CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Performances of Indian art- 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 consideration 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 of some forms of scripted theatrical genres."[1] 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."[2] 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."[3]

"Rituals, ritualised performances and other ritually informed performative events lay the foundation for what is defined and contested as a particular group's past, heritage and cultural identity."[4] 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."[5]

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."[6] 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 as it assumes new artistic status on the world stage.

Rituals and ritualized performances undoubtedly play an important role in the shaping of a cultural identity of groups of people, as they relate to and experience 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."[7] 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."[8] 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."[9]

Sattriya or *Sattriya Nritya*,[10] coming out of and representing the state of Assam today, is one among the eight principal Classical Indian Dance Traditions[11] having received its recognition in the year 2000 from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama in India. This agency works towards the promotion of the traditions of performing arts spreading over the vas geographical and cultural space of the country[12]. 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 founder of Vaishnavism in Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva, since 15th century. Originally practised and popularised by the monastic order in the Sattras i.e. the Vaishnave Monasatries of Assam as offering of prayer to their Divine, this took shape as a vibrant form mostly during the 15th -16th centuries as a part of the performance of Bhaona (or Ankiya Bhaona, the Vaishnavite theatre), written and

directed by saint and social reformer Sankaradeva (1449-1568), and his principal disciple Madhavadeva (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 Sattra, 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 Vaisnava householders affiliated to one or the other Sattra. 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 such as manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value and a set of enduring traditions of art including music, dance and theatre. (Participant Observation)

The Sattras had observed and maintained certain rigid disciplines and austerities within their walls and, until the first half of the 20th century 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 Sattra order. (Personal Communication and Observation)

Certain groups of Sattra followers undertook a move to hold the performances of parts of the large repertoire of the dances by Sattra exponents on select religio-cultural occasions, not without their ritual rigour, outside the Sattra premises. The sparkling beauty of the performances propelled the art cognoscenti in Assam to move to identify the dance form as a signal part of Assam's cultural heritage and paved the way for its promotion and wider understanding at the national level.[13] (Mahanta 2007: 71-94) 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 brought Sattriya dance on par with all other major dance traditions including Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri. This announcement has brought this dance form to a focus of national attention, an increase in its respect and has 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, an age old ritual performance, in relooking at it as a 'performing art form'. 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.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Keeping the above historical, aesthetic and political considerations in view the present research sets its subject problems as:

- To analyse the working of the Sattriya Performance Traditions in the sacred precincts and their ritual significance.
- To study and map the journey of the Sattriya Dance from the geographically insulated Majuli Island to the secular space of urban audience.
- To explore a "living tradition" i.e. the Sattriya Performance, as Intangible Heritage in the absence of Government Rules or Regulations or Guidelines.
- To study the change in the performativity and dynamics of the Intangible Heritage through examining the change in the Sattriya Performance.
- To investigate the discourse of Museumification in the Sattriya Performance with the geographical changes and national recognition.

As cited above, it is necessary to understand the history of Vaishnavism in Assam and the initial construction of the faith in the light of Vishnavite movement in India and Assam with some discussion on the environment in which Sankardeva, the initiator of the faith worked and brought about the cultural resurgence.

1.2 History of Vaishnavism in Assam and the Initial Construction of Faith

The Vaishanavite movement in Assam, also called the Bhakti Movement, as part of the pan-Indian resurgence of *bhakti* with total surrender and unflinching devotion to the Divinity, was initiated by Sankardeva in the closing decades of the 15th century of the Christian era. The movement spanning over a period of two centuries was remarkable for its multilayered contributions to the Cultural History of the land and it ushered an all pervasive cultural resurgence to Assam and its people which then constituted of three political states- Asam, Kamrup and Cooch-Behar (now Koch Behar in West Bengal). Within two hundred years of its inception it spread over the entire Brahmaputra Valley. With the disintegration of the Koch-kingdom, its western part comprising modern Cooch-Behar gradually lost contact with the rest of Assam and subsequently became a part of Bengal as a part of re-organisation of states of India after its independence. Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and Damodardeva died in Cooch Behar enjoying the patronage of the then reigning king only in the later part of their lives. (Barpujari 2007: 229-241; Sarma 1999: I-II)

The Vaishnava movement in Assam was not an isolated phenomenon having no connection with the current of Vaishnava revival that swept over the rest of India during the medieval period. The movement started by Ramanuja in the eleventh century on the basis of the older devotional cult of the Alvars of Tamil land gradually spread to other parts of India through the efforts of Nimbarka (11th century), Madhavacarya (13th century), Vallabhacarya (15th century), Ramanada (14th century), Kabir (15th century), Chaitanya (15th – 16th century) and others. The Schools of Vaishnavas founded by the above reformers might differ in philosophical niceties and outward religious observances, but the fundamental basis of these schools of Vaishnavism did not differ very much with the Vasudeva-Krsna identified as the Supreme Divinity. (Sarma 1999: 1-2) And taking a cue from the resurgence of *Bhakti*, the movement in Assam initiated by Sankardeva was a local florescence in manifold ways of religion and culture.

The movement also did not differ in essential tenets from similar Vaishnava movements of medieval India. Characteristics like belief in and adoration of a personal God in the form of Lord *Visnu* or *Krsna*, as the Supreme Being, emphasis on devotion and faith in place of rituals, recognition of the equality of all individuals, the ignoring of the caste distinction, the high place assigned to virtues like love, piety, and non-violence of the

practice of image-worship, are common to all Vaishnavite sects of India emerging from the movement. However, this faith, propounded in the matrix of a multi-ethnic social set-up in Assam and the neighbouring states by the saint-preacher was moulded according to the imperatives of local circumstances known as *Mahapurushiya Dharma* or *Ekasaranadharma* or the religion of supreme surrender to God viz. *Visnu-Krsna*.

> "The term Mahapurusha is also an epithet of God Narayana. In a few verses of the *Bhagvata-purana* (II/I/10, XI/5/33) it has been used in the above sense. As the Vaishnava cult of Assam enjoins upon the worship of Lord *Narayana* or *Visnu/Krsna* only, the cult probably came to be known as the Mahapurusiya-dharma i.e. the cult of Mahapurusa also associating the name of Sankardeva being called as Mahapurusa by one and all after him. And Sankardeva was also called 'Mahapurusha' by his followers by placing him at the same pedestral of the Lord (sankara takeri amsa- Madhavdeva)."[14]

The history of Vaishnavism in Assam cannot be treated without the reference of the Sattra institutiton. In fact, the emergence and growth of the institution is intimately connected with the growth and expansion of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. "The most notable characteristic of the Vaishnavism of Assam is the Sattra institution through which the tenets of faith were spread far and wide, and stablised. It is monastic as well as semi-monastic in form."[15]

Vaishnavism as practiced in Assam is very little known outside Assam and the amount of studies undertaken in respect of history, development and characteristic features of the great movement which laid the foundation of the modern Assamese society, its culture and heritage to a large extent has not also reached far and wide resulting in perennial ignorance or disinformation about this epoch making movement in Assam. (Sarma 1999: II) Modern works dealing with medieval Vaishnavism have also not been able to take proper notice of it. Melville Kennedy in his *Caitanya Movement* (1925) has treated Vaishnavism of Assam as an offshoot of Bengal Vaishnavism, although the two schools of Vaishnavism are completely independent of each other. Even Sankardeva whose contribution is in no way less than any of the Vaishnava saints of medieval India having left such a profound and undying impact on the cultural history of Assam is not taken

account of by critics and commentators outside Assam. Kshitimohan Sen, in his *Medieval Mysticism of India*, has dismissed Sankardeva in one or two sentences probably owing to a dearth of material available to him or ignorance about it. Wilson's *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, Bhandarkar's *Vaisnavism, Saivisim and Minor Religious Systems* and Farquhar's *Outlines of the Religious Literatures of India* contain much information regarding the medieval sects of India, but unfortunately they contain nothing relating to Assam. The works that may be mentioned, though sketchy in character, are *The Life and Teachings of Sankar Dev* (1922) and *Introducing Assam Vaisnavism* (1946) by Banikanta Kakati and S.C. Goswami respectively. But these booklets leave much room for fuller and more scientific treatment of the subject. Although scholars like Maheswar Neog, S.N. Sarma, P.J. Mahanta and some others have worked extensively on the neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam, so far as the complete history of the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam and its diverse manifestation and ramifications including its enduring impact on Assamese society and culture, over the years till this day, still remains a fertile area to be worked.

The major portion of the constructed history is based on the materials collected from the devotional works and biographies of the saints, their apostolate and chronicles of Sattras written within the period ranging from the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century of the Christian era. Biographies of Vaishnava saints and later proselytisers who were also heads of different Sattras are important sources of information regarding the Vaishnava movement and faith which throw much light on the Sattra system of Assam. (Neog 2008: 1-38; Sarma 1999: II)

> "Vaishnavism is the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity in anyone of his several forms. Hymns are addressed to Vishnu in the *Rgveda* itself; but there the deity is almost identical with the Sun-god. In course of time, Vishnu came to be identical with Krishna-Vasudeva of the time of Kuru-Pandavas. The puranic doctrine of the *avataras* (incarnations) made Vishnu identical with deities like Rama and Krishna. The legends of Vishnu-Krishna are given more and wider space in the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*; and the followers of this cult are called the 'Bhagavatas'."[16]

Later on, neo-Vaishnavism, propagated in the 15th-16th centuries onwards, placed more stress on *bhakti* and on the singinng of prayer songs than on other priestly rituals derived from the tenets of Bhakti as a self-existing, self-explanatory pursuable faith enunciated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, ascribed to have been written between 9th and 11th centuries. "During the period under review, the wave of the neo-Vaishnava movement of Assam was yet to come; whatever trace of Vaishnavisim we find during this period was presumably of the Pancaratra type."[17]

The highly ritualstic and priest-ridden rites of Brahmanical religion were considered to be unsuitable for the majority of the people who belonged to a variety of non-Aryan ethnic groups with little or no knowledge of Sanskrit language in which Brahamanical rites and rituals were conducted. "At this juncture Sankardeva was born in 1449 A.D. in the Siromani Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri (present day Bardowa) who ushered in the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam and Koch-Behar"[18] and caused a new turn in the religious history of Assam towards the closing decades of the 16th century. Within two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established the Vaisnava faith as the most widespread religious order of the Brahamaputra Valley. The movement also evolved a new institution known as Sattra which began to serve not only as the instrument to spreading the faith, but also helped to sustain and stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life. (Sarma 1999: 1-2)

S.N. Sarma in his book *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movment and the Satra Institution of Assam* says, "Though remained politically aloof from the rest of India from early times till the occupation by the British in 1826, yet in no period of her history was Assam completely cut off from cultural trends and movements of India."[19] The resurgence of Vaishnavism supplied necessary ideals and inspiration to the initiator of the movement who spent twelve years outside Assam as a part of his pilgrimage in the early part of his life, visiting holy places and studying religious trends of different parts of India. (Sarma 1999: 1-2) The earlier biographers of his life and religious activities, Ramacarana and Daityari Thakur have not referred the date or the year of his birth although both of them have recorded the date and year of his demise as *Saka 1490* (1568 A.D.) (Neog 1998: 1; Barpujari 2007: Vol 3, 231). There is no unanimity among the early set of biographies (*caritas*) about the date of Sankardeva's birth and the duration of his life (Neog 1998: 98). It is only the later biographies of the 17th - 18th centuries that have recorded the year

of his birth which are still subject to thorough examination. That is why Gait in his *History of Assam* says that the year of his birth 'is possibly thirty or forty years too early' (Gait 1926: 85). As regards his age, the Vaishnavite tradition has unreservedly accepted that he lived for 120 years being a *Mahapurusa*. (Barpujari 2007: Vol 3, 230-233)

Sankardeva came out of a Sanskrit *tol* (residential Sanskrit school) of Mahendra Kandali as an erudite scholar in all branches of Sanskrit learning about which the biographers do not differ. He settled himself as a householder and took the mantle of the lordship (Shiromani Bhuyan) of the Barabhuyan principality, but his wife died immediately after the birth of their daughter. After the death of his wife and giving his daughter's hand into marriage, he surrendered the lordship and set out for pilgrimage throughout the length and breadth of India for twelve years in course of which he must have met many saintly and scholarly persons. It is likely that he had witnessed neo-Vaishnavite movements led by his predecessors in different regions of India like Madhavacharya, Nimbarkacarya, Visnusvami-Vallabhacarya, Ramananda and Kabir. Sankardeva's reference to the popularity of Kabir's *dohas* in places like Puri and Varanasi in his *Kirtana Ghosa* bespeak of his contact with the religious movements that were gaining ground at that age. It is not unlikely that Sankardeva might have received spiritual initiation from some Vaisnava saint in Puri where he spent more than a year. Curiously enough, he has maintained complete silence about the identity of his spiritual guide, although he has not failed to pay obeisance to his guru in the opening lines of his peotic compositions. (Neog 1998; Sarma 1999; Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

> "After his return from his long pilgrimage and having obtained a copy of the *Bhagvata-purana* with Sridhara Swami's commentary through Jagadisa Misra of Tirhut, Sankardeva engaged himself seriously to the task of propagating the new faith based on the *Bhagavata-purana* and *Gita* and succeeded in procuring a band of followers with whose help he constructed a *deva-griha* (prayer hall) where prayers composed by him, recitations from the *Bhagavata* and religious discussions were regularly held. The first spectacular step for attracting people and popularising the cult was taken through a dance-drama known as *Cihna-yatra* which was enacted against the backdrop of painted scenes of seven *Vaikunthas* with a presiding Visnu over each."[20]

The new faith and movement did not take definite shape till the receipt of the *Bhagavata Purana* with Sridhara's commentary. The possession of the copy gave an impetus not only to consolidate the principles of the faith, but also enabled him to render the original texts into lucid and melodious verses in vernacular to reach out to all sections of the people. (Ibid.)

The movement was well received in his native place at Bardowa but the Bhuyans, clan to which Sankardeva belonged, had to migrate to the north bank of the Brahmaputra to avoid frequent clashes with the Kacharis, a Mongoloid tribe. They temporarily settled in Rowta and thence at Gangamukh or Ahataguri in eastern Assam. Finally they migrated to Dhuahata-Belaguri within the Ahom territory. The simplicity and the purity of the new faith in contrast to the ritual dominated Brahmanical cult was the prime factor in attracting unsophisticated masses to the devotional path. The portal of this new faith was kept wide open to all communities and no discrimination whatever was made on the basis of castes and status while conferring initiation or ordination. (Neog 1998: 109; Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

The most important achievement of Sanakardeva at Belaguri was the acquisition of Madhavdeva to his fold who after his conversion from the *Sakta* faith proved himself the ablest and the most faithful disciple. Madhava's unflinching devotion to God and deep allegiance to his guru, ultimately prompted Sankardeva to nominate him as his successor as the head of the Vaisnavite community. Having stayed at Dhuahata-Belaguri peacefully for nearly fifteen years the Bhuyans, headed by Sankardeva shifted to Kamarupa due to the hostile attitude of the Ahoms who had killed his son-in-law Hari Bhuyan for his supposed negligence of duty as a subject off the Ahom kingdom in western Assam then under the Koch in 1546. Sankardeva and some of the followers migrated to western Assam under the Koch rule and established himself permanently at Patbausi near Barpeta along with his kinsmen. (Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

The third phase of Sankardeva's life commenced with his entry into the Koch kingdom. Here in Kamarupa, Narayana Thakur, a wealthy, resourceful and devoted disciple was initiated and the latter was instrumental in bringing a large number of followers to his *guru* and thereby augmenting material resource of his religious establishment. At Patbausi, the prayer hall (*namghar*), shrine (*manikuta*), having been constructed, regular teachings were made from the *Bhagvata* and the *Gita* and dramatic performances were

regularly held which attracted a large number of adherents to the devotional fold. After a few years, accompanied by 120 followers the saint went on his second pilgrimage to Puri. On his return he visited the math of Kabir at Baliya where he met his grand-daughter. (Neog 1998: 109-127; Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

Three Brahman scholars, *viz*., Harideva, Damodaradeva and Ananta Kandali came forward at this time to join his movement. It is difficult to say in the face of contradictory statements of biographies (*caritas*) whether these three influential saints and scholars were initiated by Sankardeva. Doubtless, they helped him in spreading and popularizing the neo-Vaishnavaite movement. The cooperation of Damodaradeva and Harideva, enabled the saint to extend the sphere of his activities to the Brahamanical section which had been averse so long to the movement. (Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

There were allegations against Sankardeva in the court of Koch King Naranarayana (1540-85) that he was preaching and propagating a faith contrary to the traditional Hindu religion. The king ordered for his arrest, but the timely intervention of Prince Sukladhvaja (the brother of the king), who married Sankaradeva's niece, enabled Sankardeva to get rid of the humiliation. Sukladhvaja appeared in the Royal Court to prove that the creed of devotion preached by Sankardeva was sanctioned by the Vaishnava *puranas* and the *Gita*. Highly impressed with this saintly behavior, profound learning and dignified personality, the king rewarded Sankardeva with rich presents and assured him safety in the free propagation of the new creed. (Ibid.)

1.2.1 The Institution of the Sattra: Divisions in the Order

Daityari Thakur, one of the earliest biographers of the Vaishnava apostles of Assam says: "Sankara only revealed (the secret of) *bhakti*, the religion of love; it is Madhavdeva, who made it public."[21] It would not be unfair to say that the 'neo-Vaishnava' movement gathered full momentum after Sankardeva met Madhavdeva at Dhuwahat. Much stress has been laid in the biographies on the fact that Sankardeva and Madhavdeva upheld the ideal of *guru-sisya-dharma* (a religion which is based on the Mentor-Disciple relationship). Madhavdeva's, resourcefulness and versatility, supplemented by Sankardeva's scholarship, philosophical vision and creative genius in art and organization, and laid the strong foundation of the neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

The latter added the superstructure of the apostolic machinery and monastic organization. (Neog 2008: 127)

It now needs to be taken with certainty that this new religion obtained a strong footing in the 'country' in the later part of the 15th century when Sankardeva, the fountainhead of the *Bhagavata* movement in Assam, appeared on the scene. Vaishnavism received official recognition of the Ahom royalty during the reign of the Ahom King Suhungmung (1497-1539). Eventually when Jayadhvaj Singh (1649-63) enrolled himself as the disciple of Niranjan Bapu, whom he established as the first *Gosain* (High priest) of the Auniati Sattra in Majuli. Hearing the fame of Banamali Gosain of Koch Bihar, Jayadhvaj Singha sent for him and gave him land for setting up Sattras at Koliabor and Majuli in the name of Dakhinpat Sattra. Chakradhvaj Singh (1663-1670) also showed great reverence to Banamali Gosain. From Jayadhvaj Singha to Ratnadhvaj Singha (1679-81), the Ahom kings (with a few exceptions), showed respect and courtesy to the Vaishnava *Gosain* and accepted initiation into the faith. They made grants and endowments for the maintenance of the Vaishnava Sattras. During this period, several leading Sattras of Eastern Assam were set up under their patronage. The 15th – 16th centuries in this part of the land witnessed the formation of a new community, now collectively known as the Sattra Institutions of Assam following Sankardeva's neo-vaishnavite movement laying stress on the ideal of *bhakti* and a distinct community life practicing the ideal. (Neog 1998: 109-127; Barpujari 2007: Vol 3 230-233)

1.2.2 The Apostolate: A Pre-Cursor

The life and activities of Madhavdeva, the chief apostle of Sankardeva and the successor to the headship of the Vaishnava Order in Assam, have just been noticed. It now remains to give short sketches of the careers of the few other Vaishnava leaders, who were originally followers of Sankardeva, who later became heads of Sattras or initiators of new sects within the Order.

Towards the end of Madhavdeva's life, *bhakats* (the devotees) asked him about his appointing a spiritual heir to the 'order'. He is said to have considered the matter for three days and told the monks that he saw no individual to lead the order. He said, for those who desired to, could find him in his *Namghosa*[22]. (Neog 2008: 133) He had however, delegated the authority of administering *sarana* (initiation into the faith) to

several of his followers like Bar Visnu Ata, Mathuradasa, Bhavanipuriya, Gopaladeva, Vamsigopala and Adhaliya Yadumani. He had also admitted Sankardeva's youngest son Haricarana, who was living in Patbausi when Madhavdeva passed away in Cooch-Behar. Additionally he had placed Purusottama, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva to a high place in the order. (Neog 2008: 134)

Neo-Vaishnavas as it stands today, comprise four *samhati*[23](orders) of the faith *viz.* Brahma Samhati, Purusa Samhati, Kala Samhati and Nika Samhati. According to them, the Brahma Samhati is so called because it originated from Brahma, the creator. The Purusa Samhati derived its name from Purusa-Narayana who is supposed to be its first initiator. In this way, they try to explain the origin of the respective *samhatis* with reference to some Vaishnavite myths.

Additionally, in various *caritas* of the sub-sects, reference has been made to the rift that took place during the time of Madhavdeva which caused Damodara to secede from the 'orthodox' Mahapurusiya 'cult'. Besides the above two sub-sects, there are three more sub-sects which originated after the death of Madhavdeva within the main body of order. As stated earlier, Madhavdeva did not appoint anybody to succeed him as the religious head of the expanding Vaishnava Order. There was none among his principal disciples who could command unflinching allegiance from all sections of devotees. Damodaradeva seceded immediately after the passing away of Sankardeva. Narayana Thakur, the friend and colleague of Madhavdeva, who stood by him in all critical situations, was then too old to shoulder the responsibility of wielding together the different sections of devotees after the demise of his friend. Therefore, the disciples found themselves in three sections under the leadership of Gopala Ata, Purusottam Thakur and Mathuradasa respectively. Gopala Ata and Mathuradasa were two *dharamcharyas* appointed by Madhavdeva. Gopala Ata resided at Bhavanipur, a few miles from Barpeta and Mathuradasa at the Barpeta Sattra. Mathuradasa aspired to the leadership on the strength of his superiorship of the Barpeta Sattra, established and organized by Madhavdeva[24]. Anyhow, both of them seemed to have claimed to be the 'real' successor of Madhavdeva. Alongisde, Purusottama Thakur, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva stood as the third claimant for the leadership. Thus, with the formation of the 3 separate groups, germs of difference began to develop. Account of conflict on minor points are found in *carita-puthis* (the Guru's biogrpahies) of their respective sub-sect.

(Personal Communication with old monks at Uttar Kamalabari Sattra; (Neog 2008: 133-138)

1.3 The Four 'Samhatis' or Orders as it stands today

1.3.1 Brahma Samhati

The Brahma Samhati includes the sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva. Reference has been made to the rift that took place while Madhavdeva was alive. (Sarma 1999: 104) Damodaradeva seceded from the 'orthodox' Mahapurusiya cult which according to him, was not what Sankardeva had preached. So, after Sankardeva's death, he disowned the leadership of Madhavdeva and came out of the 'orthodox' Mahapurusiya order to start a new sub-sect claiming complete independence. Harideva, another Brahmin admirer colleague of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva following the footsteps of Damodaradeva's act of seceding away from the main body eventually found some followers as well. But nowhere is there any reference to Harideva starting a distinct sect or a sub-sect formally. (Sarma 1999: 101-103)

Damodaradeva: Unlike Sankardeva or Madhavdeva, Damodaradeva was not a poet. But he seemed to be a good religious organizer.It is clear from the scriptures that the sub-sect of Damodaradeva came into existence in times of Madhavdeva and it took place immediately after the death of Sankardeva. (Sarma 1999: 104) This he could do by modifying the religious teachings and practices of the 'parent-cult'. Damodaradeva saw an abolition of the Brahminical rites and rituals which estranged the sympathy of the Brahmins as they interpreted the Bhakti movement as a revolt against the *Vedas*. Therefore, he did not prohibit *nitya* (daily) and *naimittika* (occasional) duties or ritualism of Brahmins. Damodaradeva on the eve of his departure to Cooch-behar advised his favorite disciple Bhattadeva in the following way: "Do not alienate the Brahmins by telling them to give up *nitya* and *naimittika* rites. But yourself set an example by performing daily rites like, *sandhya*, and *ahnikas* regularly. (Ibid. 105) He made a compromise between the 'path of devotion' and the Brahminical section traditionally steeped in ritualism. This modification began to pay dividend immediately as the number of Brahmin disciples henceforth began to increase considerably. This chalking out a middle path between Vedic rites and rituals and devotional practices helped in winning over the twice-born classes to the fold of Brahma Samhati. Of the four fundamental elements (*vastus*), it lays special emphasis on *deva* (god) and that is why images of

Vishnu and *salagrama-sila*, the symbol of Vishnu-Narayana are considered necessary in Sattras as well as in households of this sect. Through the originators of the two sub-sects did not leave space for worship of any other god than Visnu, followers, later on their followers, began to take a liberal view as regards to the worship of other gods and goddesses. They did not, however, personally encourage or practice it. This 'compromising' approach of the Brahma Samhati removed the misapprehension considerably of a section of orthodox people who considered the new Vaishnava faith un-Vedic and as such contrary to the traditional Hindu religion. The leaders of the Brahma Samhati showed that the Vedic and Puranic rituals and devotional practices are not mutually exclusive. One could be a good Vaishnava, even while performing daily and occasional rites enjoined by the *dharamashastras*.

The success of Damodaradeva as a proselytiser also largely depended on his method of propagation. He selected a few capable and scholarly young men whom he sent to different directions of Kamarupa where they were installed as local religious heads. He remained as the radiating figure guiding and directing them whenever necessary. Biographer Nilakantha gives a detailed list of persons sent by Damodaradeva to different directions. (Sarma 104)

Harideva: It is clear that the sub-sect of Damodaradeva came into existence in times of Madhavdeva and that took place immediately after the death of Sankardeva. But Harideva's sect does not seem to be so old, as no reference to its growth is found in any of the earlier biographies. The only biography which tries to establish this sect as an independent one is *Harideva-carita* written by Dhaneshwar and Baneshwara Dvija which were written much later. In all probabilities, this sub-sect began to claim its independence after the formation of the Damodari sub-sect and the idea of proclaiming itself a separate sect must have been supplied by the action of Damodara and his followers. A Brahminical swing-back to orthodoxy, no doubt, impelled Damodaradeva and the followers of Harideva too, to disown their connection with the original sect of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Excepting the manner and procedure of conducting devotional services, the Harideva sub-sect is practically identical in fundamental teachings and practices with that of Damodaradeva's. (Neog 1998: 128-133; Sarma 1999: 92-102)

Scholars (i.e. Neog and Sarma) opine that probably, Harideva himself did not disown his relationship with Sankardeva, as the early biographies do not mention any attempt on his part as that of Damodaradeva to propagate this Brahmanical order. Under the circumstances, it would be more reasonable to suppose that the idea of claiming independence for his sect must have occurred later than the formation of the Damodari sect. But inspite of their contention it cannot be called an independent sect, in as much as religious tenets and observances of their *sampradaya* is almost identical with the Sankarite ways and is therefore undoubtedly connected with it. The former is more widespread and influential, while the latter's activity is mainly confined to the undivided district of Kamrupa. As the influence of the sub-sect of Damodaradeva, is far reaching, the consideration of this sect has been taken up first. Because of the predominance of Brahminical elements, the sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva have been known together as Brahma Samhati. Brahmanical rites and rituals flourish side by side with devotional rites and practices in this Samhati.

The Brahma Samhati has some of the most affluent Sattras of Assam (Sarma 1999), which makes it to be one of the most influential of the *samhatis*. Most of the Sattras affiliated to this samhati are headed by Brahmins, though non-Brahmin heads are not altogether negligible. Some Sattras affiliated to this Samhati fully developed monastic characteristics.

1.3.2 Purusa Samhati

Two explanations are normally suggested with regard to the term Purusa Samhati. The first one says, Purusa Samhati, derives its name from the term Mahapurusa, the honorific title applied to Sankardeva, who is supposed to be the initiator of this sub-sect. This explanation seems to be a farfetched one as during the times of Sankardeva, there was no-existence of any sub-sect (Sarma: 1999: 126-132). The other reason from where this sub-sect could have derived its name could be the name of its founder Purusottam Thakur, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva. (Ibid.)

It is narrated in the biographical literature of this sect that Madhavdeva declared Purusottama the descendant of Sankardeva, to be the real successor to the headship of the order founded by his grandfather and himself (Madhavdeva), who simply acted as an agent during the interim period. Madhavdeva actually nominating Purusottama Thakur as

his successor, as claimed by literature of this sect, is doubtful in view of the fact that earlier biographers like Daityari, Bhusana and Ramacharana have nowhere mentioned this; rather they have categorically told that Madhavdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him. Nevertheless, Purusottama is regarded by the followers of Purusa Samhati as the real successor of Sankardeva. (Sarma: 1999: 126-132; Neog 1998: 153-155)

> "According to biographer Aniruddha Dasa, Purusottama assumed the role of a *dharamacharya* in the twenty second year of his life while the family was in his ancestral home at Patbausi. From Patbausi he temporarily shifted to Barnagar the capital of eastern Koch kingdon where he is said to have initiated the wives of the King Pariksitanarayana and prince Rupanarayana. Thence, he returned to Patbausi and then shifted to Javaniya (modern Janiya), a village distance of a few miles from Barpeta. Here he resided for six years and finally went to Madhupur near Coch-Behar where he died in 1616 A.D. Purusottama appointed twelve of his principal followers as apostles (*dharamacharya*) to initiate disciples in different parts of central and eastern Assam. These twelve religious heads diffused the teachings of the faith by establishing Sattras in their own localities."[25]

This sect lays special emphasis on Sankardeva as the only Guru of the Mahapurusiya sect and gives more importance to *nama* element of the four fundamental elements (*vastu*) in the practice of devotion. Chanting and singing in praise of God and meditating on his various names and forms, according to this sect are considered as acts of special merit. this is why the Sattras of this sect developed various ways and modes of singing or chanting congregational prayers, such as *pal-nama* (chanting prayers in succession throughout the night), *utha-nama* (chanting prayers of prayers with rhythemic movements in standing posture) etc. (Sarma: 1999: 131-132)

The followers of this sect observe Brahmanical rites and in most of the Sattras, affiliated to it where images of Vishnu are to be found. Purusottama apparently expressed once before Vamasigopaladeva "Those who do not recognize Gita, Bhagavata, images of Visnu and Brahmins and do not perform *sraddhas* are the offenders of the Mahapurusiya cult."[26] Thus though it lays emphasis on *Nama*, it does not deny the necessity of image-worship and Brahminical rites. Viewed from this point, the gulf of difference between the Purusa and the Brahma Samhati is not very prominent except the degree of stress in

Brahminical rites. Another noteworthy feature is that the position of Sankardeva is unique in the hierarchy of religious saints with Madhavdeva standing next to him. (Ibid.) Besides propagation through his important disciples, Purusottama was also responsible for reviving the 'eclipsed' glory of Sankardeva, which according to the followers of this sect, was fading owing to activites of over-zealous disciples of Madhavdeva who placed the latter in the forefront of Assamese Vaishnavism. Purusottama proclaimed Sankardeva as the only Guru of the sect and called the other proselytisers or religious heads as mere representatives or apostles of Sankardeva. (Ibid. 127).

1.3.3 Kala Samhati

The third sect i.e. Kala Samhati owes its origin to Gopala Ata of Bhavanipur. He was one of the twelve apostles (*dharamacharyas*) nominated by Madhavdeva. There are more than one interpretation of the term Kala, attributed to this sect. One explanation is that the followers of the other three sub-sects 'sarcastically' called it *Kala* or *Kal* (extreme, Black, dangerous) keeping in view the left-handed esoteric observances supposed to be prevalent among its followers which was averse to the path of *bhakti* that Sankardeva preached. This nomenclature can be compared with those of some well-known religious sects such as Kalamukha sect or Kalacakrayana in Tantric Buddhism, which are known to have prescribed extreme esoteric practices and considered to be despicable by others outside their fold. (Personal Communication with Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra and Sarma 1999: 116-125)

But the view that the sect preached extreme and dangerous views transgressing the fundamental doctrines of Vaishnavsim is not based on any historical truism and does not stand on a close scrutiny. Neither Gopala Ata nor any of his principal follower is known to have preached extreme or dangerous views or practiced left-handed esoteric observances. Therefore, the other explanation that the sub-sect owes its epithet to the name of the locality, Kalajhar, from where Gopala Ata preached his doctrine and directed the activities of his disciples appears to be a plausible one. Kalajhar was the head-quarter of Gopala Ata for several years till his death. The Guru occupies an exalted position as that of God among the adherents of the sect. The most notable religious contribution, according to tradition is that he brought to the forefront the doctrine of *Guruvada* and took the faith of Bhakti o reach out to several ethnic communities of the land. (Ibid.)

"Gopala Ata established a permanent Sattra at Kalajhar, a place situated at a few miles distance from Bhavanipur where he died in 1611 AD at the age of 70."[27] The Sattra at Kalajhar after his death was abandoned and was run for a few years by Sriram Ata, but later on he moved to eastern Assam abandoning the Sattra. After a period of temporary eclipse, the Sattra was again revived by Srirama Ata and his descendents continued to run the Sattra. He left two dramatic compositions- *Gopi-Uddhava-Samvada* and *Janma-yatra* and several songs for the posterity. (Sarma 1999: 116-117) "The twelve Acharyas nominated by Gopala Ata preached the message of the Kala Samhati in different directions. The notable branches of the Kala Samhati which greatly contributed to the development of the sect are Dihing, Mayamara, Gajala and Ahataguri."[28]

1.3.4 The Nika Samhati (Kewaliya or Udasina Pantha): The Ascetic Order

The Nika Samhati seems to have taken shape after the formation of the other three sects. The very name *Nika* means pure, clean which points to the conclusion that it originated immediately after the formation of the other three sects.

> "The necessity of organizing a cleaner order arose when other sects appeared to have gone somewhat astray from the original path chalked out by the first two Gurus. Therefore, Padma Ata who was the youngest of Madhavdeva's chief disciples and who was also saddled with the religious headship in eastern Assam, thought it necessary to evolve a proper code of conduct for the Vaishnavas. He got immediate response from Mathuradasa of the Barpeta Sattra who was also no less anxious to purify the sect by laying stringent rules and conduct of life. They were also helped in this act by Kesava Ata, a close companion of Padma Ata throughout the latter's religious career."[29]

These three i.e., Padma Ata, Mathuradasa Ata and Kesava Ata may be considered the trio of the Nika Samhati. (Sarma 1999; 133-134)

For its exclusive attention to cleanliness of mind and body, the sect came to be known as *Nika*. The followers of this sect were required to observe strict discipline in respect of food, dress and manners and in all religious matters. They could not take food prepared by others, never take even a betel-nut without taking bath and never put on a piece of

cloth that has not been washed or dipped in water daily. The explanation was similar to that of fuel which is actually put into fire for purification. Similar stringent rules were, and are noticed in other spheres also. (Sarma 1999: 136) These conducts of everyday life are uniformly followed in all Sattras affiliated to the Nika Samhati. The word *kewaliya* (unmarried, abandoning wordly happiness, or celibate, has been connected by Hemchandra Barua with Sanskrit *Kevala* in the sense of alone. Kakati, however seeks to link this word with *kevalin* used in Ramanuja's 'church' to mean a class of bhakats, 'who desire final deliverance and seek the consciousness of their pure soul.'[30] Sankardeva, the founder of Assam Vaishnavism was a married man, but Madhavdeva, the real organizer of the order, was a celibate, and it is presumed in some quarters that his celibacy worked as an attractive ideal to the Vaishnavas. But many men who had deserted worldly pleasures lived in the cloisters under Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and they came to be a vigourously living community. (Ibid.) There was no general rule with regards to marriage or celibacy enjoined upon the superiors or clerics of the Sattras. However, with passage of time, different conventions grew up with different Sattras.

The *Nika Samhati* had certain religious characteristics, which deserve notice. It lays special emphasis in *sat-sanga* (holy association). The second noticeable feature is that of this section is that its followers consider Madhava as Guru of the sect, while Sankardeva is regarded as the Guru of their Guru and as such, their relation with Madhavdeva is immediate and that with Sankardeva is indirect. Every neophyte of this sub-sect is required to owe allegiance to the name of Madhavdeva. Thus, the position of Madhvadeva is pre-eminent in their religious hierarchy. The sect is further characterized by an indifferent attitude towards the practice of image worship. Though, this characteristic of worshipping a scripture with its central placement in the sanctum-sanctorum, is also present in the Purusa and the Kala Samhatis, it is more prominent in the *Nika* group of Sattras. They pray to the *Bhagavata*, which was originally considered to be the foundational text as preached by Sankardeva. (Personal Communication with the monks of Uttar and Natun Kamalabari Sattra; Sarma 1999: 133-135; Neog 1998: 326-330)

The most important Sattra affiliated to the Nika Samhati in western Assam is the Barpeta Sattra established by Madhavdeva. The other important Sattras in western Assam are Sundaridiya, Camariya, Dhopguri and Khatara founded respectively by Ramacarana

Thakur, Bar-Vishnu Ata. Laksmikanta Ata and Govinda Ata. Founders of the above Sattras were disciples of Madhavdeva. In eastern Assam, principal Sattras affiliated to this Samhati are Kamalabari and Barjaha founded by Badala Ata and Kesava Ata respectively.

1.4 Kamalabari Sattras ([Purani] Kamalabari Sattra in Titabor, Jorhat, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra and Natun Kamalabari Sattra in Majuli)

Kamalabari Sattra was established by Padma Ata (also known as Badala Ata), taking the leadership in Eastern Assam and Majuli. Padma Ata was initially a swordsman in the army. "He exhibited supreme distrust in worldly affairs after witnessing the large-scale massacare of men and animals during the expedition against the Daflas and became a disciple of Madhavdeva in Cooch-Behar."[31] In 1595, Badala Ata established a Sattra in the Orange Orchard of one of his disciples- Purusottama Barua in Majuli. The Sattra was named Kamalabari- *Kamala* literally means Orange and Bari means Garden in Assamese. (Personal Conversation with the Sattradhikar of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra) Over the years, the Kamalabari Sattra has become a centre of art, cultural, literary and classical studies with inmates devoting their lives to the devotional path pursuing celibacy, Kamalabari Sattra further split into three Sattras, today known as Purana (meaning old) Kamalabari Sattra, Natun (meaning new) Kamalabari Sattra, and Uttar (meaning north) Kamalabari Sattra. The last one is shifted and re-located in Titabor near Jorhat, in mainland Assam. Majuli, being a shrinking island due to heavy soil erosion, the original Sattra got swept away by the river Brahmaputra in 1972. This natural disaster forced it to get re-establish the Sattra community in the new habitat. (Personal Communication and Observation)

Kamalabari group of Sattras has been a home to legendary musicians since its early years and performers till the modern time including Late Maniram Dutta Mukhtiyar Bayan and Raseswar Saikia Barbayan of great repute in recent years, who contributed immensely towards the conferment of the classical status to the "Sattriya" Dance.

1.5 Sattriya Ritual Performance: An Intangible Heritage

Bronislaw Malinowsky said, "It must be remembered that these acts of ceremonial license are not mere indulgence, but they express a reverential attitude towards the forces of regeneration and fertility in man and nature, the forces on which the very existence of

society and culture depends".[32] "In almost all the traditions of Indian art and literature there is always a dichotomy of static equilibrium and dynamism, of contemporaneity and timelessness."[33]The Sattriya Ritual Performance also faces this dichotomy of the 'static equilibrium' i.e. its religious and ritualistic side. The material culture that includes the physical objects wrapped with the oral and unspoken, in a Sattra has held together a huge religious community for centuries now. Amidst that there has been growth, development and changes with the passage of time. Alongside, the 'dynamism' of the Sattriya Dance today has brought it to represents the state of Assam on the national and the international arena. Playing both the roles of a ritual as well as that of 'classical entertainment', Sattriya performance is today standing at the crossroads of a 'heritage identity' and contemporaneity. The intangible heritage here, does not only refer to the traditions from an obscure place but also refer to the modern changes that have happened in the last few decades. The intangible also means the contemporary construction of the performance with a change of time and space, leading to a change in its context.

1.6 Objective of the study

- To understand and analyse the ritual tradition of Sattriya performance, the dance in particular, in the context and framework of heritage.
- To analyse the triad of Heritage, Ritual and Identity in the 'Intangible' and 'Living' Tradition and relate it to the phenomenon of Sattriya.
- To draw a workable methodology for the study of intangible and 'living' heritage with reference to Sattriya Performance.

1.7 Review of Literature

UNESCO considers Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as a counterpart of the "World Heritage". ICH literally refers to songs, music, drama, skills cuisine, annual festivals, crafts and other parts of culture that can be recorded but cannot be touched. These cannot be interacted with, without a vehicle such as the human body. Hence these cultural vehicles are also called "Human Treasures" by the UN. With reference to the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Assam, which forms the major focus of this study, several scholars have expressed their observations, studies and analysis related to the subject i.e. ICH as well as discussed various limitations in their preservation. Many theoretical concepts evolve from the Material Culture Studies. Alongside, taking the present study

as a realm of 'public performances', so some theories from the Performance Studies and anthropological studies of performance have been carefully looked into as well. Literatures on the subject have been surveyed and the theoretical concepts have been studied in conceptualizing the framework of this study.

Interpreting Objects and Collections (1994) edited by Susan Pearce (eds.) brings together significant papers from scholars all across the world on the interpretation of objects and art collections and examines how people relate to material culture and why they collect things. The book is divided into 2 sections. The first section of the book discusses the interpretation of individual objects, setting the philosophical and historical context of object interpretation. Discussions are made on objects variously as historical documents, functioning material, and as semiotic texts, as well as those which examine the politics of objects and the methodology of object study. The second section is on the interpretation of collections. These discussions consider the collection as a whole in their historical and conceptual context. Many topics are covered such as the study of collecting to structure individual identity, its affect on time and space and the construction of gender. Papers in this anthology bring out the collection and ideology, collection and social action, methodology of collection study and bring together many ideas on Material Culture Studies.

Ritual, Heritage and Identity (2011) by Christiane Brosius and Karin Polit (eds.) explores the importance of ritual and ritual theory to discourses of authenticity and originality, thereby deepening our insight into concepts of cultural heritage, identity and nation in a globalised world. This is an interdisciplinary volume on the understanding of the significance of rituals and related performative traditions in the creation of grounded cultural identities, and heritage as geographically experienceable locations. It assembles perspectives from social and cultural anthropology, performance studies, education and arts that can deal with the politics of revitalisation and preservation of ritualised traditions.

The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (1973) by Clifford Geertz the author's empirical studies defining what 'culture' is and means. He explains further how culture plays a vital role in the social life and how one can study it. This collection of papers

discusses the growth of culture, evolution of human societies and analyses religion and ideology as cultural systems, ritual and social changes and the politics of meaning.

Ecomuseum: A Sence of Place (2011) by Peter Davis is a treatise which initiated an alternative thinking in the Museum World and Heritage studies. Peter Davis in his documents writes about the recent developments in the field internationally and in terms of new theories and practices. The ecomuseum phenomenon has grown dramatically in recent years. There is now no one ecomuseum model, but a philosophy that has been adapted and moulded for use in a variety of situations. With many more ecomuseums being established, the international appeal and reach of the idea grows; these changes are reflected in the 'geographical' sections of this volume. Of particular significance is the rise in ecomuseology in India, China (including Taiwan), Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, as well as significant increases in Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Turkey. This edition has been updated to cover recent theories and practices that have resonance with ecomuseums, such as the notions of cultural landscapes, intangible cultural heritage, biosphere reserves, slow cities, slow food, ecovillages, and cultural tourism. It also looks at the huge changes in electronic communication that have led to notions of virtual ecomuseums and new approaches to making meaning of places and objects.

Heritage Studies: Methods and Approaches (2009) by Marie Loise Stig Sorensen and John Carman (eds.), describes the relationship between heritage and culture. Heritage as a representation has been used to popularly describe and define culture. This book delves into the techniques, methods and approaches towards the preservation of tangible and the intangible heritages.

Performance Theory (2003) by Richard Schechner challenges the conventional definitions of theatre, ritual and performance. This seminal collection brings out Schechner's approach i.e.: drama is not just something that occurs on stage, but something that happens in everyday life, full of meaning, and on many different levels. He examines the connections between Western and non-Western cultures, theatre and dance, anthropology, ritual, performance in everyday life, rites of passage, play, psychotherapy and shamanism. In the 1990s, Schechner originated "rasa-aesthetics,"

which was a combination of Rasa from the *Natyashastra* and the western aesthetics a technique of emotional training for performers and others.

Theatre of the Roots (2008) by Erin B. Mee gives an analogy of events that shaped up the "modern Indian theatre". After Independence, in 1947, in their efforts to create an 'Indian' theatre that was different from the Westernized, colonial theatre, Indian theatre practitioners began returning to their 'roots' in classical dance, religious ritual, martial arts, popular entertainment and aesthetic theory. The Theatre of Roots - as this movement was known - was the first conscious effort at creating a body of work for urban audiences combining modern European theatre with traditional Indian performance while maintaining its distinction from both. She addresses the politics of aesthetics and analyses the visual practices, performer/spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance, the movement offered a strategy for reassessing colonial ideology and culture and for articulating and defining a newly emerging 'India'.

Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance (2007) edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli, beside mapping the vast range of performance traditions, expands the boundaries of Indian Theatre. It explores the multiple dimensions of theatrical performance in India. From rural festivals to contemporary urban theatre, from dramatic rituals and devotional performances to dance-dramas and classical Sanskrit plays, the book explains the historical background of the theatre forms and explore its social and political implications.

Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar (1990) by Anuradha Kapur documents a unique theatrical and religious event- Ramlila of Ramnagar, Varanasi, which is an annual, month-long enactment of the Ramayana story. The performance covers a whole town and involves an entire community. Men, women and children follow the course of the processional performance, accompanying Rama from his exile to his triumphant return to Ayodhya to partake of the joy and glory of Ramarajya. In *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods* readers are plunged into the rich and lively experience of the Ramlila with its svarupas, effigies, masks, Ramayanis, Vyasas, gods, goddesses, demons and monkeys; with its theatrical gimmickry and spectacle and marvels; with its thronging, surging crowds. Performers and spectators are part of a

seamless ceremony. *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods* documents this unique theatrical tradition.

Bells of Change (2008) by Pallabi Chakravorty makes a critical study of Kathak dance. She traces two centuries of Kathak, from the colonial nautch dance to classical Kathak under nationalism and post-colonialism to transnationalism and globalization. Re-orienting dance to focus on the lived experiences of dancers from a wide cross-section of society, the book narrates the history of Kathak from baijis and tawaifs to the global stage.

Beyond Appearances? (2003), by Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.) provides a dynamic forum for the main exponents of the anthropological turn in studies of South Asian popular visual culture. It analyses the modern-day society's ubiquity of visuals and images in everyday life. The 11 essays in this book analyse the material and political impact of a wide array of artefacts, media, and habits with the aim of understanding the principal contours of the visual practices and ideologies that distinguish an Indian modern. Recognising the enormous power contained within images to transform and mobilise self and community, the contributors focus on a variety of visual media including fine art and calendar art, theatre and popular cinema, photography, documentary films and propaganda videos, and maps. In the process, they also examine the inter-visual dialogue between these diverse media, exploring their underlying technologies of production and modalities of circulation and exchange.

Anthropology Art and Cultural Production: Histories, Themes, Perspectives (2007) by Maruska Svasek, provides an introduction to anthropological perspectives on art. Svasek defines art as a social process and the process of production and its wider context. Providing a critical overview of various anthropological theories of art, Svasek offers a new perspective which centres on the analysis of commoditisation, aestheticisation and object agency. She explores the process of collecting and exhibiting art works and how this relates to art's production, distribution and consumption in an increasingly global market. The book outlines the significance of art and aesthetics in everyday life, and examines the shifting boundaries between art and other categories such as kitsch, souvenirs, propaganda and pornography. Finally, Svasek argues for an anthropological

perspective that links the production and consumption of artefacts to political, religious and other cultural processes.

The Invention of Traditions (1982) by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) talks about the many traditions which we think of as very ancient in their origins were not in fact sanctioned by long usage over the centuries, but were invented comparatively recently. This book explores examples of this process of invention - the creation of Welsh and Scottish 'national culture'; the elaboration of British royal rituals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the origins of imperial rituals in British India and Africa; and the attempts by radical movements to develop counter-traditions of their own. It addresses the complex interaction of past and present, bringing together historians and anthropologists in a fascinating study of ritual and symbolism which poses new questions for the understanding of our history.

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) by Emile Durkheim, while studying the religion and religious life of the aborigines of Australia, explains the religious nature of man as an essential and permanent nature of humanity. He also explains the sacred and profane dichotomy and how anything and everything can become sacred symbols in a day-to-day life and everything that is not “sacred” can be considered as mundane or “profane”. He also deliberates on the intriguing origin and nature of religion and its impact on society.

The Anthropology of Performance (1988) by Victor Turner (ed.) addresses the issues of cultural performance, carnival, film, theatre, and "performing ethnography" to in anthropological thinking about event, spectacle, and audience. One of his last writings, "Body, Brain, and Culture" links cerebral neurology and anthropology studies in a fascinating interface. Richard Schechner's preface to this work gives a background, relevance and the importance of the work in today’s performance studies arena.

Apart from the theoretical approaches and paradigms, it was also important to investigate into not only the social structure of the Sattras under consideration. The Sattras are known to be the institutions of Vaishnava learning and teaching in Assam. They have, over a few centuries, shaped the cultural fabric of Assam. Bearing this in mind, there have been some thorough investigations made into the documentation of the philosophy

and the cultural and literary practices originating from the Sattras. The most important works amongst these are:

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam (1996, reprint) by S.N. Sarma gives a detailed documentation of the genesis and development of the Sattras and the spread of the neo-Vaishnava faith with its unique way of offering prayers i.e. through performance. It talks in details of the Sattra structure spatially and religiously.

Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faithe and Movement in Assam (1998, reprint) by Maheswar Neog is a seminal work that not only gives comprehensive accounts of the Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva, but it also accounts its multi-faceted contributions towards the construction of the present day Assamese society. This book also draws the historical canvas of the beginning of the faith and its survival against hostility from the royalty then and eventually the royal patronage. It is also a commentary of various written treatises of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and the caritas written by the apostles.

The Comprehensive History of Assam (Vol I and III) (2007) edited by H.K. Barpujari and *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (2007) by S.L. Baruah give a wholistic historical account of the land over a passage of time bringing out its social, political, economic and cultural history. It also gives and account of the parallel histories running around the land i.e. Assam analyzing the salient feature of the Assamese civilization describing the forces and the factors that moulded society.

Religion and Society in North East India (2011), by D. Nath (ed.) throws light on the major religious beliefs of North East india comprising of tribal as well as non-tribal societies. The essays on Vashnavism in Assam bring out the bhakti system and its institutional structures, its nature and impact upon the tribal societies.

Satra Society and Culture: Pitambaradeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra (2012) by Dambarudhar Nath makes and approach to one of the most influential Sattras of Assam- Garamur Sattra in Majuli. It is an analytical historiography which provides an insight ino the Sattriya way of life and its contributions towards the society and culture of Assam.

The Sankaradeva Movement: Its Cultural Horizons (2007) by Pradip Jyoti Mahanta is an investigation into the cultural dimensions of the Bhakti Movement in Assam during the 15th – 17th centuries initiated by Sankaradeva and propagated by his apostles and followers. He brings out his observations of the 'Heritage Arts' of the Bhakti Movement of Assam.

Sankaradevar Silpalok (2007) by Pradip Jyoti Mahanta (in Assamese) is a detailed survey of the important art forms in the Sattra. Giving an overview of the cultural and textual scholarship of Sankardeva, Mahanta comments about Ankiya Bhaona which was the original form of ritual performance started by the 'saint' himself. He analyses the theatrical universe of Sankardeva's first play *Cinha Yatra*. In the last two chapters he talks in great detail about Sattriya Dance, its genesis and its journey.

1.8 Methodology and Methods

1.8.1 Methodology

A structured methodology is a prime requisite for a good and a smooth research. Paradigms from various forms of studies of culture i.e. discourses on studies of heritage, performance studies, history of Indian theatre have been taken as an approach to address various aspects of the findings and collection of data.

The present research, focusing on a living tradition of performance, is explorative, analytical and descriptive in nature for illustrating various issues and arguments in the study of the performance as an 'intangible heritage'. However in today's 'globalised' world, with the mobility of goods, ideas, images and people, the cultural identity of the people derives itself from their experiences of 'modernity', national and social politics, economics and migration. Rituals and ritualized performances play an important role in the shaping of a cultural imaginary of groups of people as they relate to and experience their everyday worlds. As Christian Brosius and Karin Poilt in the editorial introduction in their book *Ritual, Hertage and Identity: The Politics of Culture and Performance in a Globalised World* write, "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 a part of a larger picture, through which they can impact their environment."[34] This study explores the relationship between the Sattriya ritual (in particular the Sattriya Dance, its heritage which led to the re-enforcement of the cultural identity of the state of

Assam, where rituals are a point of reference for what people understand as their 'cultural heritage'.

Before we can form a solid methodology, various methods of data collection- primary and secondary have been employed to get data and information from the sources.

1.8.2 Methods

1.8.2.1 Data Collection

Primary Sources: The primary sources of information have been collected for the study from the three Kamalabari Sattras i.e. Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Natun Kamalabari Sattra and Purani Kamalabari Sattra through field work, personal conversations and interaction with senior monks, exponents (in and outside the Sattras), participant observation in many of the ritual performances, interviews with performing artists who are in the limelight on the proscenium stage. The Uttar Kamalabari and Natun Kamalabari Sattras are located in Majuli and the last one in Titabor, Jorhat. Multiple field visits to all these Sattras during the course of the research were undertaken by the researcher. Field visits to other Sattras such as that of Auniati Sattra, Dakhinpat Sattra and Garmur Sattra in Majuli, Bordowa Than, Nagaon and Nikamul Sattra, Tezpur have also been made by the researcher for the purpose of having a comparative understanding of the vastness of the cultural legacy that all the Sattras have contributed towards- the history and heritage. However, the main emphasis remains on the three Kamalabari group of Sattras for the field study.

Both, Quantitative and Qualitative methods were used for data collection. In the first phase of data collection, the researcher chose the quantitative way and applied the 'observation and recording' method to collect the preliminary data at the intial stages. Eventually, surveys, and interviews were taken through – telephonic interviews, face-to-face interviews, computer assisted personal interviews (in this case- email). In the second phase of data collection that is after about two years the researcher resorted to more qualitative methods in the form of closed questionnaires to selected people, conducted interactive interviews multiple times with various resource persons- exponents, researchers and scholars. The researcher also applied 'multiple data collection' methods to verify the authenticity of the data collected especially with contemporary scholars and secondary sources. An important element which was gathered during the interviews

taken was an 'auto-biographical element. A part of Chapter 3 and most of the Chapter 4 were written on the base of these 'autobiographies' of the interviewees. This gave a personal touch to this research project. Some of the primary data collected have been given in the form of Appendices towards the end of the dissertation. However, for spatial constraints it is not possible to incorporate all the interviews that were collected.

Selection of the Field: The researcher limited herself to the three Kamalabari Sattras as the periphery of the field study for a few reasons which are:

- These institutions, have, over the centuries been able to maintain very strong performance ritual (with reference to dance in particular) and have been able to pass it down through the generations through which vibrant tradition of dance that is called Sattriya emerged.
- It is the style and grammar of the Kamalabari group of Sattras in respect to dance as a heritage, which was analysed and taken into consideration for the performances on a proscenium stage.

As stated above, interviews and participant observation have been adopted to give a definitive shape to the work. The study is based on surveys and personal conversation which led to some unstructured interviews while in the field with various representatives of the Sattras. From various research methods available for collecting data, the researcher has applied participant as well as no-participant observation methods for collecting data. This helped the researcher to understand and analyse the multifarious functions and roles played by the institutions today and interpret the reasons and the genesis for the development of the Sattriya Dance as it stands today. Application of various theoretical approaches helped the researcher develop a framework to analyse the collected field data.

Since there has been a major shift in the paradigm of the Sattriya Performance which was, even a few decades back, a ritual performance, practiced by only a certain group of people to now being performed at much more secular spaces. Multiple theoretical postulations in relation to the disciplines of cultural history and cultural studies have been referred to and cited in order to understand the realities and dynamics involved from the Sattra community and the urban well-wishers.

Secondary Sources: Secondary sources such as books, journals, e-journals, reports, articles and essays, newspaper, magazines and websites have been used for collecting information. Several libraries and various academic and other institutions were visited which were necessary to understand and gather available works related to the present study.

1.8.2.2 Data Presentation (Referencing System Followed in Thesis)

In this dissertation, the referencing system prescribed by Tezpur University for 'Humanities and Social Sciences' has been followed but additionally,

- The published text by other authors has been given in quotations with corresponding endnotes in the end of every Chapter.
- If the "quoted" text has exceeded 3-4 lines, it has been given separately in a smaller font to make it stand out.
- If an idea has been used from any or multiple authors, their names along with the year of the publication has been made mentioned in brackets after the text has finished.
- In case of a theoretical idea, when appropriate, the name of a theorist has been mentioned in the respective text or in brackets after the point has been cleared.
- In case of any repetitive reference in the endnote, the word 'Ibid' has been used to indicate the same publication. If the reference is from the same page then it is written 'Ibid' and incase of a different page number from the same publication, 'Ibid [page no.]' i.e. Ibid is followed by the different page number.
- Some arguments have been derived from the interviews, personal communications and interactions, I made with various people in the research field. If any text has been taken out of the interviews that are going as a part of the 6 Appendixes, it has been put in quotations with the Appendix number in brackets. However, there are a lot of interviews taken that cannot be put as Appendix due to spatial constraint, where the name of the person has been mentioned in brackets following the text.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

In all research works the first and the foremost concern is the paucity of time. And alongside comes a concern of deciding the area and periphery of the research work. The

present dissertation is an investigation into the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Assam known as Sattriya and Sattriya Dance in particular. The Sattra institutions of Assam have been the cradle of the development of the cultural fabric of the state. They have not only shaped up the religious backbone of the majority of the population of the state inspite of this land being a melting pot to many communities and cultures, but they have also given given birth to and nurtured the performing as well as plastic art forms of the state.

The biggest problem was to limit the study to not only performance art form but also a particular set of institutions. Even then within this particular set of institutions i.e. Kamalabari Sattras, the sheer vastness of the performance culture i.e. forms as well as their ritual contexts was overwhelming. Each performance piece is a subject in itself to be studied, researched and discovered at length. This research just sees the most famous dance forms and the pieces and looks into *Ankiya Bhaona*. It leaves out the aesthetics of the dance tradition and that of the music, texts, all narratives related to it and takes only the dynamics of the Sattriya Dance from the heritage point of view and the binarity of its ritual significance and its setting on the modern proscenium stage as a performing art. This is not a holistic study of the performance art form of the Sattras, let alone Assam.

This study is also an attempt to investigate into the journey of the 'Dances from the Sattras' to Sattriya Dance- as a classical dance form recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's National Institution for Music, Dance and Drama. This study is not an aesthetic appraisal of the diverse art forms of Assam but is only a restricted exploration into specific aspects of their change and continuity or the finality of their 'livingness' in the Sattras and their 'move' with consequential changes to an another space .

Another major area of discourse that I had to consciously leave was the concept of 'public modernity'. This phrase coined by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (1995) provides an analytical grounding for looking at the reconstruction of any art form in the domain of 'public culture'. The changing notions of modernity are historically linked to the development of the 'public sphere' and it is contemporary at the time of its beginning. Delving into this would have meant getting into an analytical study of the language and grammar of the dance forms over a period of time. Since most of the information is handed down orally, it is a time consuming task to scavenge for the records of the changes from the theatre that i.e. *Ankiya Bhaona* to a very solid

grammatical performing form must have had many formal inclusions to date. Only the recent history is found scattered around. Talking of 'modernity' in the context of a performance also means trying to investigate into various modernities over a passage of time rather than giving one linear summation of today's analysis. This study is to bring out the 'intangible heritage' of the Sattras, a very small fragment of it and an attempt to draw a strategy for the study for its conservation and preservation. This study, very categorically, does not deal with analysing the performance structure, its development as a form of expression or a language of performance, but is an attempt to study and understand it as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The understanding of the narrative needed for the thesis has been extensively based on Participant Observation, Personal Communication with the practitioners in the "living tradition" i.e. the *bhakats* of the Sattras and Sattriya Dancers in the urban scenario. However, it was not possible to include all the interviews and recordings in the thesis. I have however included 6 such communications which have directly helped this thesis and have direct quotations from them in the main chapters. Apart from these six, I have tried to give the names of all the people who helped me understand the "ritual performance" but many a time I was speaking to groups of people and the conversation was organic so in that case I have mentioned their identity as '*bhakat*' of the particular Sattra.

I do sincerely hope that this research will prove to be useful and serve as a source for further study and research in the field.

1.10 Chapterisation

This thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter 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 for various reasons. The first work of a research is to gather as much literature as possible on a research topic, so the review of literature is a detailed note on all the books that have been directly referred to

in this academic endeavour. For practical reasons the review of literature does not give an account of all other materials that were read before coming down to a selection of a necessary number of books.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Paradigms

This Chapter, which is self-explanatory, this chapter 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

This chapter 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 art forms over the centuries right from its inception in the 15th century, when its fountainhead, Sankardeva introduced *Ankiya Nat* as a language to perform his first play *Cihna Yatra* followed by other plays. He aimed at propagating the philosophy and its teachings through its performance and over a period of time this performance got enriched and led to a very strong grammatical performing form. And it stands as a religious umbrella of the religious followers and makes them stand 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. It is divided into two parts: The first gives the narrative to the study and the second (the last point in the Chapter) gives a discussion.

Chapter 4: Shift in Paradigm: From *Namghar* to Proscenium

This chapter outlines the contemporary history of Sattriya Dance. What makes this dance form interesting is that it is a living dance practiced on sacred space in the Sattras. The form is 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. It has travelled a long way from the confines of a celibate order of neo-Vaishnavite monks to the inclusion of women. Sattriya Dance on its journey to becoming a classical dance form witnessed a lot of bold and path-breaking steps taken by many teachers who withstood the resistance of their community at that time. 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. Like Chapter 3, this chapter is also divided into two parts, the first gives the narrative to the study and the second (the last point in the Chapter) gives a discussion, however, there it was necessary to discuss also a few points as the Chapter progressed.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summerises 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.

Appendices: There are 6 appendices in this thesis; the first one is a timeline for Chapter 4 and the other 5 are interviews with Sattriya exponents and scholars, which have been referred to extensively to provide a narrative on the contemporary status Sattriya Dance both as a "living heritage" in the Sattras in Majuli and Titaobor and the contemporary forms with new experiments being made in the field.

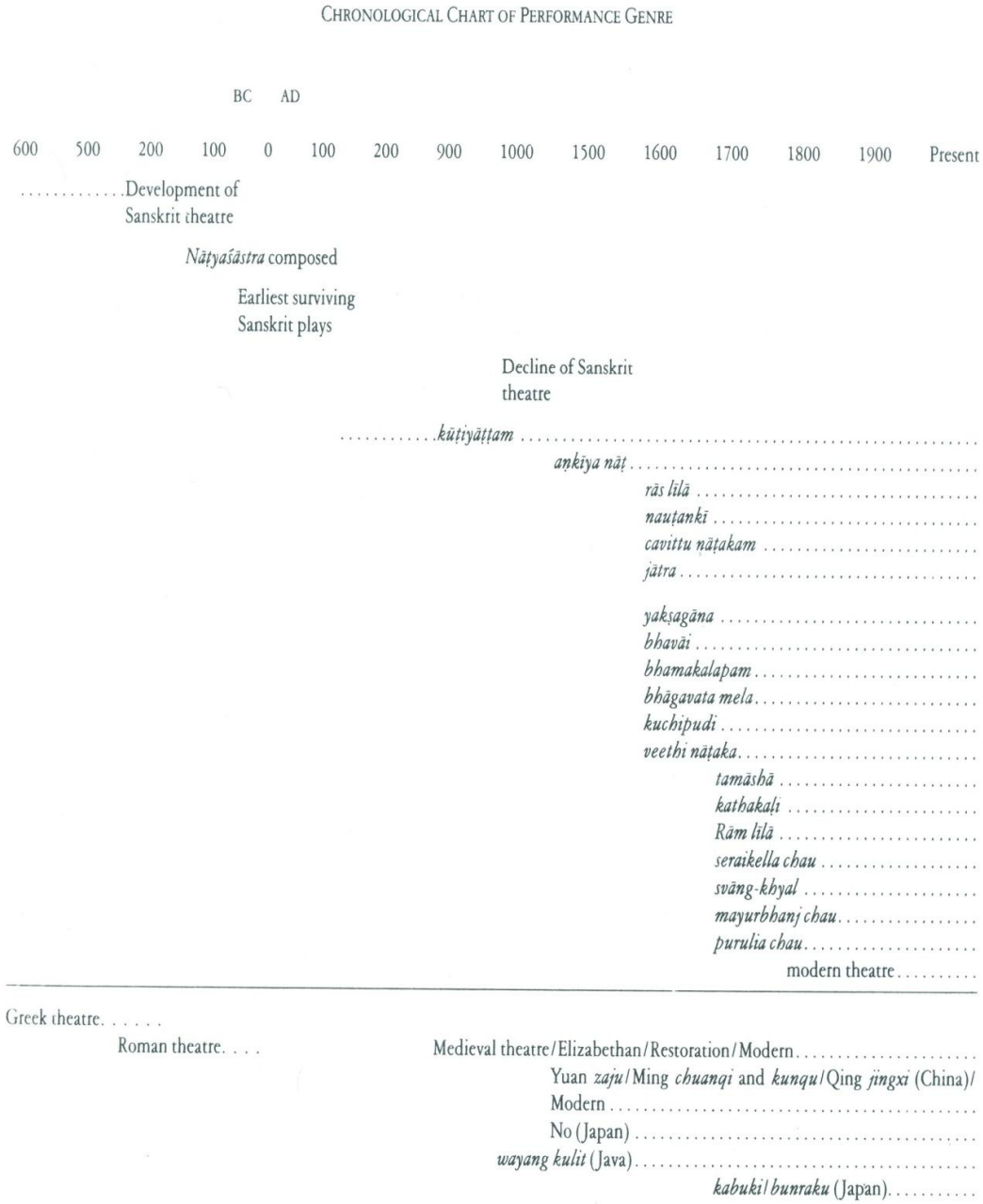

Fig 1

[Source: Richmond, Farley, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli, eds. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2007. 14-15. Print.]

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Endnotes for Chapter 1

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Brosius, Christiane and Karin M. Polit, eds. *Ritual, Theatre and Identity: The Politics of culture and Performance in a Globalised World*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2011. 1. Print.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. 1-2.
7. Ibid. 2.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

10. Prof. Maheswar Neog (about whose contributions are discussed in Chapter 4) popularised the term Sattriya *Nritya* although it was popularly in use by the Sattra fraternity to relate to the performance traditions of the Sattras. Neog, M. 'Sattriya Dance' in Dance Tradition in Assam, Dance Seminar, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. 1958.
11. Indian classical dance is an umbrella term for various codified art forms rooted in Natya and sacred Hindu musical theatre styles whose theory can be traced back to the Natyashastra of Bharata Muni (400 BCE).
12. The SNA was established in 31 May 1952 with its Memorandum of Association stating:

    [SNA's mission is] to promote research in the fields of Indian music, dance and drama and for this purpose to establish a library and a museum; to encourage the exchange of ideas and enrichment of techniques between the different regions in regard to the arts of music, dance and drama; to publish research on Indian performing arts; to revive and preserve folk traditions in different regions; to sponsor and encourage festivals, seminars and conferences; to give recognition to individual artists for outstanding achievements; to foster cultural contacts between different regions of the country and with other countries; and to cooperate with similar Akademies, institutions and associations or the furtherance of these objectives.
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21. Neog, Maheswar. *Early History of Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankaradeva and His Times* 3rd Ed. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1998. 122. Print. Daityari Thakur, 262-69, 315-27, 340-47 quoted here
22. Madhavdeva's poetic anthology in praise of his Guru
23. The term samhati is a synonym of the term *sangha* which means an association.
24. According to Gopala Ata before his faithful attendant Srirama Ata.
25. Sarma, S.N. *The Neo-Vasnavite Movement and the Satra institution of Assam*. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1999. 126. Print.
26. Ibid. 132
27. Ibid. 117
28. Ibid. 117-118
29. Ibid. 133-13
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