

## ABSTRACT

Performances of Indian arts- music, dance, theatre and such others in most cases are suffused with religious significance and punctuated by ritual practice. The traditional Indian theatre, starting from the classical age to the various regional forms that started growing from late medieval age, may not be discussed without taking into careful considerations its ritual and religious context and significance. 'In the eastern and southern regions of India, 'ritual performance' has played a central role in the development in some forms of scripted theatrical genres.' Some genres of ritual performance and many theatrical genres enact their own version of dramatic episodes based on epic and mythological sources. Not surprisingly, as scripted theatrical genres emerged historically, some ritual performances or extant modes of staging and performed important scenes depicting battles between the forces of good and evil were appropriated in them. Before turning attention to this special class of performances which we call 'ritual performances', 'it will be helpful to describe three closely related but distinct relationships between ritual and performance in traditional Indian performance: (1) rituals as performance, (2) rituals within a performance genre, and (3) ritual performances.'

'Rituals, ritualised performances and other ritually informed performative events lay the foundation of what is defined and contested as a particular group's past, heritage and cultural identity.' Rituals, thus, must be understood as a means of claiming and getting access to different kinds of resources. 'Rituals which came to be identified intangible heritage in today's context are strategically employed by different groups all over the world to make their claims public, to improve and negotiate their position on a local, national or global platform.' Aspects of divergence and conflict, as well as those of convergence and consensus are involved in the production, preservation and commodification of cultural heritage. 'We often argue that the recent interest in heritage and cultural identity derives from the distinct values and interests of the agents involved towards experiences of modernity, globalization, or national politics and migration.' The potential of this study lies in the recognition of such ritualized performances as transnational and cross-cultural phenomena that are not clearly tied to and defined via national territories and identities anymore, and which demand new theoretical and methodological approaches towards the discussion of ritual and heritage.

Rituals and ritualized performances undoubtedly play an important role in the shaping of a cultural and partly globalised imaginary identity of groups of people, as they relate to and experience in their everyday world. 'This becomes crucial to our understanding of the different ways in which people shape ritual practices when creatively constructing a 'useable past', an intangible heritage.' Rituals are especially suited for such an endeavour, because they give people the idea that what is performed, presented or constructed in front of and by them is part of a larger picture, through which they can impact their environment. We argue that a set of theoretical considerations is relevant to grasp better the relationship between ritual, heritage and identity. Among these is the concept of ritual as a form of cultural property that perennially is an issue of pertinent importance. Rituals can become an important point of reference for what people understand as 'culture'. 'In this context, to own a culture by means of ritual performance also enables agents to create identity as belonging at once to a particular place and a particular group at a particular point of time.' In this line of argument, trading rituals as one's own cultural product thus, turning rituals into heritage does not render these ritual traditions 'dead' in the sense that it mummifies them. In this process, 'aesthetic considerations are also equally important as they also qualify or shape agents' position within a discursive field.'

Sattriya or *Sattriya Nritya*, today, is one among the eight principal Classical Dance Traditions coming of and representing the state of Assam after receiving its recognition in the year 2000 from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, being the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama in India which works as an agency towards promotion of the traditions of performing arts spreading over the vast geographical and cultural space of the country. Whereas some of the other major traditions of Indian dance and theatre too had to be 'revived' in different periods of India's history, Sattriya has remained a living tradition since its creation by the fountainhead of *Bhakti* Movement or Neo-Vaishnavite Renaissance, as it is often called in Assam, Sankardeva, in 15<sup>th</sup>- 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Originally practiced and popularised by the monastic order in the Sattras i.e. the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam as offering of prayer to their Divine, Sattriya Dance (as it is known as today) took shape as a vibrant form mostly during the 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> centuries emerging from the performance of Bhaona or *Ankiya Bhaona*, the Vaishnavite theatre, written and directed by saint and social reformer Sankardeva (1449-1568), and his principal disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596).

Over the centuries, it has become intimately connected with the Assamese life and culture. From Majuli to Koch Behar (now in West Bengal), the Sattras with its diverse forms of ritual art practices dominates the social landscape of Assam and some of its neighbouring states and the entire state is culturally integrated into one whole by this network of Sattras. Today, the number of Sattras in Assam is well over five hundred with numerous Vaishnava householders affiliated to one or the other Sattras. The preservation of the Sattras has gained a larger dimension at various levels of political, social and cultural policy formulations in the light of the fact that they retain, pursue and preserve huge trajectories of cultural resources like manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value and a set of enduring traditions of art including music, dance and theatre. The Sattras had observed and maintained certain rigid disciplines and austerities within their walls and, until the first half of the 20th century. And this dance style was performed in a highly 'grammatised' manner by male dancers of the monastic order. In the second half of the 20th century, *Sattriya Nritya* moved from the sanctum of the Sattras to the metropolitan stage in the wake of the political moves of cultural heritage, identity and secular practices of art. Once the domain of celibate male monks, it is now performed by male as well as female dancers outside the Sattras order.

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Certain groups of Sattras followers undertook a move to hold the performances of parts of the large repertoire of the dances by Sattras exponents on select religio-cultural occasions, not without their rural rigorous, outside the Sattras premises. The sparkling beauty of the performances led the art cognoscenti in Assam to identify the dance form as a singular part of Assam's cultural heritage and paved the way for its promotion and wider understanding at the national level.

At different stages of history in post-independence India concerted moves were also undertaken by scholars, connoisseurs and art practitioners to urge the Union Government

to accept or recognize Sattriya Dance as a major classical Dance Tradition of India like the others which finally came in 2000.

The 'National' recognition put Sattriya dance at par with all other major dance traditions like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri etc. This announcement has brought this dance form which was already recognized and identified as an intangible heritage and a classic art by the larger community life in Assam, to a focus of national attention, an increase in its respect and it also paved the way for Sattriya dance being projected and presented in the national arena through the official agencies of the state. But this has also brought new challenges before the people associated with pursuing, preserving, propagating and developing Sattriya Dance. In relooking at an age old ritual performance, before an audience having no religious attachment to the Vaishanava ritual or philosophy, as a 'performing art form' to be performed at a secular platform. This governmental manoeuvre raised problematic issues that resonate at many levels. It raises several questions of intervention, and ownership, of appropriation of a lived and living tradition, questions about motivation, cultural property and its management, and the future of the style and profiles of practitioners. Sattriya today stands in a matrix of an intersecting system of religious belief, ritual and faith, globalization and modernity. But above all it leaves a lack of clarity regarding the meaning of 'heritage' in a Sattriya Performance.

The safeguarding of a ritual would seem to offer quite different challenges than preserving or restoring a physical structure, and it is not at all clear how this can be achieved. Certainly rituals can be recorded, resurrected if defunct, and taught to new participants. However, if, as argued earlier, heritage is an individual experience, then the participants or observers of these 'safeguarded' rituals would just experience them differently from the original participants. The notion of a ritual practice being endangered also raises the question that the existence of such endangerment is itself a clear indication that the ritual no longer fulfils the purposes for which it was created, for if it were still relevant and meaningful, it would not be endangered and in need of protection. The protected ritual is now quite different in its purpose and meaning - survival as a form, not a significant meaning - has become the objective. The same occurs, of course, with physical structures, which, once designated as a monument, change their character and

meaning through the course of time and history. However, what could be called the 'preservation paradox' is even more evident with intangible heritages., The attempt to resist change through the inscription of objects as preserved monuments, whether tangible or intangible, actually causes fundamental change. Not only do we view and experience it differently as a consequence of that designation, we see it as a different phenomenon also.

Mostly, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is passed orally within a community, and while there may be individuals who are known tradition bearers, ICH is often broader than one individual's own knowledge or skills. Intangible cultural heritage is slightly different from the discipline of oral history, the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information (specifically, oral tradition), based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. ICH attempts to preserve cultural heritage 'with' the people or community by protecting the processes that allow traditions and shared knowledge to be passed on while oral history seeks to collect and preserve historical information obtained from individuals and groups.

In spite of all the efforts made at the international level about safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in India no effort was visible in India envisaging or preparing any guideline or promulgating any act or rule at the Government level. More precisely, the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has only "The Antiquities and Art Treasure Act, 1972 and 1973 which are primarily for the protection and preservation of antiquities and art treasures. According to the Act, an antiquity includes coins, sculptures, paintings and works of art and craftsmanship that are not less than one hundred years old. It just seeks to regulate the trade in such objects rather than imposing a total prohibition on such activity. There is no mention of Safeguarding the Tangible or the Intangible Heritage in the Act. The Govt. Agencies in this case the IGNCA or the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama, would do their level best, but would not come out of the paradigm of their respective frameworks. In absence of any working framework or paradigm, it not only is difficult but is impossible to try and safeguard the Intangible Heritage in a concrete manner.

This thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction, presents an overview of the thesis. To set the pace of the study, it gives a background of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, its institutional structure and its religious sects. This chapter also defines the scope of the study i.e. subtly introducing the theoretical parameters in which the forthcoming chapter would progress. It also clearly demarcates the possibilities and the limitations in this study, gives an overview of the literature surveyed.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Paradigms, introduces relevant theoretical concepts that have helped the scholar to understand various existing social structures and changes in the context of the Sattriya performance as an intangible heritage and it also introduces the corpus of Sattriya traditions.

Chapter 3: Sattriya: An Enduring Ritual Tradition, explores and discusses the tradition of dances from the Sattras as it stands today in its geographical, religious and social context. The performance traditions in the Sattras have grown and developed into extremely fine and stylized and grammatical art forms over the centuries right from its inception in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when its fountainhead, Sankardeva introduced *Ankiya Nat* as a language to perform his first play *Cihna Yatra* followed by other plays. And now it stands as a religious umbrella of the religious followers and makes stands them out as a unique identity within the country as well as within the state i.e. Assam. This chapter introduces the details of the people and the community following this religious faith, the place where it flourished, the elements of the ‘ritual tradition’, the space i.e. the performance arena of the ritual and the aesthetics which bind it together.

Chapter 4: Shift in Paradigm: From *Namghar* to Proscenium, outlines the contemporary history of the Sattriya Dance. What makes this dance form interesting is that it is a living dance practiced on sacred space in the Sattras form, still practiced with all its austerities and ‘rigidity’ in its place of development i.e. Majuli (a river island in the heart of the Brahmaputra river in the state of Assam, India) alongside being performed as a classical dance form from this state for a ‘secular’ and an urban audience. Presently, intertwined by the ‘national’ interests of the Government, Sattriya has become a cultural identity marker of Assam and its people. This chapter also explores the micro-histories within a huge movement and shift that took place, changing the whole paradigm of Sattriya Dance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, summarises all the other chapters and throws light on the changing trend in the intangible heritage of Assam- Sattriya Dance. It discusses the changes in the context and the content in this centuries old ritual performance, the changes in the perception of Heritage, Ritual and Identity formation and the fear of museumification and vernacularisation.