

Satras-Pioneers in Preserving Performing Art Forms

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Abstract :

The Satra has a plethora of dances, songs, instruments and abhinaya arts which are practiced, and have been flourishing independently till date. In this seminar, I would like to discuss the aspects of conservation and flourishing of these embodied performative arts of the Kamalabari Satra. The embodied performative arts of Kamalabari Satra are important modes of worship in the daily rituals of the Satra. There are several categories of dances found in Kamalabari Satra. Some of these dances are derived from the Ankiya Bhaona. There are also a number of independent dances which are treasured in the Satra. These dances are mostly performed during tithi and religious festivals. In this seminar I will elaborate upon the different categories of dances existing in the Kamalabari Satra.

Key Words : *Satra, Sattriya Dance, Ankiya Natak and Sankardeva.*

0.00 Introduction

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) was a polymath, and the founder of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite movement. In the religious, cultural and social environment of Assam Sankardeva is a prominent figure, with his signature creation of *Naamghar* and the *Satra* institution. These institutions have been the conservation hubs of the religious and cultural heritage of the state. In this regard, *Kamalabari Satra* which was established in the year 1673 has a special role to play. This *Satra* has a plethora of dances, songs, instruments and *abhinaya* arts which are practiced, and have been flourishing independently till date. In this seminar, I would like to discuss the aspects of conservation and flourishing of these embodied performative arts of the *Kamalabari Satra*.

The embodied performative arts of *Kamalabari Satra* are important modes of worship in the daily rituals of the *Satra*. There are several categories of dances found in *Kamalabari Satra*. Some of these dances are derived from the *Ankiya Bhaona*. There are also a number of independent dances which are treasured in the *Satra*. These dances are mostly performed during *tithi* and religious festivals. In this seminar I will elaborate upon the different categories of dances existing in the *Kamalabari Satra*.

1.01 Aims and Objective

The dances, songs, instruments and abhinaya of Kamalabari Satra special role in the making of the composit sattriya culture. While preparing a seminar I analysis its aims and objective in order to study research about a specific topic, I try to study and compiled the information about the followings:

1. To highlight the Bhouna kendric (Theatrical Dance) Dance from, independent dance numbers.
2. To highlight of songs (geet), nitrya, badya, abhinoy in Kamalabari Sattra.

1.02 Methodology

In this paper I have used both analytical and descriptive method with field study on Sattra institution. The study has been conducted with the primary and secondary data. As a primary source I have personally collected data from resource persons. As a secondary source I have used several books and articles in journals. After collection of data, it has been analyzed for interpreting the finding of the study.

1.03 Importance of study

In the field of Sattriya Culture, the Sattriya music and dance is an essential part. Through the subject is of great importance. This music is quite exceptional in our Social life and society. It has played a vital role in preserving our vaisnavite culture and tradition. We live in a land where different tribes, culture, tradition and religion prevails. So, certain initiatives must be taken to keep our culture alive.

- 1) The dance form initiated of Bhouna kendric (Theatrical Dance) Dance form, independent dance numbers are still not classified properly. Therefore this study is very important.
- 2) The rules and significance of the performing styles of Sattriya dances have been studied from inside the sattra, this work is of great importance.

There are several views about the presentation style of Sattriya dance. This study will help to make it systematic.

1.01 Categories of dances related to *Bhaona* (Theatrical Dance) :

1.01.1 *Gayan-Bayan* –

Gayan-Bayan is the prologue of *ankiya bhaona*. It is the opening item of a dramatic presentation. There are two prominent groups in the *Gayan-Bayan* performance; the group of *Gayan* (chorus with cymbals), and the group of *Bayan* (group of drummers). The performers pass through an arch of torches to the performance arena. This tradition is still prevalent in the *Satra*.

In *bhaona* there are four orders of *Gayan-Bayan*—(a) *BohaSahini* (b) *ThioSahini* (c) *Gurughat* (d) *Lonaghat*. It is due to these four orders of performance that *Gayan-Bayan* plays an important role in *bhaona*. *Gayan-Bayan* is an essential category of dances due to its individualized *bhari-man* (foot work), and *hastachalana* (hand gestures and movements). In the foot work of *Gayan*, *Ciral* and *Stithabarta Swasati*, *Juṭi*, *citika*, *chaṭa*, *begini sari* and the uses of other foot works point towards its dance qualities. While singing *Man-cok* the dance movements of a *Gayan* are exquisite. *Paniporuwa* is one of its extraordinary elements. And with all its exquisite characteristics, *Gayan-Bayan* becomes a dance category of *ankiya-bhaona*.

1.01.2 *Sutradhari Nas* (dance) –

This dance is the most attractive dance within the treasure-trove of *Kamalabari Satra*. A *Sutradhar* is the orchestrator of the *ankiyabhaona*; he directs the whole *bhaona* performance from starting to end. There are many types of *Sutradhari* dance; at the beginning of a *bhaona* performance a *Sutradhar* attracts its audience by performing a few of them.

The different parts and order of performance of *Sutradhari* dance are –

(a) *Pravesarnas* (b) *Ragarnas* (c) *Gotarnas* (d) *Slokarnas*

The entrance of the *Sutradhar* is full of grandeur. He enters from the side of the *Gayan-Bayan* by presenting himself behind a curtain held by two persons. As the curtain is pulled he takes a few steps while revealing his hands in an idea of offering flower from his heart (*astadalapadma*). He then gradually moves towards pure dance; which is sung in *Sareng raga*. The dance performed after *Natorgeet*, *Bhotima* is known as *Gotornas*. The *Sutradhar* ends the dance performance with *Slokarnas*. These dances of the *Sutradhar* comprise another category of dances related to *bhaona*.

1.01.3 *Gosai Nas*–

Within the category of dances in *ankiya bhaona*, *Gosainas* has a special place. The entrance dance of Lord Krishna or Rama in a dramatic performance is called *Gosainas*. This dance is full of grandeur and majesty, and it is graceful in its characteristics. There are two orders in *Gosainas*–

(a) *Bajanarnas* (b) *Slokarnas*

This dance has been flourishing as an independent category, and it is a part of the treasure-trove of dances found in *Kamalabari Satra*.

1.01.4 *Gopinas*–

The entrance dances of the *gopi* (milk maids) and the consorts of Krishna or Rama is known as *Gopinas*, currently it is an independent dance category. This dance is like many other dances is derived from *ankiya bhaona*, and falls under the *lasya* category of dances. In a *bhaona* performance, Sita, Rukmini, Satyabhama and the *gopis* perform this entrance dance. It is a short dance item which is played in *Ektaal*. This dance is another note-worthy dance item of *Kamalabari Satra*.

1.01.5 *Kharmannas* –

The formation of this dance has a musical process. It is completely embedded in *taals* (beats). The songs used in this dance are played in *Kalyanraag* and *Poorviraag*. Traditionally, this dance is performed by the characters of a *bhaona*; they use gestures and hand movements like *sitika*, *haatsoluwa*, and *muruka* to seek forgiveness from the Lord through their dance. In *Kamalabari Satra* this dance is preserved and practice in its traditional format.

1.01.6 *Dances of Ankiya Bhaona* –

The dances of *ankiya bhaona* are varied and distinctive in nature, and are spread throughout the dramatic spectacle. There are various entrance dances of *Rishi* (sage), *Roja* (King), *Raksasa* (demon) etc. Other dances like *Yuddharnas* (fighting scene depicted through dance), *Sloka-bhatimarnas* and *Gitarnas* (interpretive dance to the rendering of songs) are preserved within the *Kamalabari Satra* repertoire. These dances form an important category within the *ankiya bhaona* dance repertoire.

2.00 The independent dances of the Satra:

2.01.1 Bahar Nritya (dance)–

In the cultural field of *Kamalabari Satra*, dances play a major role. Among many dances of the *Satra*, *Bahar* dance has a significant place. “It is from *Madhabdeva*’s ‘*Bhojanbebyahar*’ or, ‘*Bhojanbahar*’ play that this dance draws its name. Originally, this dance should be named ‘*Bihar nritya*’ but, with the corruption of the spoken language, this word came to be known as ‘*Behar Nritya*’ or ‘*Bohanac*’. ‘*parabhatebiharechale...*’ is a song in the *Borgeet* collection of the *Satra*. ‘*Bihar*’ actually mean *lila* (playfulness, sportful activities of Krishna with his cowherd companions) hence, ‘*Bihar nac*’ means the dance of playfulness of Krishna and his companions. The concept of sportful activities or, pleasure-sport is the idea behind this dance”¹ This is a dance performed in a group of not less than 20 to 25 young monks. This dance has two distinct parts – *Ramdani* and *Gitar-nas* and it puts emphasis on graceful flexibility of the dancer.

2.01.2 Jhumura Nas–

Jhumura is a glorious dance number of *Satra* schools of dancing. During a *tithi* this dance is performed on the day of *saubhujoni*. This dance has a specially attraction for the *natuwas* (young boys within the age group of 8 to 12); they perform it in a group of two to four boys at a time. It falls in the *Tandava* dance category because of the elements of – *pak, jap, khar and purushora*. This dance was evolved by *Madhabdeva* to be performed independently of drama; it is also very similar to *Raas Jhumura* dance. Many *Sattriya* dance gurus believe that this dance carries the essence and presence of lord Krishna in its style and fervour. The performance of *Jhumura* has three orders –

- (a) *Ramdani* – We see the use of *thukuni, suta or ektaal* in this section.
- (b) *Gitarnas*– the *natuwas* dance to the rendering of songs.
- (c) *Melanas* – this section of dance has two divisions where *Joti taal* and *Pori taal* are used respectively.

2.01.3 Cali Nas –

This dance is one of the foremost dances among the independent dances, other than those of dramatic performances. This dance is performed in *Kamalabari Satra* on the day of *tithi*. *Cali nas* is an independent category of dances in *Sattriya* dance. Traditionally there are 8 pure *Cali* dances and 4 *Rajaghari Cali* dances. The *Rajaghari Cali* dance has 4 varied *Ramdani* parts which uses many different *taals*. Some of these *taals* are –

- (a) *Brahma taal* (b) *Rupaktaal* (c) *Rupganjal* (d) *Bor bisom* (e) *Sorubisom* (f) *Sari khoniya* (g) *Dukhoniya*
- (h) *Joti* and, (i) *Sutataal*

The pure *Cali* dance is performed in two *taals* – *Ektaal* and, *Pori taal*. This dance is taught to young monks between the ages of 16-17. Some important traits of this dance - “It is said that when *Naradmuni* was

¹*Sattriya Sanskritsarnarekha* by Narayan Chandra Goswami page 71

travelling to Vaikuntha he performed a dance known as Salika, and perhaps its influence can be seen in Sattriya Cali. According to the Natyashastra, the movements of the leg, foot work are known as Cari. This Cari or gait perhaps has some similarities with the gait of Cali dance as well. In Madhabdeva's Rajasuya text there is a pad 'Cali korijadugutamoyur'² Judging from the points stated above, however it may be surmised the dance of the natuwas is related to the conception of the tail-spreading dance of peacock. Another belief is that Cali dance was performed by Lord Krishna with his cowherd friends. In Borpeta's Rangiyal Griha (house made of gold & silver) established by Madhabdeva, Cali dance was arranged to be performed by young monks.

2.01.4 Nadubhangi Nas–

This is another glorious dance of the Satra. Young boys within the age group of 14 to 15 years, perform this dance on the day of saul-bhujoni which falls on the tithi eve. "It is a common belief within the Satras that when Krishna went to save his cowherd friends from the serpent demon kaliya in Vrindavan. He swam across the river and danced on top of the serpent demon's head. The etymology of the word Nadubhangi might have come from the word Naduri- Naduri (the act of swimming in the river)"³ This dance has two Ramdani and a Gitarnas. Taals like Thukuni and Sutataal are used in Ramdani, and along with the songs the Gitarnas is performed. This dance is vigorously practiced in the Kamalabari group of Satras.

2.01.5 Bar-Praves-Nas –

This is a very especial dance which is exclusive to Kamalabari Satra circle. "This dance is performed by young monks at dusk, as soon as the lamps and torches are lit in the Naamghar. It is believed that this dance represents the dance that lord Krishna used to perform when he returned from Vrindavan to Gokul at dusk along with his companions. Leading the group of dancers is a young monk dressed in the costume of Krishna. This dance is regarded as auspicious and the Satras do not allow its performance apart from the sacred occasions of death anniversaries of the two gurus. Penalty has to be paid if this dance is performed outside. This dance is preceded by a ram-dhemali and rendering of a song in Sindhura-raag A Bor-Bayan changes his sapkonsula (dress covering his upper body) and wears an auspicious stole. For this dance only a Bor-Bayan is allowed to play the instruments. The Sattradhikar is called by Bor-Bayan to witness the 'bar' praves.⁴ The prefix 'bar' is used to denote high degree of magnitude i.e. entrance of a person of high degree of magnitude, Lord Krishna. Hence, Bar-Praves-Nas is the entrance dance of Krishna. This dance is completely male oriented, which is danced by monks standing in lines of four in one for about an hour. The basic stance of this dance is Purush Ora and the dancer presents a series of pure dance to the rhythmic syllables of Khol set in Thukuni and Sutataal.

²Ibid, page 64-65

³Ibid, page 65

⁴ Sattriya Nrityar Rupdarsan by Karuna Bora, Page 133

3.00 *Mati akhora of Kamalabari Sattra*

There is an order of practice and performance in all the embodied practices of India. While learning an embodied practice like dance, a person has to prepare his/her body in a certain way and learn specific techniques which will enable a performer to perform at ease. *matiakhora* in Sattriya dance are the initial exercises which form the base of this dance, and enable its performers. To learn the music and dance of Sattriya, a person has to be devoted to singing, practicing gestures and bodily fitness. According to the *Natyashastra*, the ground (*mati*) beneath our feet is sacred and should be respected; it is from here that *matiakhora*(ground exercises) becomes the base of Sattriya dance. These exercises make the body fit to perform other dances of the Sattriya repertoire. In total there are 64 *mati akhoras*. When a young boy is initiated into the *Satra* order, he begins his practice by first learning these exercises. In *Kamalabari Satra* the *mati akhoras* are rigorously practiced and preserved till date.

4.00 *Raga and Songs of Kamalabari Satra* –

In the *Kamalabari Satra* circle many devotional songs are sung and performed during sacred occasions as well as in certain daily rituals and customs. During *tithis*, and sacred occasions songs and Borgeets are sung in a tunes of *prasanga*. Many dances which have devotionals songs and Borgeets in them are performed in varied tunes developed by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. During *tithis* in *Satra*, the monks perform *Jagarangeet* which are found in Borgeets as early as 4 AM in the morning in tunes of *prasanga*. For the period of *tithi*, *Ghosa-dhemali* songs in *Gayan-Bayan*, *Na-dhemali* songs and other songs are performed at different time of the day for a period of four days. Here are a few examples of *Puwageet* (morning songs) sung before *Naamprasanga* –

(a) *Uthare utha bandhu* (b) *Mai khelat Gopal* and, (c) *Tejore kamalapati porobhate*

Some of the songs sung during dance performances are – (a) Songs of *Raga-mala* –

(i) *Bai hueyasdekhsei* (b) *Tur Basanta:Baikunthatejiyakeli kora Vrindavane*.

Moreover, while performing *Bahar* dance 8 songs sung in 4 different *ragas* are used. Similarly in all of 12 *Cali* dances – “*Shyamamuruti pita ambarlasa*” is sung in *raga Dhanasree*, “*Hari podna pakholi napaoli maayi*” is sung in *raga Barari*. There is also use of 10 songs embedded in different *agsa* in *Cali* dances which are usually sung in *Ektaal* and *Pori taal*. The songs sung in the pure *Cali* dances can be sung in 3 different *ragas* according to the singer’s discretion. For the 8 songs used in *Rajaghari Cali* dance, different *ragas* are used along with two *taals*; however, these *taals* are almost extinct now. There are many songs in *Nadubhangi* dance as well which are preserved in the *Kamalabari Satra* circle. Songs such as – “*Ab sokhipekhhu*” in *Sarengraag*, “*Radhe baat bujabo lohu*” in *Sindhura raga*, and “*Braja jeebon dayal din*” in *Raga Gauri*, and in *Bar-praves- nas* songs like “*Abataee Kanu surabhisorai*” are sung and practiced in the *Satras*.

During the daily ritual practices of the *Satra*, varied songs embedded in different *ragas* and *taals* are performed and practiced by monks. The format of teaching and learning these performative practices is through oral transmission. Some of the widely used *ragas* of the *Satra* are – *Dhanashree*, *Asawari*, *Shree*, *Kanara*, *Kramat Kalyan*, *Arahana*, *Gandhar* and *Paraj*.

5.00 Instrument of *Kamalabari Satra* –

Not much is known about the culture of instruments that is present in *the Kamalabari Satra*. I will make an attempt to introduce them here. – There is an extensive culture of learning and playing instruments like, *Khol* (drums), *Taal* (cymbals), *Doba* (big drums played with sticks), *Ghanta* (a type of cymbal played with a stick) and *Bahi* (flute) in *Kamalabari Satra*. The use of *Khol* and *Taal* in *Gayan-Bayan* is intrinsic. Similarly, the use of *Doba* and *Ghanta* is related to *Naam-prasanga*. The flute which is Lora Krishna's instrument is used in almost all the songs of *Satra*. The *Khol* and *Taal* are also the basic instruments used in the *Dhemali* parts of the dances; there are almost 12 *dhemalis* divided between *Bohasahini* and *Thiosahini* sub *dhemali* 25. Below is a list of *Bohasahini* and *Gurughatsahini* used in *Dhemali* –

- 1) *Raag Dhemali or Soru Dhemali*– 2 types (*Bohasahini* 6 types)
- 2) *Khat Praves* – 2 types (*Bohasahini* 6 types)
- 3) *Rang Dhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 1)
- 4) *Guru MridangDhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 1)
- 5) *Su Dhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 2 types)
- 6) *Na Dhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 2 types)
- 7) *Ram Dhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 1)
- 8) *Bor Dhemali* – 1 (*Thiosahini* 1)
- 9) *GhusaDhemali* – 1 (*Thiosahini* 5 types)
- 10) *BorpetiyaDhemali* – 1 (*Bohasahini* 1)

These *Dhemalis* are mostly played during *tithis*. Many instruments available in *Sattriya* dance are found in *Kamalabari Satra*. They are – *Pori taal*, *Ektaal*, *Sorubisom*, *Bor bisom*, *Rupak*, *Brahma*, *KharmanRosEktaal*, *Rupjyoti*, *Joti*, *Rakta*, *Jaman*, *Pori jaman*, *Man-cok*, *Dharmajyoti*, *Thukuni* and *Rupganjal* and other are available in a traditional format of *Ghat*, *Suk* and *Ga man* etc.

6.00 *Abhinaya*–

Srimanta Sankardeva first used *abhinaya* in his first *ankiya bhaona* Chihna Jatra. Even though there is no written evidence, it is widely believed that dance, songs and *abhinaya* were used in this first *ankiya bhaona* performance. Some of the dramatic performances written by Sankardeva have clear instructions of performance written on them. The first among this is – *Patni Prasad*, other *nat* (drama/ dramatic performance) are *Keli Gopal*, *Kaliya Daman*, *Rukmini Haran*, *Parijat Haran*, and lastly, *Ram Bijai*. Like Sankardeva *Madhabdeva* also composed dramatic performances like the *Jhumura*, this has a space for young boys to perform *abhinaya*. Similarly, in all the *Jhumuras* like the *Dadhi Mathan* and others, there is a tradition of performing *abhinaya*. In *Kamalabari Satra* the tradition of performing *abhinaya* in *ankiya bhaona* is highly practiced. Along with this *Sattriya OjaPali* is another performative art which has a tradition of performing *abhinaya* in it. The parts of *OjaPali* are – (a) *Raga* (b) *Geet* (c) *Sloka* (d) *Diha* (e) *Ragamalita* (f) *Saran* (g) *Badyakhiyali* (h) *Dhura* (i) *Ban*, and (j) *Upadesh*. Along with this there are various song sung in different

ragas. There is also a tradition of singing Sisulila Kirtan (which are of 4 types), Night Kirtan (4 types) and 4 types of Kirtan are sung during the day. Here, the Pad is of extreme importance. After singing *Raga Geet* a *pad* is sung from the *Dasam Skandha of Bagawat*. At this point a Ragamalita is sung in Charan Raga. The two characteristics of Sattriya Ojapali are – Sudha Nas (Pure dance), and Abhinaya Khanda (Abhinaya section).

In Kamalabari Satra, dances, songs and abhinaya has been traditionally practiced. There is an unbroken tradition of celebrating Raas Lila every year in this Satra. The Sattriya Ojapali has a close relation to the abhinaya in Raas lila and this has been practiced and preserved in Kamalabari Satra.

7.00 Conclusion

The Sattriya Culture form evolved as an ingenious contrivance for propagation of Bhakti faith by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva on the principle of classical dance and subsequently developed by Sattra intuitions with all artistic manifestations leading to a distinctive trait is termed as Sattriya Culture. The Sattras were popular institutions organized by the exponents of Assam Vaisnavism as repository of and propagating agency of Sankaradeva's faith and culture. They were the unifying forces to bring the people of different social and ethnic groups with heterogeneous beliefs. To the fold of bhakti . Besides other means, these institutions took the art of dancing forceful and attractive means to achieve their goal. The Sattras maintained the tradition of the two gurus and have been practicing these dances vigorously till date. They also added new forms and elements, new artistic embellishments, chalked out their own vocabulary and popularized the same with admirable success. Considering all these skilful innovations of the Sattras, their earnest Endeavour for extension and survival of this art form, their role as the custodian as well as the sole repository of its grammatical formula and its final arbiter, the dance and music as a whole, has been termed Sattriya.

Kamalabari Satra has preserved many rich embodied performative traditions since the time of its inception in 1673. These traditions are rigorously practiced even today in this Satra. The dances, songs, instruments and abhinaya traditions composed and created by the two Gurus - Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva are invaluable gifts to the Assamese society which are preserved as treasures in the Satras. The only way that we can keep these performative traditions alive in today's time, is by engaging the young and upcoming generations of the Assamese society to take interest in these invaluable gems.

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