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Balancing Tradition and Transformation: An Ethnographic Study of Sattriya Culture of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT: The Sattriya culture of Assam, India, is centered in the monastic institutions known as Satras and has been a centerpiece of Assamese regional identity since the 15th century. This culture is now facing the tension between preserving its ancient traditions and adapting to the strong forces of globalization. This paper argues that the Sangeet Natak Akademi's (National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama) recognition of Sattriya dance as a classical form in 2000 accelerated Sattriya culture's global exposure and rapidly transformed its economic, technological, and pedagogical domains. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Majuli island (2025), including interviews with *bhakats* (monks) from multiple generations, this study analyzes how the integration of formal education, adoption of modern communication technologies, and efforts to mitigate the new economic pressures (such as the burgeoning interest in tourism) are reshaping the mindsets and practices of devotees, particularly those from the younger generation. This paper also explores the evolving socio-political role of the *Satra*, which necessitates ongoing negotiation between Sankardeva's founding egalitarian principles and current, sometimes contradictory viewpoints concerning caste and gender. This research studies the complex strategies employed by traditional culture to maintain continuity while navigating modernization, highlighting the crucial role of individuals within the *Satras* in shaping the future spiritual, social, and economic trajectories of these institutions.

KEYWORDS: Social Anthropology, Ethnomusicology, Cultural Globalization, Sattriya Culture, Heritage Preservation.

Introduction

The *Satras* of Assam, India, are monastic institutions that serve as epicenters for Sattriya culture - a tradition rooted in the 15th-century Neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Srimanta Sankardeva. This movement established *Ekasarana Dharma*, a devotional practice centered on Lord Vishnu, and is expressed through unique artistic forms such as *Borgeet* (devotional songs), *Naam Kirtan* (congregational chanting), and specific dance forms.[1] For over five centuries, these Satras, mainly concentrated on Majuli island in the Brahmaputra River, functioned as relatively insulated repositories of spiritual and cultural knowledge and played a crucial role in shaping Assamese identity.[2]

The late 20th century saw numerous political forces, such as the problem of large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh and a prolonged insurgency, at play.[3] The efforts to preserve the cultural identity of Assam gained momentum in the local population, and a pivotal moment in this process was the recognition of Sattriya dance as one of India's eight classical dance forms by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) in 2000.[3,4] This validation at a national level significantly amplified the tradition's visibility. At the same time, it accelerated the pressures and opportunities associated with modernization, tourism, and global cultural exposure.

This paper examines how the Sattriya culture, particularly within the Satras of Majuli, is managing this delicate balance. It argues that while globalization's influence predates 2000, the SNA recognition served as a powerful catalyst, intensifying tensions and adaptations across multiple domains. Specifically, this study explores how increased outreach to a wider audience and exposure are reshaping economic structures and technology adoption within the Satras. It also analyzes the impact of integrating formal education alongside traditional pedagogical methods (*Guru-Sishwa parampara*) and the changes it has brought upon the motivations and experiences of younger bhakats (devotees/monks). Finally, it investigates if the socio-political role of the *Satras* has evolved while exploring the ongoing negotiation between Sankardeva's foundational egalitarian principles and current practices related to caste and gender hierarchies. The paper begins with an outline of the methodology of the study, which includes ethnographic fieldwork, followed by a historical overview of the *Satras*, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, and the evolution of Sattriya culture. Following this, the paper discusses the results of the ethnographic fieldwork on the key areas of change (increased outreach to a wider audience, reshaping of economic structures, technology adoption, integration of formal education, and the evolution of socio-political life). Finally, it concludes by summarizing the findings and suggesting avenues for future inquiry.

Methodology

Research for this paper was conducted using both primary and secondary sources, including intensive ethnographic field research in Majuli Island in Assam. Fieldwork was conducted in January 2025 in Auniati and Uttarkamalabari *Satra*. The *Satras*, belonging to *Brahmasamhati* and *Nikasamhati*, were chosen to obtain an additional range of opinions from orthodox and liberal sects, respectively.

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Methods used for primary data collection included participant observation during rituals like Naam Prasanga and performances, as well as semi-structured interviews with individuals from four key areas of engagement – heads of *Bohas*, senior *bhakats*, younger *bhakats*, and former *bhakats*/cultural advocates.

Data recording techniques included detailed field notes, audio recordings of interviews, and photographic documentation.

The research sought to uphold the highest standards of ethical consideration by obtaining verbal informed consent, ensuring anonymity where requested, and respecting cultural sensitivities and hierarchies within the *Satras*.

Qualitative field research techniques were used, like thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes, identifying patterns of continuity and change, comparing perspectives across generations and different *Satras/Samhatis*, and triangulation of interview data with observations and secondary sources.

This paper furthermore relies upon secondary sources drawn from scholarly papers, journals, and articles to help reinforce observations from the visit, view the tradition in its historical context, and gain perspectives related to the culture.

My position as a researcher was that of an 'insider-outsider'. I was able to establish a connection due to my Assamese family heritage and semi-fluency in the language. However, because I was born and raised in Gurgaon, outside of Assam, I lacked the same cultural context as many of my interviewees. To ensure accuracy, I sought help from a native Assamese speaker (my mother) who accompanied me in interviews and clarified complex sentences. The findings are limited by the brief fieldwork period and small sample size.

■ Historical Overview

Srimanta Sankardeva (c. 1449–1568) initiated the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, or *Ekasarana Dharma*, which emerged during a period of socio-religious tumult, broadly known as the Bhakti movement, across India. Like other Bhakti traditions, *Ekasarana Dharma* emphasized devotion (*bhakti*) to a single, supreme deity (primarily *Krishna/Vishnu*) and sought to make religion accessible to all social strata, challenging orthodox Brahminical rituals and rigid caste hierarchies.[5] As Dr. Karuna Bora, a former *bhakat* and cultural advocate, stated to me in an interview, Sankardeva aimed to *unite the Assamese people as a whole, bring the different communities together... irrespective of caste and creed*.[6] This reformist effort was central to the movement's initial spread and enduring influence on Assamese identity for over five centuries.[7]

The *Satras* became the epicenter of the movement. Structurally, a typical *Satra* includes a *Namghar* (prayer hall), *Manikuta* (shrine), and residential quarters (*Bohas*) for the *bhakats*.[8] Their leader is the *Satradhikar*, while *bhakats*, often celibate monks (*kevaliya bhakats*), are recruited in youth. They dedicate their lives to spiritual practice and the preservation of Sattriya tradition. Other disciples (*shishyas*) form the broader community base.[1]

Following Sankardeva and his primary disciple Madhavdeva, the movement evolved with differing interpretations. This led to the formation of four main sub-sects or *Samhatis: Brahmasamhati, Purushsamhati, Nikasamhati,* and *Kalasamhati*.[9] The *Brahmasamhati*, which was patronized by the Ahom kingdom, reintroduced certain Brahminical elements and caste considerations. This diverged from Sankardeva's founding egalitarianism.[10] These historical divergences continue to influence the practices and social structures within different *Satras* today.

Central to Sattriya practice are its unique artistic forms. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva composed Borgeets ('celestial songs') in Brajavali, using specific *ragas* (melodic modes) and often accompanied by the *khol* (drum) and *taal* (cymbals).[11,12] *Naam Kirtan* (congregational chanting) remains a core devotional activity. Sankardeva also created *Ankiya Naat* (one-act plays), performed as *Bhaona*, utilizing dance, music, elaborate costumes, and sometimes masks (*Mukha Bhaona*), which are also used to disseminate Vaishnavite philosophy.[13] These integrated art forms were designed not merely for aesthetic pleasure but also served as powerful tools for spiritual devotion and community building.

For centuries, these traditions remained largely confined to the *Satras* and the Assamese region. The post-independence era saw efforts by Assamese scholars, notably Maheswar Neog, to gain national recognition for Sattriya dance as a classical form, presenting it at platforms like the 1958 Sangeet Natak Akademi seminar.[3] This decades-long campaign culminated in the SNA's formal recognition in 2000. This decision significantly elevated Sattriya's national profile and acted as a major catalyst for its increased engagement with the world outside.[4]

■ Results and Discussion: Navigating Globalization Post-2000

The SNA recognition acted as a catalyst, accelerating the interaction between the historically insular Sattriya culture and the forces of globalization. The increased outreach directly supported the cultural economy of the *Satras* through an increase in tourism, performance fees, and government grants.[14]

Historically, the *Satras* have been supported by land grants (especially *Brahmasamhati Satras*) or community patronage. Many *Satras* now rely on a broader mix of revenue, which includes government funding, performance fees, tourism revenue, and individual enterprise.[15] Government grants facilitate crucial renovations, help in improving living conditions for the *bhakats*, and make the *Satras* more presentable to external visitors. National recognition, such as the award of Padma Shri, brings prestige and also inspires younger generations (as noted in the case of Mask-maker Kosha Kanta Deva Goswami).[16] Despite these expanded revenue channels, the realities of economic hardships persist. During our interview, the 102-year-old Padma Shri awardee Gopiram Borgayan Burabhakat lamented the rising cost of living and how it is a challenge to meet even the daily needs within the *Satra*.[17] This situation manifests across various dimensions, creating a need for adaptation, resistance, opportunity, and concern.

Performance vs. Ritual: Following the 2000 SNA recognition, Sattriya performance found a newer space beyond the ritual context of the *Namghar*. With access to a conventional stage, both national and international,[4] came a shift that was driven by a desire to share the culture, gain recognition, and secure economic support. Upen Borgayan, head of a *Boha* at Uttarkamalabari Satra, confirmed this trend, stating that *bhakats* now teach and "*perform in different places, even abroad, like London, France, America to spread the culture*," viewing this as a "*good development*."[18] This increased visibility has tangible outcomes, increasing tourism to places like Majuli—a significant source of income—and funding infrastructure improvements within the *Satras*.[14,19]

This shift towards performance for external audiences, including international tourists, has required adaptations. Dr. Karuna Bora described the recent creation of an outdoor performance area at Uttarkamalabari *Satra* specifically for tourists who might be unfamiliar with *Namghar* decorum or unable to sit on the floor for extended periods.[6] The field visit included witnessing one such performance for a group of French tourists on the outdoor stage.

Authenticity vs. Commercialization: The changes have also given rise to a debate between authenticity and commercialization. This tension is evident in reactions to modern renditions, such as Anurag Saikia's 'Project Borgeet,' which blends *Borgeet* melodies with Western orchestral arrangements.[20]

In the song "Are Kompito"[21] by Madhavdeva, Anurag Saikia predominantly uses Western instruments like the violin, cello, double bass, etc. The music video begins by showing visuals of the orchestra in Skopje, Macedonia, showing the sole singer Mizee and several instruments being played by members of the orchestra, with the piano being played by Anurag Saikia himself. A little over two minutes into the video, the visuals switch to rural Assam. Shots of a *Satra* and some dancers can be seen. Meanwhile, the music is dominated by the flute as the singing pauses. After about a minute, the visuals switch back to the orchestra and the singing resumes. We are also able to see the Shillong choir, although they are barely heard. This video reached a diverse audience, appealing to the younger generation. One YouTube comment captured the essence – "*I am a 13 y/o teenager, and I think my generation should listen to more songs like these and strengthen our roots to our motherland...This is the only way we can preserve this beautiful culture and heritage of Assam...*"

Other Assamese artists have also begun composing and performing music based on Sattriya culture. For example, Papon, an Assamese playback singer who currently has 1.44 million YouTube subscribers and is famous on a national level, has collaborated with Satras to publish Borgeet.[22] The video garnered over 1 million views with 20,000 positive affirmations.

Despite aiming to promote the "universality" of the music and culture, Upen Borgayan expressed reservations, suggesting such projects, while perhaps acceptable, require community consent: the artist "must seek permission first."[18] This indicates a desire within the community to maintain control over how their sacred traditions are represented and adapted for global consumption. The emphasis reveals a shift from devotional practice to cultural product, potentially altering the meaning for both practitioners and audiences. Dr. Bora summarized this, worrying that while performances spread awareness, "through media, one cannot convey the spiritual essence."[6]

Digital Outreach and Resistance: Technology serves as a tool for adaptation as well as a source of concern with the Sattriya culture. The power of digital platforms enabled unprecedented reach to a wider audience base. Upen Borgayan actively uses YouTube ("Upen Borgayan official")[23] to share *Borgeet* performances. While his channel has 14 videos, he acknowledges the double-edged nature of technology in that it increases awareness but potentially supports a superficial engagement with shorter attention spans. "*Online knowledge can be superficial," he cautioned, worrying that users might "take it easy and [not] want to devote enough time and energy*".[18] His perspective in the interview has an experimental tone: "*It comes with both pros and cons... trying to determine whether it will be a net positive in the Long run*." On the other hand, the elderly Gopiram Borgayan Burabhakat shared a stark warning that unchecked technology "*may destroy the essence of Satra life*."[17]

Within the *Satras*, the new is integrated pragmatically: harmoniums are used in teaching (though not in prayer rituals), modern instruments like violins and flutes feature in some performances, and sound systems help amplify *Bhaonas*.[6] These adaptations reflect a conscious effort to remain relevant even as the core dilemma persists on how to leverage modern tools without compromising the tradition's "*original essence*".[18] Dr. Bora shared this concern, noting that commercial motivations can lead individuals to "*imparting half-baked knowledge...*" diluting the art form.[6]

Evolving Transmission: The traditional method of transmitting Sattriya knowledge is the *Guru-Sishwa parampara* (teacher-disciple lineage), which relied on immersive apprenticeship within the *Boha* residential system.[8] This model has been indelibly changed with the increasing emphasis on formal education. Dr. Karuna Bora described the resistance he faced as one of the first *bhakats* from his *Satra* to pursue higher education in the mid-to-late 20th century: "*Back then, school education was not encouraged... I had to face a lot of hardship and resistance*."[6]

Today, the situation has reversed; formal schooling is now an acceptable standard, and many young bhakats pursue higher education alongside their monastic duties. Jumon Gayan, a 19-year-old *bhakat*, studying Political Science, exemplifies this new reality. He manages a demanding schedule of *Satra* duties (cleaning, cooking, rituals, fieldwork) alongside his college studies by relying on determination and support from friends: "*If he has to go for a function and has to miss school, his friends give him notes*."[24] His views on formal education are positive, and he believes it will help "*preserve Sattriya culture by adapting it to modern times*."[24]

However, this integration of formal education has influenced motivation and recruitment. Some interviewees noted that fewer boys join the *Satras*, partly due to increased education-

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al and career opportunities outside.[25] There is also a concern that some recruits might be attracted more by the "*glamour of becoming a performer*" on the international stage, rather than deep spiritual devotion.[25] Upen Borgayan linked this to the role of technology in reducing our ability to focus: "*Use of mobile phones has reduced people's attention span... These days, the usage of phones and technology leaves no time for introspection.*"[18] This raises a critical question on whether the depth of spiritual training and embodied knowledge central to the *Guru-Sishwa* tradition can co-exist alongside modern educational pathways and digital distractions.

Socio-political role and contested hierarchies:

Caste: Sankardeva's *Ekasarana Dharma* explicitly aimed to create a unified spiritual community, void of any caste structures.[7] Historically, *Satras* achieved this by facilitating the integration of various communities, including lower castes.[8] However, one can see the existence of a paradox where some *Satras*, particularly within the more orthodox *Brahmasamhati*, maintain caste-based hierarchies. Reserving key leadership positions such as *Satradhikar* for individuals from only Brahmin or high-caste backgrounds confirms this paradox. When questioned about this practice, the reasoning offered was adherence to a long-standing "*tradition that has prevailed for fourteen generations and cannot be broken*."[18] This acceptance of an evolved institutional custom over Sankardeva's founding egalitarian principles illustrates the complex interplay between founding ideology and entrenched interpretations.

Gender: Gender roles have sparked both tension and transformation within the Sattriya mindset. While vital to the socio-economic support of the *Satras*, women were traditionally excluded from core ritual spaces and leadership roles.[26] The SNA recognition facilitated the emergence of several women as prominent performers of Sattriya dance on public stages.[4] The pursuit of the Sattriya dance form took new dimensions - in the way it was learnt, the incorporation of newer costumes, and the entry of trained professional dancers into this art form. While there was a wave of change in training and performance of this dance, the inclusion of women within the ritual life of the *Satras* is still contested. In 2010, a landmark intervention occurred when the then-Governor J.B. Patnaik facilitated women's entry into the Patbausi *Satra Namghar*, invoking Sankardeva's inclusive vision. Yet, it did not lead to universal change; conservative institutions like Barpeta Satra continue to restrict women's access. Furthermore, acceptance of female performers is not uniform even among relatively liberal *bhakats*. Upen Borgayan expressed a nuanced view on female Sattriya dancers: "*He believes that excellence in the practice is characterized by strength and grace. He says that girls are able to exude grace but not strength, which is required in certain movements of the dance. In a way, the dance loses its original character.* "[18] This perspective highlights the ongoing debate surrounding authenticity, aesthetic standards, and gender as the tradition evolves beyond its historically male-dominated monastic origins.

■ Conclusion

The Sattriya culture of Assam, particularly as currently practiced within the *Satras* of Majuli, offers a compelling case study of how traditional cultures navigate the multi-dimensional forces of globalization as well as their survival. The entire ecosystem experienced a pivotal catalyst when its dance was formally recognized as a classical dance form of India. This single decision ushered in a new period of globalization, accelerating Sattriya music and dance's popularization and forcing the community to adapt quickly. This paper has demonstrated that managing this vital balance is not a uniform strategy handed down from the top. Rather, it is a constant, often conflicted negotiation happening among the individual monks, with every generation trying to figure out how much of the new world to embrace while still honoring the old.

The findings clearly reveal a spectrum of individual responses from the stakeholders. On one end, we have the determined guardians like Gopiram Borgayan Burabhakat. He represents the elders who fiercely guard authenticity and warn against any form of dilution. In the center, there are pragmatic leaders such as Upen Borgayan, who strategically experiment - adopt technology and adapt performance practices - to ensure the tradition's economic viability. On the other end is the young generation, exemplified by Jumon Gayan. They embody a more resolved synthesis: acceptance of formal education and modern life along with monastic duties, fueled by personal drive and a deep sense of cultural duty. Additionally, it has revealed how individuals outside of the *Satras* also engaged in the commercialization process, thereby impacting the broader Assamese community.

We see the impacts of globalization in clear, tangible ways: economic dependencies on tourism and government grants, the infiltration of digital media, acceptance of formal education, and evolving social hierarchies. These forces clash dramatically. The spiritual devotion of the past negotiates the commercial demands of performance, the immersive traditional transmission confronts the easy accessibility of digital platforms, and the egalitarian promises of the founder question the hierarchies and interpretations that came later.

However, these tensions are not just threats, but a focal point where the Sattriya identity is being shaped. The *bhakats* are the real agents of change with their daily choices - how they use their phones, how they explain caste practices, what they prioritize in their teaching. While this initial study was geographically constrained to Majuli and relies on a small sample of interviews, the consistency in commitment from the bhakats to the purpose of *Satra* life is clear, and they are the ones actively deciding the future trajectory of this tradition.

This ethnographic study offers a foundation for some significant future avenues for expansion. Future research can quantitatively investigate the true economic costs and benefits of tourism across various *Satras* as well as track changes in recruitment patterns and motivations for bhakats post 2000. Additionally, it could engage with the often-overlooked experiences of women practitioners - both inside and outside the *Satra*. Finally, this research encourages further discourse on whether the traditional power structures will finally yield to

Sankardeva's liberal founding ideals, or if those structures are simply too dominant to be overturned.

Ultimately, the Sattriya culture's evolution tells us that tradition is never static. Its survival hinges on its ability to adapt, a process linked with the personal experiences and deliberate choices of the custodians who guard it. The real challenge is to navigate change in a way that protects the essence while ensuring that the echoes of Borgeet still hold meaning for the generations to come.

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