

CHAPTER 4

SHIFT IN PARADIGM OF SATTRIYA DANCE: FROM NAMGHAR TO PROSCENIUM

4.1 Early Efforts Made to take Sattriya Dance out of Majuli

The multiple genealogies of Sattriya dance articulate a complex intersection of the region's history and culture. This dance style from the north-eastern state of India was an amalgamation of multiple cultures which, over the years, made Sattriya an extremely intricate and complex performance form. Sattriya was born out of the *natya* tradition- *Ankiya Bhaona*. The report of the 'Seminar on the Sattriya Dance of Assam' organized by The Directorate of Culture, Government of Assam and the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi in January 2000 (page 2) records, "This dance tradition pursued, practiced and handed down to generations in the recluse of the Sattra institution as a part of the various prayer services, rituals and festivals has also entered the arena of the secular art world and over the decades is pursued as a rich and distinct art form."

Sankardeva's main aim of any performance was to communicate the sentiment of *bhakti rasa* (devotion in simple words) in any congregation that was there. Right from his first dramatic representation '*Cinha yatra*', played at Bardowa to all his six plays (popularly known as Ankiya Nat or Bhaona) and all other composition- be it music or poetry- were subjected to evoke the *bhakti rasa* i.e. a sense of devotion to God in the mind of his audience. The Sattra as an architectural space with its paraphernalia did not exist in those initial years of Sankardeva's journey as a preacher and a composer. There were only religious gatherings. (Mahanta 2007; Neog 1998) Guru Ghanakanta Bora explained the meaning of Sattra as- "where there is *sat-sanga*. It has been told in the Bhagvata. Where there is *sat-katha* and *sat-sangat* [the place] is known as Sattra." (Interview with Ghanakanta Bora taken on 9 May 2015, Appendix II)¹ Madhavdeva, his chief apostle and a very close associate also composed six plays and called them *jhumura* with mainly *vatsalya rasa* (or filial love). "It was Madhavdeva who composed and worked on some independent dance forms like *Chali*, *Jhumra* etc. Thus it is observed that the origin of Sattriya (dance and several other arts including mask making) is in Ankiya Nat." (Personal Conversation with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat of Purani Kamalabari Sattra, Titabor in September 2013)

Today in the Sattras, the performance forms, stand as a mixture of existing folk culture, multiple minds of many gurus, thinkers and innovators in the fields of dance, music and stagecraft who, over the centuries, shaped up the grammar and the structures of all the performances inside the Sattras. Unfortunately names remain unknown since in the Sattra, no one puts 'his' name to a work or innovation of this nature, considering it to be a service before the Divine or work of the Sattra commune. As Pradip Jyoti Mahanta observes, "a twofold process got embodied in the Sattriya Dance in getting structured as an organized form of performance. On the one hand the basic structure of the form found in inheritance was adhered to and pursued religiously, on the other hand gifted exponents among the Sattra inmates generationally embellished and enlarged them with 'decorative frills' without compromising the foundational philosophy of the faith which lay embedded in such numbers. So an aesthetic approach towards the art form was thus inbuilt in it through the centuries." (Mahanta 2007). It is only, since the turn of the last century when things started getting documented in some form or other that people began to know. This was an orally transmitted ritual, more like a way of life that these monks grew up learning. Nonetheless, Sattriya Dance as it stands today would not have been possible without the contributions of those anonymous names who contributed immensely towards the formation of the language of this performance form.

4.2 Pre-Independence Period

The turbulent periods of Assam's social and political history during the Burmese aggressions which caused unprecedented devastations in the body politic of the state also severely affected Sattras and Sattriya culture causing a state of stasis in all ways. The British rule in Assam that came as fallout of the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826, brought a temporary sigh of relief to the people of Assam after the shock of devastation and defeatism. It also brought in many changes including its relationship with the Sattras. (Personal Conversation with Prof. P.J. Mahanta in April 2015)

"The British administrative systems introduced by the British resulted in an exact census of the sattras and their inhabitants. The Gazetteer of 1905 refers to 'the dances of the sattras'. It was during the British period that another interesting tradition of Sattra arts took shape. It was particularly popular in the two districts- Tezpur and Nagaon called 'Hejeriya Bhaona' (from Hazaar or thousand, referring to a thousand 'paiks' or 4000 men) or 'Bara Kheliya Bhaona' (referring to the 'Khel', the collective of 'paiks'). It

stood for a festival of many Bhaonas performed in a short time.”² Sethi quotes Prof. Maheswar Neog’s observation in his book *Barechahariya Bhaona: A Drama Fair of Assam*,

“... financed by a feudatory chief, this tradition was started towards the end of the Ahom rule. It was popular for almost 150 years, and records have it that during the anti-British struggle, it was used as a cover for political gatherings. In fact, in 1921, during the National Movement, the British authorities got so suspicious of it that they burnt the large tent in which it used to be traditionally performed, in an attempt to stall the performance.”³

This fair was believed to have bridged the gap between the Sattras and the civilian life and through the process the ritual performance came out of the sacred place of the Sattras or village Namghars for fellow people to see and experience the artistic masterpieces in larger open and makeshift spaces. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

It was the late Pitambar Deva Goswami, the Sattradhikar of Garamur Sattra, Majuli, who can be said to have pioneered bringing the neo-Vaishnavite cultural pageant especially the dance forms to the modern stage in the 1920s from the confined periphery of the Sattra. (Personal Communication with Bhabananda Barbayan in September 2013). It began with the introduction of various traditional dance performances, prevalent in the Sattra, in to the *Raslila* presented in the “*Tarun Ranga Mancha* – a modern stage- erected on the occasion of *Raas Purnima* in 1922.”⁴ Pitambar Deva Goswami himself a great teacher, trained the dancers, assisted by late Bapuram Bora Bayan of the Garamur Sattra. Pitambar Dev Goswami made another trendsetting change by introducing female dancers on stage for the performance as the Ankiya Bhaona and dances in the Sattras were exclusively a male domain. (Thakur; Personal communication with Bhabanada Barbayan in September 2013)

Between the years 1935-1938, the organisation *Prachin Kamrupi Nritya Sangha* was set up in Shillong, then capital of British ruled Assam. Active members of the organisation started organising programmes based on Sattriya Music and Dance on various public platforms in the state as well as outside introducing the tradition to a larger audience. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, please refer to

Appendix I). “In the year 1938, the Sangha troupe toured the length and breadth of the State with its repertoire of traditional dances of Assam for a period of six months continuously and earned great applause for their presentation of Sattria based dances too.”⁵ However the Sangha efforts were subjected to criticism for improvisations on the Sattriya Tradition since it was a living ritual performance form and was at a nascent stage when it came to an urban platform. It will however be apt to remember the valued contributions of the Sangha in reaching out to the large populace and art lovers in particular with the diverse forms of Sattriya Dance and Music. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, please refer to Appendix I) and Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat). In the year 1938, at Kamalabari, the ‘Majuli Milan Sangha’- a modern stage came into existence where Raslila was enacted for the first time. (Personal Communication with *Burabhakat*, Uttar Kamalabari Sattria, Majuli) “Late Dhaniram Lekharu Borbayan of the Bengenati Sattria, Majuli, trained all dance performances, braving the opposition from various quarters.”⁶ This endeavour was indeed a daring one which gave vent in presenting one of the Sattriya dances to an ‘audience’ at that time.

In the late 1940s, there was a move to identify the tradition in the Sattras as a representation of cultural heritage of Assam. It again started from Shillong, the capital of Assam (the physical map of Assam then included all the seven sisters). “Most of these initiatives were spearheaded by late Jibeshwar Goswami with the support of the British Government. Late Jibeswar Goswami of Bholaguri Sattria, Kaliabor, Nagaon, took the cause that Pitambar Deva Goswami has started”⁷ i.e. of performing music and dances from the Sattria on proscenium stages in Shillong. He became one of the most important figures for promotion of the dances of Assam during the heydays of the *Prachin Kamrupi Nritya Sangha*. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, refer to Appendix I).

“Under the name of the Sangha, the legendary Bishnu Prasad Rabha and noted dance personality of Assam late Suresh Chandra Goswami composed and performed”⁸ a fairly huge number of dances including some of the Sattria’s dance sequences performed both at the state and at national theatres. Some other names to be mentioned are late Guruprasad Ojha of Barpeta, late Gajen Baruah of Jamugurihat

and late Purna Sarmah of Biswanath Chariali for their contribution towards popularising this ritual tradition through stage performances.

4.3 Post-Independence Period

“In the post-independence period, the development and growth of this art form owes a lot institutionally to Asam Sangeet Natak Academy (an independent institution from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi), and the scholarly efforts of late Prof. Maheswar Neog, a celebrated scholar, and a famous litterateur of Assam. After a spate of activities in the years prior to India’s independence, *Prachin Kamrupi Nritya Sangha* gradually declined. In the year 1953, Asam Sangeet Natak Academy was instituted with the then Governor of Assam Jairam Das Daulatram as President and Smt. Rani Sabita Devi, the scion of the Zamindari in Bijni (now Bongaigaon district of Assam) as its Member Secretary. The Academy modeled on the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the national institution founded in 1952 initiated a series of activities relating to the promotion of Sattriya Music, Dance and Theatre which included holding conferences, music and dance competitions among the younger generation and above all initiatives of documenting these traditions by inviting veteran exponents like Maniram Dutta Mukhtiyar, Maniram Gayan from Kamalabari Sattras, Jadav Chandra Pathak from Barpeta Sattras. The most remarkable work that the Academy had undertaken was that of initiating a plan of documentation and research through instituting a cell called Bargit Research Committee (Bargit Gaveshana Samiti) with Maheswar Neog (later Dr. and Professor), then a young scholar working in Gauhati University, as its member-convener. In spite of not being either an artist or a monk from one of the Sattras, his systematic endeavours brought the ‘Sattriya Nritya’ (a term already popularly used in the Sattras to identify the dance forms from the Sattras encompassing the numerous dance forms in the Sattras. Neog used the term in his academic work and public presentations and popularized the term amidst the researchers, academicians and people outside Sattras) into the knowledge and understanding to the rest of the nation and the world. And it would remain as a remarkable feature in the history of Assamese culture. There were three very important edited volumes by Maheswar Neog published out of which the first two were supported by the SNA:

- The first project undertaken by the Academy was the documentation of *Bargit* titled *Swararekhat Bargit* (literally, *Bargit* in notations) which was published in 1956.
- The *Swararekhat Borgeet* was followed by the documentation of the rhythmic patterns in the Vaishnava music of Assam, published in 1958 as *Rhythm in Vaisnava Music of Assam*.

The Bargit Research Committee also undertook another work of documentation and study on the Sattriya Dance and its rhythms conducted with support from Sangeet Natak Akademi leading to the publication of:

- *Sattriya Dance and its Rhythm* which however was published much later in 1975 by the Publication Board, Assam and the Academy got gradually defunct.

Dr. Neog was all along supported by late Maniram Dutta Muktiyar, the principal teacher and performer of Purani Kamalabari Sattri of Majuli with his associates from conducting the aforementioned projects.” (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, please refer to Appendix I)

In 1952, Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA)- Republic India’s National Academy for music, dance and drama, was established by the then Ministry of Education. ‘In 1958, SNA organised the National “Dance Seminar” at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi between 30 March – 7 April. Over 350 artists representing various schools and styles of Indian dance and 40 scholars and critics participated in the seminar, besides observers from Ceylon, China and Nepal.’⁹ At this time only 4 dance forms were recognised as Classical Dance forms of India. These were: Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kathak and Manipuri. In this conference Maheswar Neog made a presentation along with demonstration by Bayanacharya Maniram Dutta Muktiyar and his disciples. This was the first time that the dance academies and connoisseurs from and outside India were exposed to this art form from the interiors of the north-eastern region of this country. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta). Prof. Neog had generous support from the late Chandrahas Goswami, then Sattradhikar of Kamalbari Sattri. Maniram Dutta Muktiyar (at the age of 79) accompanied by his group presented various dances and other music performances from the Sattri before a conclave of scholars, critics and exponents of various dance

traditions. He eventually was also invited to be on the Bargeet Research Committee of Asam Sangeet Natak Academy in its research projects on rhythm of the Vaisnava Music and Sattriya Dances of Assam, at the initiative and invitation of Dr. Maheswar Neog. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora). This conference constituted an expert committee to explore the possibility of exploring other traditions like Odissi and Sattriya. This committee held its first meeting in the Music Academy, Madras (present day Chennai) under the chairmanship of Dr. V. Raghavan, a doyen of scholars in the aesthetics of Indian Dance and Drama in 1959. Prof. Neog was also a member of the Committee. The meeting made a strong case towards Sattriya and recommended to SNA to consider Sattriya exponents for the National Awards alongside Odissi. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, please refer to Appendix I). In the 1960s, the Akademi initiated cultural programmes for the promotion of Sattriya at various national events and undertook field research, documentation by sending recording units to Kamalabari group and other Sattras in Majuli. In recognition of his contribution towards Sattriya dance, music and theatre as an exponent and teacher of dance and Khol, he was honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Sattriya Dance in 1963 as an exponent of a 'Traditional' dance form (not Classical). This was the first recognition from a national institution under the Government of India not only to the contribution of the exponent but also indicated the acceptance of 'Sattriya Dance' as a formal representation from Assam and the North-Eastern State. The second award went to Gohan Chandra Goswami of Nikamul Sattras, Tezpur for Ankiya Bhaona and many more awards came to the state in the following years. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta, Ghanakanta Bora and Sangeet Natak Akademi website:<<http://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/awardeeslist.htm>>

A contemporary of Maniram Dutta Muktiyar,

“late Bapuram Bayan Atoi, another exponent, teacher and performer of Natun Kamalabari Sattras, Majuli also come forward in popularizing the Sattriya dance, theatre and music by performing and teaching outside the Sattras. At the initiative and invitation of Asam Sangeet Natak Academy late Bapuram Bayan Atoi performed Sattriya dance and music with his group at Shillong and Nagaon in 1953 and 1954 and received wide appreciation from the audience.”¹⁰

In the year 1960, being invited by Pitambar Deva Goswami, Garamur Sattradhikar, Bapuram Bayan Atoi trained some Sattriya dancers in the Kamalabari style of performing the Raslila at Bangshi Gopal Natya Mandir (the erstwhile Tarun Ranga Mancha). He also taught Sattriya dance and music at various places outside Majuli. In the year 1979, Bapuram Bayan Atoi was also honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. (Narayan Chandra Dev Goswami, Sattradhikar, Natun Kamalabari Sattria in *Nartanam*, Vol XIII, No. 2, April-June 2013. 124-125. Print.)

SNA set up The National School of Drama in 1959. The first of their two national institutions of dance- Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy in Imphal and Kathak Kendra (National Institute of Kathak Dance) in New Delhi - were set up in 1964 respectively. National Projects of Support to Kuttiyattam - the age-old Sanskrit theatre of Kerala, Chhau dances of eastern India and Sattriya traditions of Assam were launched subsequently. (SNA Website: <http://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/centres.htm>)

4.4 Geographical Dislocations: Natural and Personal

4.4.1 New Beginnings

Meanwhile, many Sattriya groups frequently performed on many national platforms but solo performances had yet not begun. “By the 1970s, women had begun to take part in the *Rasleela* in Garamur Sattria. Slowly women started to learn Sattriya Dance and Music.” (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora). However, it was Late Sri Rasheswar Saikia Barbayan from the Kamalabari Sattria, who has the greatest role bringing Sattriya dance from Sattria to proscenium. Women were not directly related to Sattriya *parampara* especially in that of the celebrate order of the neo-Vaishnavism. [He] “taught Dipali Das Sattriya dance for the first time”(Personal Communication with Gargi Goswami, please refer to Appendix V) followed by others in Guwahati and elsewhere.

Raseswar Saikia Barbayan hailed from Purani Kamalabari Sattria, one of the principal seats of Vaisnava religion and culture of Assam in Majuli, who learnt the basics of Sattriya way of life, dance and music under the guidance of various Adhyapaks in the Sattria including the legendary Maniram Dutta Muktiyar. “He was an expert khol player and became an expert in dance and acting in Ankiya Bhaona. It is popularly believed that in the prime of his youth he earned accolades in the Sattria and outside with his scintillating performances in Ankiya Bhaona. He soon was entrusted with the title of 'Barbayan', the principal teacher of dance and Khol playing in a Sattria.” (Personal

Communication with Ghanakanta Bora, please refer to Appendix II)). His view of Sattriya music and dance as a secular art form within the sanctions of this religious and ritual art brought it outside the precincts of the Sattria and taught the art to the children including girls. “He took a very bold step to take a female student at the Garamur Sattria.” (Personal Communication with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat). For this he also had to earn the wrath of the Sattria order. “He was ousted from the Sattria in 1959. But once he came out of the monastic order, he dedicated himself to the pursuit and wider extension of the Sattriya dance tradition outside the traditional Sattria way of life.”¹¹

Jatin Goswami, saw the Rojagorhiya Dance that Raseswar Saikia Barbayan had directed at the Assam Sangeet Natak Academy Conference in Nagaon. Jatin Goswami then sought Saikia’s help for an Ankiya Bhaona- *Rukmini Haran* which Goswami had planned to perform on the proscenium stage. In August 1962, Jatin Goswami took him to Tinsukia in Upper Assam where Goswami alongwith Saikia, Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha with the help of a local MLA established the Pragiyoti Kala Parishad. During this period he was deeply inspired by Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha to take up the pursuit of Sattriya Dance in a more dedicated and secularistic way. Unfortunately due to the Indo-China war, whole of Upper Assam was in turmoil and chaos. Goswami and Rabha left for Guwahati and after 2-3 years Saikia also shifted to Guwahati. (Jatin Goswami’s interview on youtube, Web. 23 June 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckS7LugGcDs>>

With a view to familiarizing the traditions of Sattriya music and dance in Guwahati, which was gradually growing as a hub of cultural activities and also to get the younger generation trained, a group of scholars and art lovers started an institution called ‘*Bayanar School*’ with Raseswar Saikia Barbayan as its principal in 1967 admitting their own children in the premises of Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, another institution with various initiatives of academic and cultural interest. The ‘*Bayanar School*’, later nomenclature as ‘Sangeet Sattria’, set up with Dr. Maheswar Neog as its President was the first institution in Guwahati and outside the Sattria, for that matter to be a formal training ground with a syllabus oriented pedagogy relating to Sattriya Dance and Music. (Ibid. and Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta). The Sangeet Sattria continues to run its pedagogical practices conducting routine training examination and award of degrees in the disciplines of Sattriya Dance and Music and has a network of training centres spread all over the state which are affiliated to it. Raseswar Saikia served this institution as its founder Principal and continued in this capacity till his last breath.

(Personal Conversation with Ghanakanta Bora and P.J. Mahanta). He contributed enormously towards popularization of Sattriya Dance outside Assam taking groups with him at every possible occasion to create awareness about Sattriya outside Assam and to expose Sattriya exponents to other creative fields. His contributions towards the making a place for Sattriya Dance at the national scenario as a distinct form of Classical Dance of India is inspiring. After Maniram Dutta Muktiyar passed away, Dr. Neog received prime support in compiling his book *Sattriya Nritya* and *Sattriya Nrityar Taal* from late Raseswar Saikia Barbayan and his disciple Ghanakanta Bora, then a young monk in the Kamalabari Sattrra. Dr. Neog was also assisted as co-writer by late musician Keshav Changkakoti in bringing the aforesaid compilation which helped to lay the academic foundation of the dance form in writing with all notations of the mnemonic sounds. Apart from various honours the people of Assam showered on this dedicated teacher and exponent, the Sangeet Natak Akademi conferred on him the prestigious Akademi Award in 1980. (Jatin Goswami's interview on youtube, Web. 23 June 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckS7LugGcDs>>)

4.4.2 'Purani' Kamalabari Sattrra: A Natural Disaster Forcing a Permanent Relocation

“The Kamalabari Sattrra, was established in 1673, belongs to the *Nika Samhati* as discussed in Chapter 1. It survived many ‘turmoils in its centuries old existence at Majuli, including two internal problems in 1832 and 1936, leading to the inadvertent development of two new Sattrras viz Uttar Kamalabari (Grant) Sattrra and Natun Kamalabari Sattrra respectively”¹² coming out of the original one. With this new development, the original site came to be known as Purani Kamalabari Sattrra. However, the Purani Kamalabari Sattrra, which was the original construction of Badula Padma Ata could not withstand the flood of 1974 which swept away and eroded the land of the entire Sattrra caused by the powerful currents of the mighty Brahmaputra and the turbulent Tuni river on two fronts, east and west simultaneously. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora).

“The dreadful erosion had been of high magnitude in Upper Majuli as well. Once a predominantly rice-growing and river-business centre of the eastern most part of the island, Salmara, had, within a couple of weeks time, been reduced to a wretched

condition. As many as three hundred odd families of five villages were in danger of being rendered homeless. It was then dispassionately judged that unless the ill-fated families were shifted and rehabilitated in some safer place, they would be exposed to further uncertainties.”¹³

“The shifting and the rehabilitation process of hundreds of families and one of the oldest monasteries of Assam was done swiftly during Sarat Chandra Sinha’s tenure as Chief Minister. Late Arif Ali, the then Deputy Commissioner, Jorhat, took some steps for acquiring about two thousand bighas of ceiling surplus land of Tyroon Tea Estate of Titabor Circle.”(Personal Communication with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat). “Taking over of physical possession of the acquired land had also just been a mere formality as there was complete government support and no resistance, no objection from any quarters whatsoever” (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora) also with sympathy and respect in the public mind towards the Sattrā.

“The most stupendous and trouble-some job of loading and unloading of the huge timber posts, the heavy articles of the *Kirtan Ghar* of the sixteenth century Vaisnavite monastery across the mighty river manually in the absence of modern-age cranes and other gigantic machineries, with calculated movements, patience and tremendous energy of the devotees and involving a high magnitude of risk had been a subject of great appreciation. The dragging of heavy items from the river-bed to the shore above and again to the waiting trucks with primitive methods had not only been very risky but also entailed great human skill. Their ultimate bid to do justice to their orthodox profession had mainly been guided by absolute determination to resurrect the Sattrā. As soon as the grueling ordeal of transportation came to a successful end, the first plot of land measuring hundred bighas of unencumbered ceiling surplus land, considered then to be a prime one, by the side of the Titabor-Mahimabari PWD road, had been handed over to the Sattrā, having around ninety devotees, in thirty *Bahas*, on a pleasant forenoon of 9th February 1975. Performance

of sacred rituals and chanting of collective prayers by the Sattrā inmates on the auspicious moment in the midst of fragrant aroma reverberated in the air and filled everybody's hearts with excitement. Receipt of five bighas of the same category of land at a distance of about a half Km from the Sattrā precincts on the other side of the road by each of the families had been considered all the more worthy, after their marathon toil.”¹⁴

“The newly constructed 227 long and 60 wide *Kirton Ghar*, independent *Bharal Ghar*, *Kalia Thakur* and *Banshi Badan*'s cottages with a big *Bat Chora* (main gate) is the replica of the old Sattrā. The tremendous job of salvation and resurrection of the Sattrā in the new site at Mahimabari has been refurbished to the great relief of the Vaisnavite people as well as the selfless devotees. The hundred and thirty years old black tulsi timber column of 22 length and 12 breadth has presently been kept in a glass chamber on the eastern verandah of the *Kirton Ghar*.” (Personal Communication with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat in September 2013)

In its glorious days, the Sattrā had the privilege of receiving a galaxy of high profile dignitaries including Late Jai Ram Das Daulat Ram, the Governor of Assam in the early fifties, Sri B.K. Nehru with his European wife, Governor and Lady Governor of Assam in 1972, dance maestro Rukmini Devi and Sangitacharya Vinayak Pattvardhan to name a few. (Ibid.)

Within a short span of time, the Sattrā has succeeded in its endeavor- to spread the neo-Vaishnavite philosophy and the Sattriya culture “among all sections of the people including the tea-garden labourers of the neighborhood,” (Personal Communication with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat) through its theatrical performances like *Bhaona*, *Ras Lila* and celebration of the annual *Tithis* of the Gurus i.e. Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and Badula Ata.

However, this changed the face of the Sattrā forever. Once a rigid religious establishment, which ousted one of its principle teachers for taking a woman disciple, was forced to dislocate from its 'sacred space' i.e. Majuli. Even though the process was very fast and did not take more than a year, to re-habilitate, 'Purani' Kamalabari Sattrā

underwent major problems with its inmates. ‘During that year many of the monks fled Majuli in order to save their lives. Once out of the place with an uncertainty, many of them did not go back as celibate monks. Also after leaving the isolated environment of Majuli, Jorhat city was much more cosmopolitan in nature and demanded different behavior in terms of austerities.’ (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora). This was a major change for Sattriya Dance as many of the monks who left were teachers, and they studied further to give a new direction to Sattriya Performances.

4.5 Inclusion of Women Dancers

In spite of being a ‘gendered’ performance form, once Sattriya opened itself to women, the journey of the ‘performance’ took a sharp but a very definitive turn. Unlike other dance forms of India, women Sattriya dancers did not have to face social and public condemnation. Bharatnatyam, Odissi and Kuchipudi emerged from the *devdasi* traditions and Kathak formed the ‘nautch girls’ of northern India. And our colonizers, in order to be able to prove their cultural hegemony had done their bit to ridicule and ruin the impression of the dance forms in the public eye. For this reason, the first generation of women dancers in independent India faced a lot of criticism from the masses of the country and it was not considered good to send the girls to learn and be a part of these socially ‘downgraded’ traditions. It took a lot of work from the government agencies, *gurus*, and the connoisseurs to work towards the ‘image building’ of the respective art forms. However, Sattriya’s image as that of being the purest (since it primarily developed and grew in *Nika samhata* sattras), and that too with no *sringara-rasa* i.e. absence of sensuality in the dance form found a comparatively easy appreciation in the public eye.

4.5.1 Women Dancers: The First Generation and Their Contributions

Once the door was opened, some talented women dancers in Assam undertook as personal responsibility in the learning of this form. The first generation of women dancers who were mostly trained in other forms of classical dance like Bharatnatyam, Odissi and Manipuri realized, at that time, the significance of Sattriya Dance. Several amongst them learnt the form at individual level with exponents from the Sattras like Raseswar Saikia, Ghanakanta Bora and others and tried their best to mobilize Sattriya dance amongst the existing and the next generation.

4.5.1.1 Garima Hazarika

Garima Hazarika was born in 1939 and was trained in Odissi and Kathak. She started her training in Sattriya under the legendary Raseswar Saikia Borbayan and eventually continued it under the tutelage of Ghanakanta Bora Borbayan. She is known for her choreographic endeavours where she employs elements from classical as well as folk dance from the state of Assam. She has also directed dance sequences in films. In the year 2006, she received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for her contributions to creative and experimental dance. (*Nartanam*, Vol XIII, No. 2, April-June 2013. 133. Print and Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

4.5.1.2 Indira P.P. Bora

Another such name was Indira P.P. Bora. She was born in the 'British India' in 1943 to a business household in a town called Sonari in Assam. Her maternal uncle Pradip Chaliha (a Sattriya dancer himself) took her to stay with his family away from her parents, between 1956-1961 where she learnt Sattriya Dance. In one of her interviews she mentions, "In those days it was still not considered respectable for a girl to dance professionally, but I loved dancing - in any style. I spent many hours dancing, every day."¹⁵

After she turned 18, Chaliha convinced her parents to send her to Kalakshetra to pursue dance seriously. There trained as a Bharatnatyam Dancer under Rukmini Devi Arundale, she stayed for 13 years. She remembers, "Rukmini Devi could see the beauty of the Sattriya dance. My guru allowed me to perform Sattriya as an item of ten minutes or five minutes in many shows. This was in 1969-72. Rukmini Devi thought it was very beautiful and she encouraged me."¹⁶ She later continued her Sattriya education under Adhyapak Ghanakanta Bora. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora). She established her dance college, Kalabhumi in 1982 in Guwahati where Bharatnatyam and Sattriya are taught. The college now has around 300-400 students. She received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for her contributions towards Sattriya Dance in the year 1996.

(Kalabhumi's website: 26 May 2015. <http://www.kalabhumiindia.com/kalabhumi.html>)

4.5.1.3 Pushpa Bhuyan

Pushpa Bhuyan (then Pushpa Bora) began her formal training in Dance way back in 1956. But she started with learning Bharatnatyam from Kalakshetra under the tutelage of Rukmini Devi Arundale. In fact, she was Rukmini Devi's first disciple from the North East of India. After Kalakshetra, Pushpa learnt under Tanjorkar Kubernath Pillai adhering to Guru-Shishya Parampara. Kubernath Pillai was the nephew of the legendary Guru of this dance form- Chokalingam Pillai. At 18 years of her age she performed in the Sabhas in Chennai with her Guru Kubernath Pillai as the Nattuvanar. She pursued her studies in Bharatanatyam in Bangalore (present day Bengaluru) under Guru - Muthaiya Pillai, son of the legendary Chokalingam Pillai. Simultaneously, Pushpa learnt the Kathak Dance form from Guru Vishnu Vaishalkar of the Jaipur Gharana and later on from Guru Shambhu Maharaj who formed the Lucknow Gharana. She learnt Sattriya Dance from Bhabananda Borbayan. (<http://www.pushpabhuyan.com>)

During the celebration of the 50 years of India's Independence the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (I.C.C.R.), and autonomous body under the ministry of External Affairs invited Pushpa and her troupe to be a part of a cultural delegation to U.S.A. where she performed in cities like Los Angeles, Salt Lake City etc. She showcased Sattriya Dance in her repertoire while performing in these cities. Her Dance recital in Salt Lake City U.S.A. was attended by a large number of university students and professors of the city, along with the local governor. It would be safe to say that she is one of the first to introduce Sattriya Dance to the western world. She was bestowed with Padmashree Award in the year 2002 for her contributions towards the field of Indian Classical Dance. Unfortunately, due to a major surgery in the spinal cord in 2003 forced her to bid adieu to dance. (Ibid.) Though there have been many criticisms around her 'Sattriya' performance, she nonetheless remains a pioneer who introduced this art form to the west

4.5.1.4 Sharodi Saikia

Sharodi Saikia, who learnt various dance forms in her formative years, found her calling in Sattriya. Her first lesson was in Manipuri dance under Guru Rathin Singh, then she learnt Kathak in her teens. When her father took her to mentor Raseswar Saikia Barbayan of Kamalabari Sattri, she fell in love with the dance style and for more than 35 years she has been performing and spreading the beauty of Sattriya dance. She comments

“So it was not by choice that I took to Sattriya, but out of parental wish in the beginning and later out of commitment for this beautiful form that was not known even to the people of Assam, let alone the country, till the eighties.”¹⁷

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Raseswar Saikia Borbayan by the mid 1960s had begun teaching in Guwahati. He happened to be a friend of Sharodi Saikia’s father, a leading political activist, who had earlier told her mother that when she grew up, he would initiate her into this dance form. She shares, “I started my dance lessons with Manipuri when I was just five-six years old and then in my early teens shifted to Kathak which I enjoyed doing most. Till date it remains my great love; I however did not give up Manipuri. At sixteen, after my school final, my father brought me to Guwahati to learn Sattriya from Raseswar Saikia Borbayan. I found the dance very tough but challenging and also discovered that I happened to be one of the very few to be learning it at that time. My guru wanted me to popularize it and so even before I could actually grasp the nuances of the form I was made to perform on stage. It gave me instant fame but my parents did not let me bank on it and encouraged me to take the promotion of the dance form seriously as a commitment. My guru wanted me to stop practicing Kathak and Manipuri and concentrate on Sattriya only.” (Personal Communication over Telephone with Sharodi Saikia on 14 May 2015)

She is one of the first people to develop and present a distinctive repertoire for solo performance of Sattriya dance, which traditionally was performed by a group of monks in the Sattras. This meant working on aspects of costume and adornments, music and presentation, stage craft and choreography, building a repertoire for solo performance, improving artistic expressions, simultaneously. She further reflects, “Sattriya dances form a large corpus of dance items performed during daily and occasional prayer sessions in the Sattras institutions of Assam. The dance form remained confined to the Sattras for more than five hundred years and as such very few outside the monasteries of Sattras got the opportunity to learn it. It was during the mid-fifties of the last century that it was presented for the first time to the intelligentsia and the dance world in Delhi.”¹⁸

While reflecting on her Guru’s contribution, she says,

“The dance form that is ritualistic and has been preserved, practised and cherished by the monks as a path to salvation

remained in the Sattras for more than five centuries. To bring it out for presentation for the audience outside meant teaching the form to females, frame a curriculum for it, keeping the essence of the form intact, adapting the attire for female physique, enriching the music with addition of musical instruments, searching into the inner depth of the *Sahitya* (literary text), creating a new set of rasikas, and critics, seeking official patronage etc. etc. My 'Adhyapak' (guru) late Raseswar Saikia Borbayan, was the first martyr of the process - he got expelled from the Sattras for teaching females outside the Sattras. Things are not the same any more, many monks are teaching females outside, and also in the vicinity of Sattras nowadays."¹⁹

Also a talented sitar player, Saikia runs a school of Sattriya dance called Rangayan in Guwahati and has penned a few writings on the Sattriya tradition.

4.6 Simultaneously in the Academic World

While all of this was happening, SNA initiated an elaborated documentation on the traditions of music, dance and theatre from the Sattras of Assam. In 1995, Prof. Maheshwar Neog passed away which was a setback for the research and scholarship on the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam. The work was further taken up by Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta between 1996-1997, then, a faculty in the Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, took teams from SNA to various Sattras in Majuli as well as other parts of Assam for documentation as well as a refresher tour so as to introduce them to the cultural milieu of the state.

Guwahati, had by now become the centre of pursuit of this form of art i.e. Sattriya Dance alongwith Sattriya Music. "The rigidity to keep this art form confined within the Sattras campus and that too amongst celebrate monks gradually lost its orthodoxy."²⁰ The need for modification for a performance on a proscenium stage was felt. The first workshop on "footwork and cadence of movement was held at Jorhat and then also at Dibrugarh University which also covered other aspects of the dance form. Research and thorough investigation into Sattriya dance began in the hands of senior and young scholars like Dr. K.D. Goswami"²¹, Dr. J. Mahanta and Dr. P.J. Mahanta through their scholastic as well

as popular writings in journals and periodicals. “Jagannath Mahanta was the first person to obtain the PhD Degree in Sattriya’ (Ibid.) under the supervision of Dr. K.D. Goswami and Mallika Kandali was the second one to complete her Doctoral Research under the guidance of Dr. P.J. Mahanta.

4.7 National Recognition

In the year 1999, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, a cultural celebrity and renowned composer with national fame became the Chairman of the SNA. He was then urged to take up the case of recognition of Sattriya Dance as a classical tradition of dance at the formal level with SNA. The move for the cause somehow had lost its momentum. Discussions were on all this while at the state level but not at the national level. Dr. Hazarika in his new capacity as the Chairman of the Akademi, asked the Govt. of Assam to prepare a vision document on the history and profundity of the Sattriya tradition and its justification to be recognized as a Classical tradition. The Govt. of Assam constituted a committee with Jatin Goswami, Dr. Jagannath Mahanta, Nabakamal Bhuyan and Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta as the member convener. An exhaustive report with details of its large base in terms of its history, characteristic traits, stages of development and contemporary practices was prepared by February 2000. For this to happen, a series of workshops and seminars took place in Guwahati where participants and teachers from Sattras and outside participated. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

SNA organised a Seminar-cum-Festival of Sattriya Dance Tradition, in collaboration with the Government of Assam, Guwahati between 18-20 January 2000 inaugurated by the then Governor of Assam Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha and attended by the Chairman of the Akademi and a host of dance experts. The report of the Seminar reads,

“This dance tradition has also drawn attention of the wider world of the scholars, critics and connoisseurs with its distinctive nuances.....this art form enduring as vibrant tradition in the Sattras or monasteries as a part of the bhakti cult, is however passing through a transition from the Sattria-centric ritualism to the secular world of art appreciation. There has been a new approach with experimentations going around to give this spectacular emotionally surcharged bhakti centric art an aesthetically pleasant

look without destroying its traditional flavor and nuance is at the same time acceptable to the modern proscenium audience.”²²

Delivering the key note address of the Seminar immediately after the inaugural Session, Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta outlined the salient features of the Sattriya Dance with demonstrations of distinguished Sattriya artists. Dr. Mahanta in his address said that, “the term Sattriya Dance, a modern appellation-like the Odissi-is appended to the form of dance traditionally preserve, pursued and practiced in the Sattras institution. And endowed with five hundred years of glorious past and an enduring present, the Sattriya adds a distinct dimension to the larger panorama of the Shastric Indian Dance tradition imbining the colour and raciness of the multiethnic Assamese society.”²³

Earlier in the evening in 20.02.2000 there was an informal get together of the scholar exponents, performing artists on an invitation by the then Secretary of the Akademi, Shri Jayant Kastuar in which Dr. Sunil Kothari also took part. Held in an intimate atmosphere in the Conference Hall of the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, the get together dealt with various aspects of the development of the Sattriya Dance and its recognition at the national level. Dr. Kothari emphatically stated that there is a lot to be done in respect of the development of the vocal aspect of the Sattriya Dance Music. Moreover the dance should not be treated only as a spectacle. Shri Kastuar also suggested that efforts must be made on to build up the Sattriya as a *lasyanga* presentation within the given performance space and time. He proposed that a multilayered, multipronged scheme covering all aspects of the Sattriya Dance should be taken up at various levels involving all concerned and it must be specifically result oriented so as to give a boost to and evolve a distinct performance pattern of the Sattriya Dance as a performing art. He referred to the development process undertaken in respect of the Odissi dance tradition. Shri Kastuar assured that the Akademi will certainly come forward to support such schemes at individual or institutional levels. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

In a personal conversation, with Guru Ghanakanta Bora mentioned, “...then the Sangeet Natak Akademi organised a seminar and workshop in Assam. Participants from all over Assam - from Sattras and outside Sattras were invited. Meetings and programmes happened day and night. Other folk forms from Assam were also considered and performers were asked to make their presentations. It was organised by SNA but

coordinated by Sunil Kothari. Dances, Bhaonas were showcased. I performed too. Since I went outside of the Sattrā, I was able to understand a few things. I was forced to study the Shāstras. I had never studied them earlier. *Natyashastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sri-hastamuktavali*. I studied the last one in great detail. So when I gave my demonstration, I appropriated various elements of Sātrīya Dances to the Shāstras. I showed them the difference between the feminine and the masculine. It ended in 5 days and SNA recorded everything. On the last day all the presentations were discussed and reviewed in front of all the participants. Sunil Kothari said, “I saw Sātrīya Sangeet, Sātrīya Dance, Sātrīya Bhaona. I saw them all. All the performers had a distinctive characteristic about their respective performance. But one needs to take only one route.” Likewise, Auniati and Garamur Sātrās perform very differently from that of Kamalabari Sātrās. There are 700 Sātrās in the whole of Assam, Then he consulted Jatin Goswami about which ‘*dhara*’ should be considered for a formal consideration. That’s when it was decided that the demonstration by me was most appropriate and well explained since I was able to justify them according to the shāstras. And since then the style of Kamalabari [Sātrā] was recorded and accepted for a classical recital.” (please refer Appendix II)

Following a series of activities-academic, performance-oriented, and discussions at various levels, the General Committee of the SNA, in a meeting held at Guwahati on 14 November 2000, resolved to include Sātrīya as a Major Tradition of Indian Dances and on 15 November 2000 this news was publically announced in a highly attended programme of Sātrīya Dance organized by SNA and the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Guwahati, Assam at Rabindra Bhawan by Jayanta Kastuar, the then secretary of the Akademi.²⁴

4.8 Sangeet Natak Akademi: Its “Nationalist” Guidelines

The Sangeet Natak Akademi - India's national academy for music, dance and drama - is the first National Academy of the arts set-up by the Republic of India. It was created by a resolution of the (then) Ministry of Education, Government of India, dated 31 May 1952 notified in the *Gazette of India* of June 1952. The Akademi became functional the following year, with the appointment of its first Chairman, Dr P.V. Rajamannar, and the formation of its all-India council of representatives, the General Council. The first President of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, inaugurated it on 28 January 1953 at a special

function held in the Parliament House. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, then Union Minister for Education, in his opening address at the inauguration of the Akademi, said:

“India's precious heritage of music, drama and dance is one which we must cherish and develop. We must do so not only for our own sake but also as our contribution to the cultural heritage of mankind. Nowhere is it truer than in the field of art that to sustain means to create. Traditions cannot be preserved but can only be created afresh. It will be the aim of this Akademi to preserve our traditions by offering them an institutional form... In a democratic regime, the arts can derive their sustenance only from the people, and the state, as the organized manifestation of the people's will, must, therefore, undertake ... maintenance and development [of arts] as one of [its] first responsibilities...”²⁵

Erin B. Mee in her book *Theatre of the Roots* writes,

“...varied impulses, agendas and experiments of individual artists, institutionalized and later, prescribed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), the National Academy of music, Dance and Drama in Delhi. The assumptions about theatre and culture gave rise to the movement were articulated by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), legitimized by government policy that established the Akademi and embedded in the Akademi's mission statement and activities. These were designed to create a 'national' theatre that could reflect and constitute a 'national identity...’”

“1930 to 1970 are often referred to as the years of Dance renaissance in India.”²⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s under the guidance of Dr. Suresh Awasthi, the secretary of the SNA then, the organization ‘consciously began to create a ‘national’ aesthetic.’²⁷

“In 1974, Uma Anand then Assistant Secretary at the SNA, declared the mission accomplished in an article unambiguously

titled 'Emergence of a National Theatre in India': '[A] contemporary theatre has emerged, not in any one or other corner of this diverse and large country but simultaneously in all major centres [...] which bears a definite stamp; a unity, if not uniformity; a character that can only be called national since it is composed of so many varying facets.' (1974:16). In fact, what the Akademi actually created was not a single 'national theatre' but a group of artists spread across the nation who used traditional performance in the making of their modern theatre. Through a series of festivals that they produced between 1984 and 1991, the Akademi supported those artists whom they determined were working to develop 'a theatre idiom indigenous in character, inspired by the folk/traditional theatre of the country' (SNA 1986-87: 39). This laid down the approach of the organization for years to come."²⁸

"The Akademi's charter of functions was expanded along the original lines in 1961, when the Sangeet Natak Akademi was reconstituted by the Government as a society and registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 (as amended in 1957). These functions are set down in the Akademi's Memorandum of Association, adopted at its registration as a society on 11 September 1961."²⁹ Since its inception the Akademi has been functioning as the apex body of performing arts in the country, preserving and promoting the vast intangible heritage of India's diverse culture expressed in the forms of music, dance and drama. In furtherance of its objectives the Akademi coordinates and collaborates with the governments and art academies of different States and Union Territories of India as also with major cultural institutions in the country. The Akademi establishes and looks after institutions and projects of national importance in the field of the performing arts. (www.sangeetnatak.org 24 June 2015)

The National School of Drama, set up in 1959, was the first of their national institutions of theatre and dance -- Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy in Imphal and Kathak Kendra (National Institute of Kathak Dance) in New Delhi -- The latter two were set up in 1964. (Ibid.) National Projects of Support to Kuttiyattam - the age-old Sanskrit theatre of Kerala; Chhau dances of eastern India and Sattriya traditions of Assam have been

launched subsequently. After ten years of intensive work under the Kutiyattam project, the UNESCO declared Kutiyattam as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in May 2001. (<http://kutiyattam.org/home.html>). It organizes performances of music, dance, and theatre. The Akademi Awards conferred annually on distinguished exponents of the multiple traditions of Indian music, dance, theatre and their accessory subjects, are the highest national recognition.

A new tradition was ‘invented’ and was about to be recognized by the Government of India like that of the Sattriya Performance for the proscenium stage and an urban audience. Eric Hobsbawm in his introductory chapter of the book ‘*The Invention of Tradition*’ writes, ‘Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.’³⁰

4.9 Re-Structuring of the Format for a Proscenium Stage

The National Recognition was undoubtedly a great milestone achieved in the history of Sattriya Dance. In a personal conversation with Dr. Anwesa Mahanta she reflected, “Recognition was a very important [development for] all the people related to Sattriya. Even they did not know what recognition actually meant. It was a joy but they didn’t know the tactics of classical and non-classical.” (Personal Communication with Anwesa Mahanta, please refer to Appendix III). So on 15 December 2000, a workshop was organized at Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati to discuss the dynamics of the Sattriya performance for a proscenium stage and solo recitals. Attended by 20 scholars, exponents and artists taken from Guwahati and elsewhere. After days of intense discussions and exchanges, a format was decided for the performance on the stage which was as follows: Being essentially from a *bhakti* faith, any recital on stage should reflect the spirit of its origin. So a recital should begin with an invocation both as an obeisance to the Divine and an instrument to create an ambience of serenity.

Vandana (Invocation)

Pure Dance piece: Ram Dani

Illustrative piece: Geetar Nac (literary the mimetic part based on *bhakti* poetry of the saint composers)

Elements: Shlokar Nac [Literally- Dance of the Shlokas]

Mela [Literally- Elaborate], which is a pure dance piece

Kharman [Benedictory presentation]

(Interview with Bhabanada Borbayan, Appendix IV and Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

In February 2001, this was shared with 250 participants in a two day workshop. Dr. Anwesa Mahanta, happened to be one of the first exponents to have her '*ranga-pravesh*' with ceremonial blessing from the mentor (*Adhyapak*) and the Sattradhikar . She speaks about it, “[there is the] *moholadiya* ritual, a convocation like ceremony in the Sattrra. Keeping that in mind I was given to hold the *ashirwada* ceremony which was done in 2001 immediately after my HSLC. So there his holiness the *Sattradhikar* came and gave me *Bakul Phulor Mala* a mark of blessing along with my *Adhyapak*. These were all publically done on stage. Then it was a three hours performance.” (Personal Communication with Anwesa Mahanta, please refer to Appendix III)

This was the first time indeed that presentation in the form of a *ranga-pravesh* by an upcoming dancer on a proscenium stage happened in front of an urban crowd with a structured repertoire. But there was complete acceptance and support from the Sattras. And it was another step ahead from the time of Raseswar Saikia. Anwesa says, “It was a new thing. The entire repertoire was decided earlier. My father [in consultation with my *Adhyapak*] had a major role to play in the foundation because it had come to the proscenium.” (Ibid.) And it was modeled on the *moholadiya* ritual of the Sattrra. So students who have been seriously learning and preparing themselves to perform on stage should also have some kind of a standard. “In the presence of the Sattrra exponents, it should be accepted that they are trained to some standards and it should be seen whether a performer is actually eligible to perform. And in this regard the mentor should take the lead as in the Sattrra, where the *Adhyapak* always takes the lead because it is his disciple who is to perform. And the honours are done to the Sattradhikar.” (Ibid.)

Anwesa further remembers, “In that *ranga-pravesh*- the Natun Kamalabari Sattrra did the first *purva-ranga*, the second one was done by Uttar Kamalabari Sattrra. So it happened in that way. The Sattradhikars of Natun Kamalabari Sattrra blessed me with the *nirmali* followed by a *rag-repani*, another *purva-ranga* to the actual dance done by the Uttar

Kamalabari Sattrā. The ceremony happened in Rabindra Bhawan [Guwahati], and consisted of two parts: first with *purusha* numbers in male costume and then the *prakriti* numbers in female costume. Meanwhile the *Ekahariya* concept has also been introduced now. One more important thing is that, in a way, it was a new introduction of a formal set up in the presence of a spectacular audience invited by my parents who were wondering. They asked what is she going to dance? In Sattrā, do we have that kind of a repertoire? Earlier whatever people had seen, it wasn't a concert kind of a thing. It was a half an hour presentation or a fifteen minute presentation in which a dancer mostly used to have just presented a *Cali* number. And that way the feminine number was more [popularly] known. But for the first time a lot of work on the male presentation with illustration was done. So in a way, it was a very new introduction even for the public.” (Ibid.)

Whatever had been discussed during the Seminar before the Akademi's recognition came about on the proscenium stage regarding repertoire, text, music, time and space management, costumes etc. came to reality, the pattern of which would be followed by the coming generations of “Sattriya Dancers.”

4.10 Theatre of the Roots?

“...‘Modern’ theatre in India developed as part of the colonial enterprise in three port cities established and built up by the British East India Company - Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (present day Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai respectively). In the nineteenth century the British introduced modern European theatre to these colonial cities in three ways: by touring productions to entertain their expatriate communities engaged in various administrative jobs; by supporting productions of English plays staged by the expatriates themselves in newly erected British style play houses; and by teaching English drama in Indian universities where Shakespeare was presented as the apex of the British civilization. The spread of English Drama was part of colonising Indian culture; it was designed not only to shape artistic activity but to impose on Indians a way of understanding

and operating in the world and to assert cultural superiority and hegemony in a sense.”³¹

The urban middle-class in the mid-nineteenth century, especially the ‘intellectuals’ began to build their own proscenium stages. This began in Calcutta. (Mee 1-2) It started with the translation of “English plays into Indian languages and to write their own plays in the style of the modern European drama to which they were being exposed.”³² Erin B. Mee opines that, “colonial theatre’s actual influence on modern Indian theatre has been both overstated and understated, it is clear that the British introduced the proscenium stage to India, which changed the performer-audience relationship and the ways in which audiences participated in productions.”³³ Whatever may be the ‘colonial agenda’, they did commercialize theatre-going. This turned Indian theatre into a ‘commodity’ instead of a community event, which was either religious or festive in nature like that of *Ankiya Bhaona*. Most significantly, however, they introduced a conceptualisation of theatre as ‘dramatic literature,’- a construction that shaped the very definition of theatre, and the aesthetics of the emerging modern Indian theatre.

“The definition of modern theatre-playwright-initiated, text-driven and plot-based- marginalised indigeneous, performance-driven genres of theatre based on actor improvisation, composed of short unrelated pieces of entertainment and/or of a number of song-and-movement sequences and/or taking place over an entire night or a series of days and nights. Genres with these dramaturgical structures came to be thought of as ‘theatrical’ and not as theatre per se.”³⁴

There was an exclusive definition of theatre popularized as ‘dramatic literature’ contributed to a construction of theatre history that “effectively erased several centuries of performance-based theatre”³⁵ prevailing in villages, sacred spaces (like the *Namghar* in Assam) of India. According to this definition, there was no theatre between the decline of Sanskrit drama around 1000 CE and the rise of modern drama in the nineteenth century (even if there prevailed any vibrant tradition like the *Ankiya Bhaona*, it remained in obscurity outside the ‘elite’ knowledge) “because there were very few theatrical

genres that produced dramatic literature as a standalone product outside the context of performance.”³⁶

Sattriya was one of the many and varied performance genres throughout India, prior to the imposition of text-dominated theatre, ‘while one of its kind in terms of “artistic goals and aesthetics, dramaturgical structures, social roles, political agendas, the specific cultures they reflect and the regional languages of performance, were and continue to be similar (only) in that they are not staging of dramatic literature.”³⁷ This does not mean they do not work with literary texts, but that they are not ‘literature that walks’.

“The definition of theatre as dramatic literature was connected to the imploration and imposition of literary culture and the presumption of the imported culture as superior. It created a cultural divide between what came to be seen as high/English/urban/modern/theatre and what was categorized as low/Indian/rural/traditional/performance. Of course the dichotomy, between, ‘modern/Western/theatre, and, traditional/Indian /performance is neither as clear-cut nor as absolute as it appears. Many traditional genres, too in the process, absorbed techniques and aesthetics from colonial theatre, while the conventions of colonial theatre were appropriated, undermined, adapted and redirected as they were adopted. Nonetheless, the perception of a cultural dichotomy was very real, and it profoundly influenced the movement that came to be known as the theatre of roots which crystallized as a strategic response to colonial definitions of modern theatre.”³⁸

4.11 Challenging the Colonial Aesthetic

“Because [modern] theatre was used to disseminate colonial culture and demonstrate cultural superiority, it became a powerful tool for some theatre activists to challenge that very colonial authority, both before and after India’s independence in 1947.”³⁹ A number of playwrights and directors, after independence, turned to “classical dance, religious ritual, martial arts and popular entertainment (genres that had come to be identified as ‘Indian’) along with Sanskrit aesthetic theory to see what dramaturgical structures, acting

styles and staging techniques could be used to create an ‘indigenous’ non-realistic style of production that in turn could define an ‘Indian theatre’.”⁴⁰

“This impulse became known as the ‘theatre of roots’ movement- a post independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual practices, performer-spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance. The movement sought new ways of structuring experience, new ways of perceiving the world and new modes of social interaction that were not dictated by the values and aesthetics of the colonizers or west dominated perspectives.”⁴¹

This movement was the “first conscious effort to produce a body of work that synthesized modern European theatre and traditional Indian performance- creating a new, hybrid theatrical form.”⁴² Erin B. Mee quotes director M.K. Raina (b. 1948) in her book, who states, “We are not going back to tradition, as some of us claim. We are in the process of creating new thinking, new sensibilities, and therefore new forms. Perhaps the fusion of some of the traditional forms and contemporary struggles may give birth to vital new forms, representative of contemporary Indian reality.”⁴³

Thus efforts are driven, more particularly in the post-independence theatre in India to revisit the traditional forms and to contemporaries them to modern realities and situations. Simultaneously, other performance traditions such as music and dance, which were once preserves in the temples or other sacred spaces, royal courts, public spheres, have also been drawn inevitably to the same proscenium brought about by the colonizers.

4.12 Government Agendas

“To create a modern theatre that is not Western in post-independence India is to challenge acultural theories of modernity and definitions of modern theatre originating in the West.”⁴⁴ Mee talks about the two aspects of the theatre of the roots, which were- (1) the impulses of the individual artists whose work comprises the movement; and (2) the political agendas of the government agencies that funded and gave institutional support to the movement, articulating its goals in ways that did not always accurately represent the perspectives of the artists. Even though the ‘impetus’ for the theatre of roots

movement belonged “to the post independence period, most of the directors and playwrights are still working on the format and the production styles, and their work continues to have an enormous impact on contemporary theatre in India.”⁴⁵

Mee states that, “the origins of the roots movement lie in the varied impulses, agendas and experiments of individual artists, but the creative manifestations of this work were formalized, institutionalized and later, prescribed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA).”⁴⁶ She further writes,

“The assumptions about theatre and other cultural expressions that gave rise to the movement were articulated by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlala Nehru (1889-1964), legitimized by the government policy that established the Akademi and embedded in the Akademi’s mission statement and activities [referred earlier in Chapter 1]. These were designed to create a ‘national’ theatre that could reflect and constitute a ‘national’ identity and, in the wake of independence, partition and the complicated integration of princely states into the Union articulate India as a unified, unique nation.”⁴⁷

As we have discussed in many words, Indian theatre is not devoid of its religious or festive contexts. But in an attempt to unite the then princely states as one India and revive the ‘Indianess’ in our culture pre and post independence, the government enforced resurrection of some dance forms such as Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi etc. The standardized format made while reviving them left a permanent impact on the ‘stage-aesthetics’ of every performing art form the government then wished to foster. As M.K. Raina explained, (discussed earlier in the chapter), we did not go back to our roots i.e. the original context of the performance but created new ‘traditions’. These traditions weren’t exactly old and neither exactly new as they did carry a lot of elements from their respective pasts. They were more hybrid-performance structures made for the ‘modern’ stage. This is very starkly evident in the case of Sattriya as unlike other dance forms, it did not have to be resurrected as the living culture still exists in its original space and context. But its appropriation according to the requirement of the Government of India makes it an interesting subject of study.

4.13 Discussion

The migrations of members of the Sattras, and the relocation of entire Sattra communities, partially due to individual innovation attempts and also caused by natural disasters, changed the face of the dances from the Sattras which now is known as Sattriya Dance. The second schematic model given by David Clarke (Fig. 3) clearly shows the ‘oscillating subsystems’ over the passage of time. There was a complete collapse of the sacred-profane dichotomy. A ritual performance which was once (and until very recently) was preserved and nurtured in the closed and rigid environs of celibate monasticism of the Sattras, now came out in the open to embark on a new journey. Naturally, it has changed many meanings, characteristics and dynamics of this intangible culture- the Sattriya Dance. It all began with the efforts and attempt (it would be safe to say foresight as well) of late Pitambar Deva Goswami to take the performances to a secular stage and to encourage women in learning the dances. Furthermore, the bold step taken by Raseshwar Saikia Barbayan to leave the confines of the Sattra, (which no one prior to that day had ever done). These displacements and new inclusions affected the eco-system of the Sattriya structure. The religious, social and the psychological subsystems which were initially intertwined with the ways of the Sattras, came out in a modern, globalised world with new opportunities. It began with a change in the survival system i.e. the economic condition of the celibate monks. Once completely dependent on the Sattra’s economy, now these monks took teaching jobs in private and government institutions to be able to support themselves and were independent in able to give a new direction to this ritual performance. It changed the psyche of the performers of today. With the change of the ‘place’ and ‘space’, the original context of the ritual changed. The nuances of rituals became free of the hierarchy and closeness of the Sattras and now could convey an independent meaning. Its basic material culture such as the costume and the jewellery was modified according to the need of the stage and the women dancers. Women could not have danced in ‘*dhotis*’ like the monks. The textile of course remained the same as it is available easily in the whole of Assam, but was bought from vendors and not woven locally.

David Clarke’s model of dynamic equilibrium (Fig. 4 and 5) where the various sociocultural subsystems i.e. the religious, social, economic, psychological and the material culture system, network themselves within a single ‘sociocultural system and its total environment system’ that includes ecology of- flora, fauna, climate and geology

with a passage of time. 'The environment of a cultural system expresses the attributes of that system and their varying and successive states in time and space.' In Chapter 3 I attempted to investigate into the relationship between various 'sociocultural subsystem' in the cradle of Sattriya Dance, that is, Sattras, particularly the Kamalabari Sattras in Majuli. The dance form, to date, still exists there in its 'pristine' form mainly because of its geographical isolation from the mainland (Majuli being a river island). Naturally, if I may say- the 'purity' of the performance is in its pristine state since it is practiced as a ritual in these Vaishnavite monasteries with the spiritual and cultural access of not only the inmates but also the villages around. A unique feature of this neo-Vaishnavism of Assam, initiated by Sankaradeva was that the *sringara rasa* (the erotic) was very systematically left out making Assam's Vishnavism (initiated by Sankaradeva and later propagated by his disciples) to be one of its kinds as Vaishnavism in many other parts of India, circles around the sensuous love for the Divine. Sankaradeva, travelled a lot and is believed to have come across various thinkers and scholars from other schools of Vaishnavism, one integral part being that Vaishnavism from Orissa and Bengal which preaches the sensuous love between the duo of Radha and Krishna. It is beyond doubt that Sankaradeva was aware of the concept of 'duality' in Vaishnavism epitomizing the love between the duo which symbolises the surrender and devotion in Krishna *bhakti*, the *rasa* that is the prime emotion of being one with the Lord. In all the Ankiya Nats and other compositions, composed by Sankaradeva and his apostles including Madhavdeva, the prime emotion is that of *bhakti* but of course, with the feeling of *dasya* (literally: servant) or *vatsalya* (literally: motherly love) even if it is in the Rasar Nac or Gopir Nac (*Rasleela* Dance or Dance by the *Gopis*). It is rather intriguing to observe that the *sringara rasa* has been carefully played down. Whatever *sringara* element the poets delineate is consummated in the *dasya*. Anyway, this became even more rigid over a period of time and became a basis of the celibate order in Assam Vaishnavism. This absence of *sringara* enforced 'purity' of faith (similar to that of Roman Catholicism or celibate sects of Buddhism). In upholding this 'purity', it enabled the Sattras administration to claim a kind of religious superiority as they were the only ones to have renounced the world and dedicated themselves to the 'service' of the Lord. It has also led to the absence of the female gender from this sect (however, all other three sects are domestic orders). With, complete dedication to the services to the Sattras and its functions, with no other worldly distractions, under such stringent codes of living, it was easier for the celibate order to have grown and developed into a highly stylised ritual

performance. But with the passage of time and inevitable changes in technology, climate, geology i.e. Majuli suffers from heavy soil erosion and flood caused by the harsh currents of the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries, amidst which Majuli is located. Every year a village or two is lost to the Brahmaputra river, such as in 1974 when the whole of Kamalabari Sattrra (now located in Titabor, Jorhat District, Assam) was lost to the water. This dislocation, caused by an unavoidable natural disaster, led to a dramatic change in the history of Sattriya Dance. Having no place to live, the monks of this Sattrra, for the first time were forced to leave Majuli and struggle for their own lives. Even though the Government of Assam provided the Sattrra with land to re-establish itself, it was nothing in comparison to what it had in Majuli. This not only changed the entire economics of the Sattrra, but it also lost a lot of its 'celibate' disciples to the 'outer' world. Even though a few years back, Raseswar Saikia along with some other monks had to leave the Sattrra for disciplinary reasons, i.e. for taking women students, the change was not as grave and huge as it has been now. By the time the Kamalabari Sattrra reconstructed itself, almost 2 years had passed and many monks like Ghanakanta Bora had opted for domestic lives. They are still associated with the Sattrra very closely but they reside in Guwahati, which is the capital of Assam and is about a ten hours journey away or elsewhere now.

The religious subsystem which dominated the entire culture and was inseparable from the social and the psychological systems now are independent features. With the travel of the gurus nationwide, the students now came not only from Assam but also from different states. It was still probable for the Assamese students to be a part of some Sattrra or the other but for others, this wasn't the case at all. This took away the 'religious context' from the dance form and gave it a much more objective meaning, that being of the language of the dance itself. And this changed the face of the Sattriya Dance. This intangible heritage came to be seen as a performing art form, independent of its contextual tags of religiosity and rituality. No art form in the world can survive without support from its connoisseurs. So it almost became a necessity to promote this performance art form not only its publicity but to spread the knowledge of this age old tradition locally as well as nationally. In one of the conversations I had with Prof. P.J. Mahanta, he reflected that not many people in Assam, that is, outside Majuli knew of the existence of such a rich and dense tradition within the confines of the mighty Brahmaputra river till the early part of the 20th century. Even if people had a basic

knowledge of the 'ritual performance', they did not know of the richness of it i.e. it was based on a solid grammar, text, music and percussion along with other visual art forms all forming the umbrella 'Sattriya' heritage (Fig. 6). This was a testimony to the complete collapse of the sacred-profane dichotomy that the Sattras had upheld for such a long time.

The changes in the performance space brought two major changes in the characteristic and the meaning of the Sattriya dance with its spread into newer spaces, it became a cultural symbol of the state of Assam and it led to the institutionalization of this already institutionalized dance form in a new set up. As K. N. Panniker says, "culture is either a vehicle of nationalism or an instrument of nationalist mobilization"⁴⁸, the new image of this living intangible heritage formed a part of the state's intention and strategies that were employed to gain 'legitimacy' and regional representation in the national arena. The 'regional cultural formation' that was the idea prevalent from post-colonial/independent India, became the guiding factor of the ongoing expansion or growing understanding of the Sattriya Dance. When practiced in the Sattras, the dances as ritual performance had the purpose of upholding the smooth functioning of the Sattras structure. But now on a 'modern' and a secular stage it seeks to comply with the nation's definition of 'high art' i.e. the 'classical' dance form the north-eastern state that is also still alive as sacred worship, unlike the other 'resurrected' classical dance forms such as *Bharatnatyam*, *Kuchipudi* or created classical dance forms such as *Odissi* and *Manipuri*. The word 'classical' in the context of performing art forms of India has a special meaning. They refer to the performance structures which either belonged to the temple or the court (*kathak* being the only one in this category), with a solid grammar defining the body language based on the philosophical text. This 'selective appropriation ...of [the] traditional cultural practice' followed the 'integrative-disintegrative tendencies of Indian polity' leading to the invention of a new tradition altogether. Under this meaning the Intangible heritage of Assam, came to communicate the 'regional identity' of the people of the state and the cultural elite. In the Sattras, the Sattriya heritage meant and continues to mean the rites and rituals which had been orally passed down from generations, but as a dance form from the 'state' it referred to the 'living culture' called the Sattras. In other words, the institution became the symbol of heritage- both- tangible and intangible.



Fig. 71 MANIRAM DUTTA MUKTIYAR



Fig. 72 RASESWAR SAIKIA BARBAYAN

(Courtesy: Ghanakanta Bora)



Fig. 73 GARIMA HAZARIKA

[Source: Frontline, Volume 27- Issue 19, 11-24 September 2010

<http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2719/stories/20100924271906400.htm> seen on 15 June 2015]



Fig. 74 INDIRA P.P. BORA

[Source: Indira's Dance Academy- Kalabhumi's Website

<http://www.kalabhumiindia.com/uk.htm> seen on 15 June 2015]



Fig. 75 Pushpa Bhuyan

[Source: Pushpa Bhuyan's Website

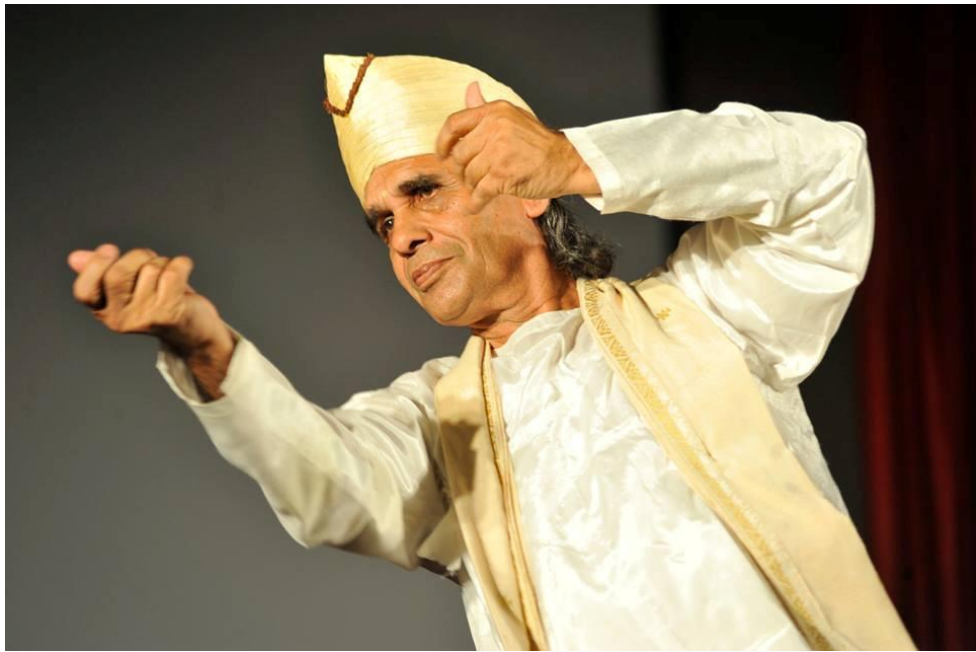
http://www.pushpabhuyan.com/gallery_1.html seen on 15 June 2015]



Fig. 76 Sharodi Saikia

[Source: The Hindu Website, Article Published on 8 January 2010

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/where-dance-blends-with-scholarship/article788789.ece> seen on 15 June 2015]



Figs. 77 AND 78 GHANAKANTA BORA PERFORMING ON STAGE
(Courtesy: Anwesa Mahanta)



Fig. 79 ANWESA MAHANTA IN A *PURUSHA BHANGIMA* ON STAGE
(Courtesy: Amuthan Vivekh Kumar)



Fig. 80 ANWESA MAHANTA IN A *PRAKRITI* NUMBER ON STAGE
(Courtesy: Inni Singh)

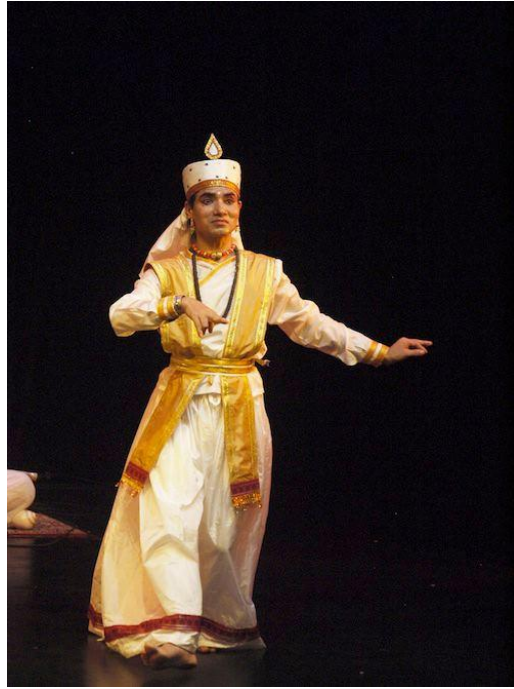


Fig. 81 BHABANANDA BARBAYAN PERFORMING *SUTRADHARI NAC* ON STAGE

(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig. 82 BHABANANDA BARBAYAN IN A *PURUSHA* NUMBER ON STAGE

(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig. 83 GARGI GOSWAMI IN A *PRAKRITI* NUMBER ON STAGE
(Courtesy: Gargi Goswami)



Fig. 84 GARGI GOSWAMI IN A *PURUSHA* NUMBER ON STAGE
(Courtesy: Gargi Goswami)



Fig. 85 MALLIKA KANDALI ON STAGE



Figs. 86 AND 87 *BHAKATS* OF UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA PERFORMING AN EXCERPT FROM AN ANKIYA NAT ON STAGE

(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Figs. 88 AND 89 *BHAKATS* OF UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA PERFORMING IN
PARIS, FRANCE
(Courtesy: Emmanuelle Freget)

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Endnotes for Chapter 4

1. As recorded in the chronicles of the Ahom kingdom known as *Buranji*, Sattriya performances, especially *Ankiya Bhaona*, were held in the Ahom royal court as several Sattras were invited on various occasions to present Bhaona by the Ahom kings. The invitee Sattras too had to oblige the royal order and performed *bhaona* with its ritualism in a make-shift arrangement. Thus the highly ritualized performance tradition appeared on a secular space in the 18th century. Ghanakanta Bora narrated a story prevailing in the Sattras circle that once the Ahom king invited the Kamalabari Sattras to present *Cali Nac* (an important in the repertoire of the Sattriya Dance) in the Ahom royal court. The Sattras monks fearing to present a ritual prayer service always performed in the *Namghar* in a non-religious space and occasion, and also disobeying order of the king took a middle path of presenting an improvised performance with changes in the dance number. Thus dance of the Sattras too, like the *Ankiya Bhaona*, moved to find a place as a secular presentation back in the 18th century- excerpted from the contents of the interview taken on 9 May 2015).
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