutable fracture in the legacy and history of performance, which no amount of manipulation of memory can airbrush. As a result, today, Sattriya exists between worlds and has a schizophrenic life, being the art of a sacred space, with an agenda of self-negation and spiritual promotion at one level, and on the other, pursuing a secular, self promoting agenda. In this dichotomy, increasingly, it is the voice of the

female dancer, relatively a new entrant in the practice of this dance, which speaks for it.

Sattriya reveals an inward and outward looking life, beyond the national recognition. At one level the *sattras* are reinventing, re-energizing and revitalizing themselves, reaching out to bring the marginalized ethnic communities of Assam once again into the fold, and consciously re-claiming their position in the social and cultural life of Assam. At another, it is creating a global footprint with a presence, on concert stages, in museums and universities overseas.

This research reveals that today Sattriya is a ritual in its sacred spaces, and a signifier of a unique cultural identity on the regional, national and international stages, but does not follow a homogenized practice across its various locations.

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RESUME OF THE AUTHOR