DESI AND MARGI INTERPRETATION IN SATTRiya NRITTYA

KRISHNA TAMULI

ABSTRACT

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement started by the saint-scholar-composer-artist Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) also ushered in a cultural resurgence with flowering of all arts in 15th-16th centuries in Assam. The Sattriya Dance of Assam is a living tradition and is performed in the monasteries called Sattras for several centuries as a ritual performance.

In the contemporary time the Sattriya dance is in parallel performed in the Sattras as a medium of worship and also as a performing art on the stage outside the Sattra premise. Like other classical dance forms, the Sattriya has all the aspects of angika and abhinaya which are mentioned in many old treatises.

Sankardeva propagated a form of Vaishnavite faith known as Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nama-Dharma, or Mahapurusia dharma, devoted to a single god, Krishna, and stressed upon unqualified devotion to Him. He spread the liberal and humanistic doctrine of bhakti in Assam. The religious system of Sankardeva is monotheistic and the worship of deities other than Krishna is strictly prohibited.
Sattriya Dance - A Historical Outline:

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement started by the saint-scholar-composer-artist Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) also ushered in a cultural resurgence with flowering of all arts in 15th-16th centuries in Assam. The Sattriya Dance of Assam is a living tradition and is performed in the monasteries called Sattras for several centuries as a ritual performance.

In the contemporary time the Sattriya dance is in parallel performed in the Sattras as a medium of worship and also as a performing art on the stage outside the Sattra premise. Like other classical dance forms, the Sattriya has all the aspects of angika and abhinaya which are mentioned in many old treatises.

Sankardeva propagated a form of Vaishnavite faith known as Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nama-Dharma, or Mahapurusia dharma, devoted to a single god, Krishna, and stressed upon unqualified devotion to Him. He spread the liberal and humanistic doctrine of bhakti in Assam. The religious system of Sankardeva is monotheistic and the worship of deities other than Krishna is strictly prohibited.

Sankardeva used all audio-visual and performing arts to spread the neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by him. He travelled far and wide to propagate the new faith.

A prayer hall called Namghar or Kirtan-Ghar was built at each place where Sankardeva camped and preached. Performance of music, drama and dances and recitations of his literary texts were held there to invoke devotion in his followers. After Sankardeva's death, a permanent organisation in the form of the Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya Sattra started taking shape as a repository of the fruits of the movement and an institution for their pursuit and preservation.

Simultaneously, architectural development also happened to sustain the institution, with Madhavdeva establishing a sattra at Barpeta and Damodardeva, another disciple of Sankardeva, starting one at Patbauisi. Their apostles set up similar institutions at different places. Typically, each sattra has a large prayer hall, where monks perform various rituals every day. On the four sides of the namghar are rows of huts for accommodating the monks. The house of the sattradhikar, or head of the monastery, is usually situated in one of the rows. The namghar, built with available now materials of Assam was decorated with sculptures made of woods and bamboo works which made it a unique piece of architecture. Each namghar was from the very beginning a hub of various performance activities like congregational singing, theatrical performance, recitation of sacred text and so on.

The Sattras of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam are together can be described as a religio-social and cultural organisation emerging from the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva. This institution served the purpose of spreading the faith of bhakti far and wide. It helped to sustain and stabilize Vaishnavism in Assam and culturally became a part of Assamese social life.

After the passing away of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the Sattra Institution was divided into four sub-sects, namely Brahma-samhati, Nika-samhati, Purusa-samhati and Kal-samhati.
Brahma-samhati consists of satras set up by the followers of Damodardeva and Harideva; Purusa-samhati those set up by the descendents of Sankardeva; Nika-samhati those set up by the followers of Madhavdeva; and Kal-samhati those formed by Gopal Ata. Sankardeva went on a pilgrimage, which lasted 12 years, at the age of 35. A popular perception is that he created Sattriya as an integral part of Ankia Nat on the basis of his experiences and the various elements he had gathered during the pilgrimage. The resources gathered by Sankardeva during his pilgrimage, the application of his studied elements contained in the Natya-Sastra and other treatises of Indian performing Arts, went towards the foundation of the Ankiya Bhaona which he introduced. The biographical narratives (caritas) point out that Sankardeva studied Natya Sastra along with the Vedas and the Upanishads under his teacher Mahendra Kandali.

The great saint with an aim of propagating bhakti, introduced Ankiya-Bhaona, the distinctive form of theatre as a medium of reaching out to the people of all hues. The Ankiya Bhaona was a great work of artistry combining music, dance and drama. On one hand it was shastric and on the other, it imbibed popular elements from local traditions in it. It is worth-mentioning that Srimanta Sankardeva had written six plays and his principal apostle Sri Madhavadeva had also written six plays, which contained a large number of dance sequences. Thus, these plays themselves presented a very large repertoire of the dance numbers, suited to various characters and sequences. Sri Madhavadeva also introduced several dance numbers outside the arena of theatrical performances. In this way, during the days of the saints, dance flourished as a distinctive form. And these dances came to be classified under two groups – (a) dances derived from the theatrical representations and (b) the dance numbers which are independent of the drama. It can be mentioned that the particular dance tradition of Sattriya came to flourish within the sacred premise of the Sattra, the Vaishnava monasteries of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement founded by saint, as dances came to be pursued as rituals deriving prayer series of the Sattras. The Sattra has been a repository of multiple art forms, which acted as a vehicle for Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya carrying forward the ideals of Vaishnavism and to create an enduring environment for an overall socio-cultural and religious renaissance.

The dance numbers which found essential part of the Ankiya Bhaona have been taken out by some Sattras are practiced ritually as parts of various festival, events. This has led to the growth of dance as a distinct ritual discipline in those Sattras. As it was necessary to teach and transmit the ritual art to younger generation and oral grammar were developed with introduction of grand exercises, Mati-Aakhoras and other relevant aspects. The Sattra exponents through their innovative pursuits added newer dimensions to the form by multiplying the numbers and adding colors to them. In this process the dance which initially was a part of the theatrical tradition got transformed to a vibrant form rich in all elements.

Its Movement from the Sacred to the Present Scenario:

The process of continuity and change is a universal phenomenon and applicable to all matters related to life and society in the world. It is so in respect of religion, art and art practices. Dance constituted to be an essential component of Sankardeva’s religious order through the enactment of plays which in itself was a religious act. And so dance was also a sacred performance to be done in the prayer hall (namghar). After the death of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva dances which formed a part of the religious exercise like the Ankiya Bhaona, became distinct rituals or
ritual observances to be done with utmost devotion in the namghar by the devotees in the Sattra institutions. Within that space and over a period of time great amount of changes has taken place in the hands of Sattra devotees who brought many decorative elements to different dance numbers to make it more attractive.

The first movement of the dances in the Sattras to a secular space occurred in the presentation in the royal court of the Ahom Kingdom during the eighteenth century when the Ahom King Rajeswar Simha invited the Kamalabari Sattra to present its dances before a royal guest. The Sattra exponents with some modifications presented in before the royal dignitaries.

In the wake of the freedom movement to over through the foreign rule/colonial rule there was widespread consciousness all over the country growing to look back to India’s past heritage out of (a sense of) patriotic zeal. This resulted in the identification of the heritage dimensions of literally and cultural expressions belonging to different areas of the country. The renaissance milieu in Bengal during the 19th century worked as a catalytic force in inspiring a group of young intellectuals in Assam to look back the Assamese past and its various cultural elements from nationalistic stand point. For them, the manifold contributions of Sankardeva and Sattra heritage where areas with which Assam Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya and Assamese culture could boast of. Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938) was the most important name in this respect, initiated the process of identifying the Vaishnava heritage of dance as treasures of Assamese literature and culture. This was a vantage point from which the later scholars and connoisseurs tried to look at the heritage of Sattriya culture from both academic and exploratory dimensions. The Sattriya Dance was one of the components of this exploratory journey.

Gradually the Sattriya dance form evolved as a major art form with the support from the cognoscenti both inside and outside premises of the Sattra. As the form grew and became an essential component of the various ritual and prayer services of the Sattra, the Sattra community developed gradually into a well structured pattern for teaching and learning which was handed down orally through the gurukul system likewise the dance form come to be learnt and practiced outside the Sattras with the initiatives of the public at large.

Treasures of Sattra and Sattriya culture began to be looked as heritage- Satriya dance - In the vast domain of Satriya culture, Satriya dance is a form of classical dance which originated from the famous “Ankiya Naat” of Srimanta Sankardeva. It represents the colorful heritage of Assam. This dance form merged into the vast stream of Indian culture with its innovative artistic technique and expressive gestures. Satriya dance is now well known not only in India but also all over the world in a new style and form consistent with the spirit of modern times.

Sattriya Dance as a treasure of Classical heritage- Sattriya is the classical dance form of Assam. The classical dance forms which have developed, have set rules that have been followed traditionally over the years. On the basic model, various gurus incorporate their own imaginative innovations, leading to various schools within a particular dance form. Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya People of various places appreciate this Sattriya Dance form as the classical dance. It has some special features as classical heritage.

Assam Sangeet Natak Academy’s efforts to place Sattriya Dance and Music in public platform- Assam Sangeet Natak Academy was formed in the year of 1952 in Shillong with the initiatives
scholars, connoisseurs and art activists for augmentation and broadening the Sattriya Dance. The aims were to publish books of Sattriya Dance, teaching people in schools or institutions, organising programmes and so on. Late Maniram Gayan Muktiyar and Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Bayan and several others were key resource persons in bringing Sattriya Dance to large public acclaim. But due to some predicament Assam Sangeet Natak Academy did not last long.

Sattras to come out to present it in the public domain - In 1958, a group of Sattriya Dance came from the Sattra and performed in the All India Conference. Again in 1960, another group from Sattra performed in the Guwahati Refinery’s cultural programme. In 1975 a group of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra went to Indonessia to perform a Bhaona with the President of India, Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed.

Scholars and connoisseurs took up Sattriya Dance to the National level to bring its wider acceptance as a classical tradition - Many scholars give lots of contributions to take up Sattriya Dance to the National level. Luit Konwar Rudra Barua, Dr. Maheshwar Neog, Kesab Sangkakoty, Ananda Mohan Bhagawati are the important figures in taking initiatives in gaining popularity to Sattriya Dance outside of the state.

Luit Konwar Rudra Barua as the Director of Cultural Affairs of Assam gathered the practitioners of Sattriya Dance and gave training to young artists by the Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya experts and sent them to different places of India for performances for the bright future of this art form.

The Present State:

Sattriya Dance today has emerged as a major Indian dance tradition with its growing popularity and experience. It’s recognition as a classical tradition of India by the Sangeet Natak Academy, the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama in 2000 has brought new honour to it and facilitated its expansion all over the country as a living art form.

At the local level its increase in popularity and practice as an art form - Sattriya dance is now practiced in every places. Lots of schools and colleges of Sattriya Dance to be found and this is now include as subject of extracurricular activities in many schools and colleges. In Dibrugarh University, the M.A programme in Sattriya Dance has been launched.

Growth of generations of young artists outside the Sattras - Outside the Sattras, the Dance form of Sattriya is very popular among all generation individuals. Lt. Maniraam Dutta Muktiyar was the first person who get the Sangeet Natak Academy award in this field. Dr. Maheshwar Neog gave contribution in the theory part of this dance form. Lt. Raseswar Saikia, Bayanacharya Ghanakanta Bora, Nrityacharya Jatin Goswami, Lt. Rameswar Borbayan, Gobinda Saikia, Tileswar Tamuli Borbayan, Sailen Saikia , Jibanjeet Dutta are the important names in this field. Many of them are come out from the Sattra institutions. They started schools for teaching the young people outside the Desi and Margi Interpretation in Sattriya Nrittya Sattra institutions. Government also gives the facility to the artists to learn more this Dance form by providing some fellowships. Many young scholars doing research, doing performance in this field.

Many young talents coming up to take it as a profession or matter of academic pursuit - In present times, every parent would like to train their student of classical dance. And people of different places outside of Assam and also outside India have the curiosity to learn this Dance. And
generations of young talents are growing in learning and practicing Sattriya Dance giving the
tradition bringing it to the level of academic vocation as well as professional standing.

Sangeet Natak Academy’s recognition as a classical dance form of India and present in National
festivals and events- Festival of Sattriya Dance from 15 to 17 November 2005 is sponsored by
Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi in association with Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Assam
with the broad objective of featuring the creative efforts of young enterprising artistes, so that
they are able to come together to acquire greater confidence in this area able to commemorate
and introspect for further development. This will also provide their gurus and senior dancers a
national platform to present their artistic works of aesthetic value based on this noble tradition.
Experts & dance exponents of the state are also participating in the Lecture- demonstration on
important aspects of Sattriya Dance and Music in conventionality with the festival. Brahaddesi
Sangeet Mahotsav, Brahaddesi Sangeet Mahotsav, Vadya Darshan, Bharatnatyam Mahotsav-
Bangalore, Rag Darshan- Kolkata, Natya Parva- Mumbai, Nritya Sangam Dance Festival-
Nagpur, Nritya Sangam -Imphal, Natyanjali -Mumbai are the festivals by Sangeet Natak
Academy where Sattriya Dance is presented by the artists. Schools and institutions all over the
state and outside for its intensive training and pursuit- There are lots of schools and institutions
for the training of Sattriya Dance. Sattriya is a discipline now a days. This is the seven years
course. Examinations are held every year in the month of june. There are six boards of this
disciplina. Many examination centres of Assam are under the board of Sangeet satra Guwahati,
Assam. Some training centres are also found in outside of the state and the country. Workshops
of Sattriya Dance are also frequently organized by the people, by some institions, organizations.
Spic-Macay played an important role in this area.

But over professionalization and population have brought a state of dilution of its standards in
recent years as alleged by scholars and critics. The discipline which was a marked feature in
learning and pursuing the art form is gradually being compromised. It is feared that such a
process will in near future bring erosion to the classicity of the tradition. Sattriya Dance- Margi
and Desi Continuum

Concepts of Margi and Desi:

Dance is the aged genre of communication. Lord Shiva and Parvati are considered as the creator
of dance. Indian dance is broadly described with two kinds, viz- traditional or folk dance and
classical dances. They are described so on the basis of their various characteristic features.
India’s prehistory and proto-history also provide sufficient evidence of this fact. For example,
there is the dancing girl from Mohenjodaro, and the broken torso of the Harappan period
suggestive of a dance pose.

Gandharva (Margi) is a type of music or dance or the dance based on canonical elements evolved
derive the period of 600-500 BC. The Gandharva type of music or dance was considered as
sacred and celestial like the Vedic music, and so it was known as Margi as they observe certain
fixed principles and adhere to textual treatises as their basis.

The word Margi comes from the word Marga. The term marga suggests the idea of a path for
searching and collecting i.e., marga connotes the idea that most of the materials of the Vedic
music were searched for and collected and then were applied to the gandharva type of music.
And the word Marga also denotes Mriga which means deer. A Mriga goes on its definite direction and margi forms operate on a definite path or direction. The Shiva or Druhina describes it as the “highway” because it was devised and practised by Lord Shiva and handed down to sage Bharata to inscribe it as a definite text – as the myth goes.

Margi is also understood to be “classical” as it is ancient and has some prescribed rules and regulations, in terms of costumes, canonical texts and so on. It also is an institutionalized tradition. In India, temples were such institutions which governed operational functioning of such traditions. Under such contexts the traditions of dance and music which are based on canons or principles are known as “Margi”. And this Margi is now popularly known as the Classical form. But this classical itself has a different meaning.

Although often equated with Margi, the idea of “classical” is derived from the west.

Desi : “Desi”, the other variety of Indian music and dance as prescribed by the Natyasastra originates from the Sanskrit word “Des” meaning country or region. The first known usage of the Sanskrit root is found in the Natyasastra, where it defines the regional varieties of art other than those coming under the pan Indian “Margi”.

Desi also denotes Dis to indicate “region” or “quarter or settled in a given locality as described as Desa Vyavahara or Desachara. Loka on the other hand means the people at large, or an area denoting the popular and mundane, Desi or Loka is thus mundane, worldly and devious , as distinct from super mundane, divine and direct.

We can also call the Desi or Loka tradition as folk-tradition opposite to Margi or Classical tradition. Here there are lots of flexibility and the forms are primarily not institutionalized and not bound by any canonical text as in the case of the other.

Sarangadeva(13th century) in his treatise on Indian music the Sangita Ratnakara describes the Margi of suddha and regional variants under the head of Desi paddhatis.

Desi or the folk performances speak directly to the people, there is less dependence on established aesthetic principles. The performance system is relatively open and masked by spontaneity and is mostly connected with religious or agricultural festivals. Folk- popular performers may be full- time professionals but historically they have seldom received patronage from higher castes or ruling houses.

Features of Margi and Desi in Sattriya Dance:

The Sattriya Dance, Music and Theatre is an instutionalized form prevailing in the Sattras for centuries and has been in practice as a ritual form. The question of its identification under the category of Margi or Desi did not arise till recent past. It has come into for only with its entry into the wider world of Indian dance as an art form. Scholars and critics and connoisseurs also always look upon a form of performing art from either of this categorization- Margi (classical) or Desi (folk). Under such circumstances it becomes pertinent to explore the process of continuum of the features of both these broad categories.

It is worthwhile to remember that more of the erstwhile traditions emerging from the Vedic or Upanisadic time which were hailed as Margi by earlier treatises is prevailing in India at present.
Even a highly stylized form like Prabandha Sangit which widely prevailed in both North and South India with support of canonical texts like the Sangita Ratnakara led to extinction. As such the present traditions of Indian dances which are often described as Margi or Classical emerged from the Desi or regional forms.

As in many other classical Indian dance traditions, the Sattriya as observed today, possesses a strictly laid down curriculum of training, which however is verbally handed down through the gurukul system in the Sattra institution.

All the classical dance forms of India have applied principles to formulate their individual grammer. The Sattriya dance also as an enduring tradition has over the centuries evolved a structural grammar of its own, which is called Mati-Akhora. Mati-akhora are the basic exercise patterns and grammatical forms, the structure of the Sattriya dance has been designed. With the use of these exercise patterns various dance-poses are created and combining all those poses in different patterns, different dance- forms have been composed.

Desi or the folk elements are also found in Sattriya dance. Colorful cultural elements of various tribes and nationalistics living in Assam, such as Mishing, the Bodos and the Deuris, can be found in Sattriya. Many characteristics like hand gestures found in the dances of the Mishings, footworks and body movements in Bodo dances, and the gati of the Deuri folk dance are present in Sattriya dance. The influence of Devdasi and Ojapali(ethnic) which were practiced in the pre-Sankardeva period, can also be noticed in Sattriya. Some examples of folk or Desi elements in Sattriya dance are-

1. Some footworks are acquired from bodo. Karbi, Rabha community. Some footworks of the Bagurumba dance of bodo community, Hamjar dance of Rabha community are similar with the footwork called sirol, Lasi, Sitika, Lahi Ura of Sattriya dance. The footwork used in the first part of Sattriya Dance is similar with a dance step of the Kherai Dance of Bodo people.

2. Body movements are also similar with the folk dances like Kherai, Bardoisikhla, Bagrumba of Bodo people.

3. Some hand gestures, namely- Pallava, Alapadma, Haire, Ardhachandra are similar with the Bihu dance, Missing bihu and so on. And other hand-gestures which represent some local meanings. For example- Anjali, Gadadant (elephant’s teeth), Kesobondho (tied hair) and so on. Karkata, the Asanjukta Hasta (a one hand gesture) used in Sattriya Dance symbolises the togetherness of the Lord and Devotees but it is used in Mising dance to symbolise an erotic meaning. Mentioned Hastas or the Hand Gestures are found in the Srihastamuktawali by Subhankar Kabi.

4. In the body-flexibility of this dance form, folk elements have also been found.

5. In the costumes of Sattriya dance, we have found the folk motifs like kolka, sangeri-potia ful on the lohonga (piece of cloth used as skirt).

6. In the tunes, some of the songs used in Sattriya dance, we have found the tunes of folk songs like bihu.
7. And in case of instruments, we have found the similarity between the folk and Sattriya instruments. Naga and Bhutia people used an instrument which is used in Sattriya Dance. The name of the instrument is Borkah or the Bhurtaal.

8. Name of the Mati-Akhoras are adopted from the folk community. For example- posola tula, pani xisa, sereki pak. Sereki is the instrument used in weaving. The revolving pattern of the Sereki has been adopted in the Mati-Akhora called Sereki with a vernacular coinage. The body of the dancer gains flexibility with this type of revolving movement.

Evolution of its Uniqueness:

Sattriya dance is thus a unique combination of Desi and Margi or the classical and the folk elements. Some aspectsof angika give uniqueness to the Sattriya dance which too are combinations of Margi and Desi elements.

1. Body position- the entire Sattriya dance form depends on the five basic body positions- purux ora, prakriti ora, phul ora, lahi ora and sama.

2. Body bending or bhanga-in case of body bending the Sattriya follows all four bhangas, which are derived from the Indian sculpture and iconography. They are- samabhanga (equipoise), abhanga(slight flexion), tribhanga (triflexion), and atibhanga or bahubhanga(excessive flexion).

3. The body movement- the body movement of any classical form possesses the peculiarity of its own, that makes it distinct from the others. In Sattriya also we can see that type of peculiarity and uniqueness. They are-

   I. The most distinguish feature of sattriya is its Ulaha. In Assamese ulaha means euphoria. In Sattriya, this ulaha is like an undulating and wavy movement.

   II. Dipping and bobbing (called doop) and horizontal movement of the body (called hali) are also unique feature of this dance form.

   III. The body movement of this dance constitutes the horizontal, vertical and circular patterns.

4. Pada-sthiti- (foot positioning) and pada–sanchara give the uniqueness to this dance form.

5. Mandala bheda, utplavana or jumps, bhramari or pak gati (different types of gaits), hasta(hand gestures), sira bheda, griva-bheda( neck-movement), chawani or dristi bheda (eye movements) are give the most uniqueness to the Sattriya dance.
CONCLUSION

In the light of the above discussion it can be discerned that the Sattriya Dance is a unique tradition which is enduring over more than five hundred years as a living one. Born in the wake of the Bhakti Movement in Assam it continues to be pursued as a ritual tradition, mostly in the Sattras. Simultaneously the tradition in recent years has also travelled to a secular space and is being pursued as a performing art by practitioners outside the Sattra institutions. The recognition of Sattriya Dance as a major tradition of Indian dance has brought in a new level of popularity and acceptance among the general public. It has started featuring in major festival of Indian dance and music. Thus, Sattriya Dance is parallelly continuing both as a ritual form in the Sattras and as a performing art form in the wider public sphere.

The Sattriya Dance has a subtle combination of both Margi and Desi elements in its texture which have been artfully synthesized by the earlier apostles of the Bhakti Movement. The basic structure of the tradition is derived from the great tradition of Indian dance prescribed by the canonical texts like the Natyasastra, Abhinaya Darpana etc. It is also Margi in its character as the tradition is essentially devotional in spirit. However, elements from local tribal as well as folk traditions have been derived and absorbed into it. Such elements are perceived in the body movements, hand-gestures and also in the oral pedagogy built as foundation of the dances. Such elements are however given a stylized application in the Sattriya form. Such an ingenious combination of elements from both the mainstream Indian and regional forms make the Sattriya Dance to be a magnificent example of Margi and Desi continuum.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


