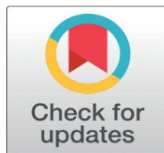
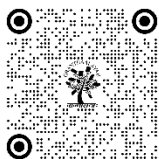


# SATTRIYA DANCE: AN AESTHETICAL OUTLOOK

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## ABSTRACT

Aesthetic is the pursuits of one's individual mind. The theory or sense of beauty is always in connotation with art appreciation or criticism and is cultivated in the responsive spectators. The aesthetic experience evolve among the *sahridaya* and varies from person to person depending upon the perception of beauty. Indian Classical Dances are sacred art forms associated with the union of individual soul with the Absolute. They imbibe the spiritual values. *Sattriya* dance, one of the classical dance form from Assam, created by the great saint *Sankaradeva* in the 15th -16th century was a product of neo-*vaishnavite* movement. This form carrying the legacy of living tradition till today is performed in the *Sattra* precinct as a ritual service to appease the almighty while simultaneously seen performing on stage to appease the audience. This research paper is an attempt to assess the aesthetic qualities of *Sattriya* dance and to evaluate the aesthetic experience that arise out of the dance form in the minds of the spectators. The paper will be based on secondary sources comprising magazines, books, journals and internet content.

**Keywords:** Sattriya Dance, Aesthetic, Rasa, Aharya, Angika, Music

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the arts, dance is one of the most sublime beauty. An art has the capacity of creating beauty resulting in aesthetic experience in the minds of the spectators. As aptly says, the beauty of a work of art lies in the eyes of the beholder. Aesthetic is classified under Philosophy. Sattriya dance is rich in its aesthetical aspects as its spiritual qualities lie in the philosophy of Vaishnavite faith.

## 2. ORIGIN OF SATTRIYA DANCE

Sankaradeva, the great saint and philosopher initiated the neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam in 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of binding the people of the society irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender. The then society was under

the disorder of many evil practices like animal sacrifices in the name of god, casteism, following different religious practices and paying homage to various deities. His faith was *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma*, where single god, Krishna is worshipped. He strongly opine that worshipping Vishnu is the only means of getting salvation and to demolish these evil practices from the society, establishing the paramount glory of Krishna among the masses is the only means. “As the branches, leaves and foilage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water only at the root of the tree, as the limbs of body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Vishnu (Krishna)” [Roychoudhury \(2013\)](#), P. 111. He believed that instead of providing religious discourses to the people he opted the audio-visual medium and composed various naats, geets, dances and monumental works on religion to make the lay people comprehensible on the importance of Krishna. This medium to propagate the vaishnavite faith provide a fillip to the *Bhakti* movement. Sankaradeva composed six naats to propagate the vaishnava faith, later known as *Ankiya naats*. These plays are an amalgamation of dance, music, acting, dialogues and carry the message of Krishna Bhakti to inculcate conscience within themselves. Here it is worth mentioning of the contributions of Madhavadeva, Sankaradeva’s apostle who composed various plays, known as *Jhumura* except one, to spread bhakti and to attract the masses to the vaishnava fold. The dances that are within the theatrical wing along with those outside the theatrical practices are known as Sattriya dance. Due to neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam two significant institutions fostered the way of life of the people. To proselytise the *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma* Sankaradeva established the congregational prayer hall, *devagriha (Sattr)* in Bordowa, Nagaon with the motive to discuss and to chant Krishna’s glory religiously. In *Charit Puthi*, it is beautifully written as:

Sankare Bolonto Bhai    Xuniyuko Ramrai  
Devagriha Xajio Jotone  
Heno Kotha Xunilonto    Sattragriha Xajilonto  
Ramrai Moharonga mone ||156|| [Goswami \(2019\)](#), P.15

Later on the *devagriha* emerged in a structural form as it is present today (Sattr) and mention to be made of Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. Another institution is the *Namghar*, which is the central structure of a sattr. Here, religious discourses, nama kirtan, bhaona performances, are held with the aim of bringing all the people of village irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender. All people are equal in the eyes of law and there is no discrimination while taking initiation into the Vaishnava faith of Sankaradeva is the main motive behind it.

Bharata Natyashastra is considered to be the first work that explains about aesthetics in Indian traditions. Rasa is the soul of any work on art. The word Rasa was borrowed from *Atharva veda (Rasan atharvanad api)* [Unni \(2014\)](#), P. 379 to explain the theory of dramaturgy by Bharata in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Natyashastra as *Rasaadhyaya*. Rasa is spiritual and aesthetic. Visvanatha in *Sahitya-Darpana* says that “aesthetic pleasure and spiritual pleasure are twin brothers. They are, indeed, not different in kind; and, if at all, they differ in degree, that is infinitesimal and hence absolutely negligible. Aesthetic pleasure, too, like spiritual pleasure, is characterized by disinterestedness and unselfishness” [Chaudhay \(1991\)](#), P. 46. The concept of Rasa plays’s an important role in dance and no dance is justified without the experience and appreciation by the viewers. Rasa is the soul and source of all life. Bharata uses the word rasa in search of true beauty. He enumerated eight rasas: *Sringar, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Vira, Bhayanaka, Bibhastha, Adbhuta*. Later

commentators like Abhinavagupta added one more rasa, *Santa* making them to *Nava rasa* [Beohar \(2015\)](#), P. 189. Vaishnavite philosophers like Sri Rupa Goswami in *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu* and Jiva Goswami in *Pritisandharva* devised the concept of *priiti* as a form of bhakti [Bandopadhyay \(2010\)](#), p. 226. Under bhakti rasa, there are *Pancharasa*. “The Vaishnava have considered all the rasas under one basic *rasa* i.e *bhaktirasa* or the *rasa* of devotion. Within this the other *rasas* exist” [Bandopadhyay \(2010\)](#), p. 226. The five rasas are: *Santa*, *Dasya*, *Sakhya*, *Vatsalya* and *Madhura*. *Rasa* is based on the four kinds of *abhinaya*, *angika*, *vachika*, *Aharya* and *sattvika*. *Abhinaya* is significant in Indian Classical Dance. It is a medium that bridges a link between the artist and the audience.

To relish the beauty of Sattriya dance, it is necessary to understand the traditional pedagogy and its various aesthetic components that influences the mind of the viewers. In Sattriya dance, other rasas are subservient to *bhakti* rasa. It is of great importance in Sattriya repertoire. The dancer pays obeisance to the divine through *Vandana* (prayer to god), depicts stories of the divine and even seen representing the divinity through dance. The composition in Sattriya dance either begins with praising lord Krishna or Guru Sankaradeva or verses from sacred manuscripts written by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. As Sattriya dance plunged from ankiya naats, bhakti is incorporated in the entire *naat* through songs, dances and dialogues. The Sutradhar keeps on reminding his audience to look (*Shravan*) and listen (*Kirtan*) carefully to the naat and keep on chanting Hari’s name to avail salvation.

***Bho bho sabhasadah juyang srinudhwam shradhayadhuna /***

***Rukmini haranang naam natakam mukti sadhakam //***

Sloka of Rukmini Harana naat [Goswami \(2022\)](#), P.34

Another noteworthy is *Dasya bhakti* and *Atma-nivedan* in Sattriya repertoire where Krishna is the sole god to be worshipped. In Madhavadeva’s monumental work *Namghosa dasya bhakti* and *atma-nivedan* can be seen in the following verses:

***Nuhu jana ami cari jati cari ashrami nuhu aati***

***Nuhu dharmasil danbrata tirthagami /***

***Kintu purananda samudrar Gopibharta pada kamalar***

***Dasara dasa tana dasa bhorilu ami // Sankardeva & Madhabdeva (2016), P.***

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I do not belong to the four castes nor I belong to the four ashramas. I am neither a pious, a donor or a pilgrim. But to the lord who is the ocean of joy and happiness I become the servant of his lotus feet.

***He Krishna taju pawe pahilu sarana /***

***Mayi anathoro natha tumi Narayana // Sankardeva & Madhabdeva (2016),***

P. 81

Oh lord Krishna being an orphan you are my preserver and I bow down and self-surrender myself onto your feet to take refuge.

The *Ankiya naat* of Sankaradeva, comes to an end with the note of *bhakti* rasa. In *Ramvijaya naat*, when Ram and Parshuram encountered and the latter was defeated, the dramatist give the following *bhakti* words in the mouth of Parshuram as:

***“He Prabhu Sri Rama: Tuhu Parama Isvara: Hamu Tuhari Angsha:  
E Najani Darpa Kayolo: Hamaro duho moroho guhai ||”*** Medhi (1997), P. 270

Merging of the individual self with the absolute (*paramatna*) is the static aesthetic feeling prevalent in the entire Sattriya repertoire.

*Angika abhinaya* enhanced the beauty of a dance form. In *Abhinaya Darpana*, Nandikeshwara described as:

“Where the hand goes, let the glance follow  
where the glances lead, there should the mind follows  
where the mind goes, the emotion is generated  
where the emotion is generated, there is the sentiment delineated”

Ramachandrsekhar (2016), P. 26

The learning of the traditional Sattriya dance form from *adhyapak* (guru) is always in oral tradition. The use of *hastas*, *pada karma*, *griva bheda*, *drishti bheda*, *siro bheda* all makes the Sattriya dance form aesthetically appealing and helps to create a spiritual ambience among the audience. *Matiakhoras* are the backbone of the dance form. These are taught to new learners to make their body flexible and physically fit. Maheswar Neog cited, according to late Maniram Dutta Muktiyar there are forty-four *matiakhoras*, but late Roseswar Saikia Barbayan promoted the number to sixty-four. Asom Sattri Mahasabha (association of sattras) stated seventy-three *matiakhoras* Kandali (2014), P. 34. Gobinda Saikia, mentioned 108 *matiakhoras* relating to the 108 *karanas* of *Natyashastra* Saikia (1997), P. 1. Mallika Kandali stated, “there is no anonymity about the total numbers of the *matiakhoras*; in other words, the different Sattras advocate different numbers of *mati-akhoras*” Kandali (2014), P. 34.

The more time a dancer devotes in learning the basics in its pristine form, the more beautiful her dance will be in entralling the audience. Aesthetic will be more precise when there would be *Anga suddhi* (the correct depiction of the *angas* or the body movements of Sattriya dance).

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Dandawat or Khosoka

**Source** <https://www.hindustantimes.com/photos/india-news/photos-on-assam-s-majuli-island-monks-keep-an-ancient-tradition-alive/photo-7e7989FITPA2UiEX8LR2JO-3.html>

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Purush Ora (Basic Stance of Male)  
**Artist** Gobinda Saikia

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Prakriti Ora (Basic Stance of Female)  
**Artist** The author

Music and musical instruments are another striking aesthetic component of Sattriya dance. When they are well used in a dance sequence, it will never go astray. It is difficult to separate music from dance and both are intertwined with inner beauty expression. Musical instruments have the capacity to arouse the feeling and mood without verbal association in the hearts of the audience. The use of *Brajabuli* language by Sankaradeva (admixture of *Assamese, Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, Udiya, Newari* and *Brajabhasa*) in *Borgeets, Ankiya naats* and in his several works could be easily perceivable to the people. The employment of musical instruments in Sattriya dance recital plays a significant role. The main instrument of the dance form is the *Khol*, which is given a revered position in the society and referred as *deva vadya*. Along with this, other instruments like *taal, banshi, doba, violin, sankha, sitar, kah, ghanta* etc. are used to accompany the dance form creating not only religious feelings but also creates spiritualism among the dancer and the viewer.

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Khol

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5 (A)** Khuti tal

**(B)** Pati tal

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Banshi

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Doba

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** Sankha

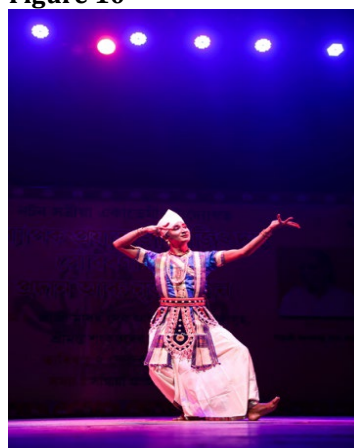
The appearance of the dancer also makes an aesthetic statement. She should look slim and graceful, having an appealing effect among the audience. The dancer should feel comfortable, look gracious and dignified. She should not be overdressed but select such costumes that enhance her physical beauty. She should put on clothes that suits the rasas depicted in the dance sequence. The colour should be in accordance with the emotions and should be pleasant to the eyes. The *aharya* should be such that it suits not only the dancer but also the choreographic item. The attire not only make the dancer elegant but also aesthetically attractive that they can immediately delight and captivate the eyes of the spectators. In Sattriya dance, two attires are observed: the male and the female costume. Ekharya concept is also observed in choreographic works where abhinaya is profusely depicted. The make-up too plays a distinctive role in adding glamour to the dancer. The makeup differs according to various characters in *ankiya naat*. It is necessary to keep in mind that besides the two broad divisions of attire mostly seen performance on stage, each dance numbers in the repertoire have different costumes, such as, *jumura nac*, *nadubhangi nac*, *gopi nac*, *gohain pravesh nac*, *chali nac* etc.

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9 Female Attire**  
**Artist** The author

**Figure 10**



**Figure 10 (A) Male Attire**  
**Artist** Niranjana Saikia



**(B) Male Attire**  
**Artist** Borish Dutta

Figure 11



Figure 11 Ekaharya

Artist Mousumi Borah and Juhimon Das

The use of lighting is another aesthetic feature that meets the need of the dance composition. It enhances the entire atmosphere and ignites the feelings among the audience to relish the *rasa*. Use of proper and correct light according to the thematic purpose adds beauty to the composition and creates a captivating and immersive experience for the audience. As Sattriya dance belongs to the theatre performances called *ankiya bhaona*, we can observe while staging the *ankiya bhaona*, the conventional lightening methods were used that enhance the aesthetic, spiritual, and religious aura of the entire performance arena before the emergence of electric lights. Neog said, "Light is provided on the stage with the help of large chandeliers (*gacha*), each holding about a hundred earthen cups with mustard oil, torches (*ariya*) of burning cloth soaked in such oil, large mustard oil lamps, and brilliant pyrotechnic lights (*mahata*, *mata* or *mahala*), lighted at the time of entrance of the chief actors or at the time of dancing. Gas lights, petromax lamps and electric lights in the last instance have been displacing these old and indigenous lighting arrangements" Neog (1984), P. 9-12. The performers in *ankiya bhaona* pass through an archway of lights consisting of nine earthen lamps representing the nine forms of bhakti, called *Agnigarh*.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Aesthetic is the art of moving the body rhythmically and links all perplexed meanings in one perfect expression piece. Dance is an art and representation of an artist's inner depth. It is believed, *rasa* is experienced by those who are emotionally reactive or it is rightly said, beauty is only seen by those audience who can grasp its beauty. Hence, the audience should be *sahridaya*, able to feel or enjoy *rasa* and it is apparent only when the audience has a knowledge on the pedagogy and understanding of the *abhinaya* performed in dance. The nuances of Sattriya dance form and the distinct system of rhythm not akin to other forms have given this tradition a separate entity. These all-aesthetic attributes of Sattriya dance form help the audience to transcend the mind and heart in the ladder of spiritualism.



The audience experience different aesthetic pleasure while watching the Sattriya dance form but they finally merge in the bhakti rasa, which is the significant rasa of the form. The presence of bhakti rasa in Sattriya dance is beautifully witnessed by spectators through its compositions which describes the stories of lord Krishna. The bhakti rasa or bhava is the sthaya bhava in Sattriya dance and a spectator can relish the bhakti rasa present in the dance form only if he has the minimal knowledge on the pedagogy of the form. In one of the borgeets of Madhavadeva, he described:

*"Ji Rasa Milise Brindavane /  
Ae Sukha Nahike Tribhubane //"* Kandali (2014), P.61

The rasa that one experience in Brindavan is the ultimate happiness that cannot be found anywhere else.

Similarly, all the rasas that one experiences while witnessing the dance form finally merge in the bhakti rasa, which prevails throughout the performance.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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