

Performing Art of Neo-Vaishnavite Culture with Special Reference to Barpeta District, Assam

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KEYWORDS: Culture. Neo-Vaishnavism. Satras. Assamese. Heritage. Art.

ABSTRACT: Assam witnessed a great reformation during 15th century when the whole Assamese society was pervading through a darker phase that had marked its history. This reformation is known as the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement pioneered by the famous Vaishnava saint Srimanta Sankardeva. It can be considered not only as a religious reformation but can rightly be affirmed as a great socio-cultural revolution in the history of Assam which plays an important role in creating a strong social cohesion among the Assamese community as a whole. Srimanta Sankardeva tried to unite the people of diverse cultures under the belief of one supreme God i.e., Lord Vishnu or Krishna. Along with Srimanta Sankardeva, his disciple Mahapurush Madhabdeva also played a leading role in establishing 'Satra' institutions (vaishnavite monasteries) to fulfill the socio-cultural and the psychological needs of the people. Barpeta is known as *Satra nagori* (monastery town) as it is embedded with *Satras*. The cultural heritage of Barpeta district is very rich with its varieties of art forms like *Bargeet*, *Ankiya Naat*, *Satriya dances*, *Gayan Bayan*, *Holi-Geet* which are the by products of Vaishnava movement in Assam. This paper aims to focus on performing arts of Barpeta Satras as it enhances the cultural heritage of the Assamese people in a unique way. The methods used for the study include anthropological methods like observation and interview methods along with the use of secondary data.

INTRODUCTION

Generally performing art means temporary time-based art forms i.e. connected with artists' presence and occur in real times before an audience. Common performing art forms include drama, music and dance. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement headed by Srimanta Sankardeva is a great religious and a socio-cultural revolution in Assam that promotes an important role

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South Asian Anthropologist, 2025, 25(2): 183-186

in creating strong social binding among Assamese community through various means. It focuses on the theme of elimination of caste rigidity. He propagated the ideas of Eka- *Sarana-Naam Dharma* (belief in one supreme God) to spread the light of knowledge and truth to remove the darkness of ignorance, superstition and irrational practices. Through Neo-Vaishnavism, a new democratic outlook has been developed among the people. Sankardeva has been recognized as one of the great spiritual leaders of Assam who laid stress on 'Bhakti' and also made it

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attainable to every member of the society. He tried to bring his followers to the pure doctrine of his Vaishnava faith. Hemchandra Baruah defines 'Satra' as the residential area of the noble religious people in Hemkosh (1900) which is the first etymological dictionary in the Assamese language. The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement played an important role in the real transformation of Assamese social and cultural life. Sankardeva with his disciple, Madhabdeva, Damodardeva and Harideva spread the Vaishnavite religion to every corners of Assam. The Satras are very special to Assamese cultural life with its intangible aspects as dance, drama, music, poetry, while the tangible aspects include, instruments, handicrafts, mask making etc. Through these practices of art forms which had been developed by Sankardeva while staying in Barpeta, tried to attract the common people within the religious fold of Neo vaishnavism. A tremendous impact can be noticed upon the lifestyle of the people living in Barpeta due to this cultural revolution led by the vaishnava saints in 15th century.

Barpeta is well known as 'Satra Nagari' (monastery town). The cultural heritage of Barpeta district is very rich in the field of *Bargeet*, *Ankiya Geet*, *Holi-Geet*, *Bhortal Nritya*, *Satriya Nritya* and *Gayan Bayan*.

Objective: The main objective of the study is to focus on the performing art forms of Vaishnavite culture which bears a rich cultural heritage with special reference to Barpeta, Assam.

MATERIAL & METHODS

The methods that are implied for the study purpose are the observation method and interview method along with use of secondary data i.e from journals, books and e-resources.

DISCUSSIONS

Devotional and spiritual songs that were composed by the vaishnava saints, Sankardeva and Madhabdeva are called *Bargeet* or the *ankiya geet*. The *Bargeet* are the backbone of Barpeta culture which are composed by Madhabdeva more than 200 years ago. These spiritual songs basically spread the devotional and spiritual faith of Lord Krishna among the people. These are considered as a distinctive school of Indian classical music. Sankardeva

composed approximately 240 *Bargeet*, unfortunately only 34 *Bargeet* are found. The language is "Brajabali" which is the combination of Maithili and Assamese language (Barua, 1960). The *Bargeet* play a great role in enhancing the spiritual sentiments among the people. Each '*bargeet*' is tuned to a particular '*raga*' (melody). The sweet melody of these ragas have the capacity to tranquilize the human soul and led them to a closer affinity to God. *Borgeet* are woven with strands of religious experiences, philosophical reflections, secular and ethical bonding (Barua, 1960)

Bhatima is another creation which are regarded as poetry and can be compared to 'ode' of English poetry (Neog, 1965) They can be classified into '*natya bhatima*' which are used in plays and drama, *deva bhatima*' which are used in praise of God and '*Raja bhatima*' or panegyrics to Kings (Das, 1999)

Holi is the glorious carnival in India. It is one of the famous festival of Assam and especially in Barpeta, which brings joy and happiness to the hearts of each and every denizen residing in Barpeta. It is also called '*Fakuwa utsav*' or '*falgu utsav*'. In Barpeta it is called '*Doul utsav*'. *Holi 'geet'* (songs) are the special attraction of this festival which are sang with great zest and in a typical rhythm by the local people.

Mahapurush Madhabdeva introduced the '*Holi Geet*'. In primeval time, his '*Bargeet*' were marked as *Holi geet* by his disciples. One of those *Holi geet* which was performed by his disciples is '*Phagu Khele Karunamoy, a Nanda Kumar*'. Musical instruments like '*Dhulki*' (Drum), '*Taal*' (cymbal) are used by the people while singing. '*Holi geet*' binds the people with a strong cultural sentiment. One of the famous '*Holi geet*' of Barpeta is '*Gunjore Madhukare*'. These songs carry the religious fervour which unites people with the eternal power.

On the last day of the festival, '*Holi geet*' are sung by the people of Barpeta inside the satra premises.

One of the famous '*Holi geet*' written by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev is:

"Range faku khele chaitanya banamali
Duhate phagur gunda sichanta murari"

The great Vaishnava saint and reformer of Assam

Mahapurush Sankardeva introduced the Sattriya dance form in the 15th century A.D. It is considered as a powerful medium for propagation of Vaishnava faith. This dance form has been cultivated and preserved with great enthusiasm by Satras and it has been rightly named as Sattriya because of its religious character and association with Satras (Dutta, 1990). Some strictly laid down principles like hastamudras, footworks, asanas, music etc. governed Sattriya dance tradition. This tradition has two distinctly separate streams- the 'Bhaona' related repertoire starting from the 'Gayan', 'Bhayanar Nach 'to the 'Kharmanar Nach', secondly the dance members which are independent such as 'Chali', 'Rajagharia Chali', 'Jhumura', 'Nadu Bhangi' etc. (Neog, 2015). Among them the Chali is characterised by gracefulness and elegance while Jhumra is marked by vigor and majestic beauty (Sattriya dance, ccertinda.gov.in). Sattriya Nritya is recognised as one of the best classical dances in Indian dance tradition. The origin of the Sattriya dance is evolved in the Ankiya dramas of Sankardeva. 'Mati Akhora' is the main dance form steps and exercise of Sattriya dance and this can be considered as the fundamental sets of moves that the dancers had to learn during the training period. "Khol'mridanga and taal'(musical instruments) are used in this dance form.

Sattriya dance can be recognised as a symbol of greatness and renowned tradition that has been provided a unique identity to the Assamese culture as a whole.

'Gayan - Bayan' is known as a religious folk performance which is mainly practised in the 'Satras' of Assam. 'Gayans' are called the singers who also play the taal (cymbals) and 'Bayans' are the instrument players who play 'Khol' (drums). The prologue of Ankiya Bhaona is called 'Gayan-Bayan'. Gayan-Bayan is considered as an important category of dancers for its individualised 'bhari-man' (footwork) and 'hastachalana'(hand gestures and movements).

Bhortaal Nritya (cymbal dance) is another performing art introduced by Narahari Burha Bhakat of Barpeta. This is mainly a devotional dance form. The root of this dance lies in the Ojah pali dance which was in practice in Assam before the advent of Vaishnavism. Thiya naam (standing prayer) that was also existed in Assam got a new form in Barpeta as

ghosa-kirtan and it is from this source that bhortal nritya developed fully. In this dance form, cymbals are held in both the hands by the dancers. There are two types of dance form, one is 'ekok bhortal nritya' (one dance artist) and the other is 'daliya bhortal nritya' (number of dance artists).

Srimanta Sankardev introduced the concept of drama in the Assamese language by marking a significant milestone in Assamese culture. He wrote and staged the first Assamese drama 'Chinhajatra' when he was in Bardowa. This event is termed as the formation of drama in Indian regional language and it can be pointed out as Sankardeva's innovative contribution towards the Assamese culture.

'Ankiya Naat'(drama) which may be termed as musical dramas developed as a distinct form of entertainment which is a blending of 'Vaktirasa'(religious melody) to attract audience. Sri Madhabdeva took a pivotal role in continuing this tradition at Barpeta Satra where he enriched the cultural heritage of this region by writing and staging numerous dramas. By taking the help of his disciples Sankardeva practised, developed and performed dramas in the 'Rangial Griha' of Barpeta Satra. These dramas were written in classical grandeur style (Barua, 1960). Sankardeva travelled to different parts of India and was much influenced by Rashlila, Ramlila, Kathaka etc and thus his dramas were result of the inspiration derived from various art forms of India. These dramas rendered a kind of mental amusement to the people who were still living under a cloud of superstitions and magico religious beliefs.

Sankardeva also developed the concept of 'sutraddhar' who conducts the whole play and introduced the drama before the audience through dance form.

Following is the chronology of these dramas:

1. Kaliya Daman and Ramvijay by Sankardev on his death anniversary.
2. Rukmini -Harana and Parijata-Harana by Sankardev on the death anniversary of Sri Madhadeva.
3. Nrisinha badh by Doitari Thakur and Kansha Badh by Ramcharana Thakur on the death anniversary of Mathura Das Burha Ata.
4. Janmajatra by Gopal Ata on Lord Krishna's

birth anniversary.

These dramas were traditionally staged inside the *Rangial Griha* (a place for performances) inside the *satra*.

CONCLUSION

Neo Vaishnavism in sixteen century is a prolific period in the history of Assam not only for its religious reformation but also for the parallel development in the fields of art, culture and literature. The emergence of the vaishnava saint Srimanta Sankardeva is a turning point for the then society which was under diversified beliefs and crude practices. Vaishnavite *satras* played a major role in enriching the rich cultural tradition of Assam through the grand creation of devotional songs, dance and the dramas which are popularly known as the *satriya* culture. Even in the present era, Assam is famous for its rich cultural heritage that spreads the message of these erudite

Vaishnavite saints which is quintessential element for the betterment of a society.

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