

## **Sattriya: Its Transformation as a Principal Medium of Preaching Vaishnava Religion to Performing Art**

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**Abstract :** Sattriya, the youngest of the eight principal Classical Indian dance traditions, has undergone too many changes and modifications to arrive at its present stage of performing art form extracting itself from age-old religious confinement. Although some of the other traditions have been revived in the recent past, Sattriya has a living tradition since its inception in the 15th century by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great Vaishnavite saint, poet, playwright, lyricist, painter, singer and dancer of Assam, a primary north-eastern state of India. This living dance tradition from the Sattras, the Vaishnavite monasteries, has been practiced for over five hundred years by celibate male monks, as a powerful medium for propagating the Vaishnava religious faith. Sankardeva realised the potential of the vocalised word integrated with the visual image as a powerful medium of expression and communication. So he used this principal medium for propagating his newly found message of devotion among the people of his time. Earlier, Sattriya was performed by male monks alone in monasteries (Sattras) as a part of daily rituals. The females were not even allowed to learn this art form. But, in present time, Sattriya has come out from the Sattras to proscenium stage, performed mostly by female as well as few male dancers also. The technique of performing movements, costumes, ornaments, music and style of performance too have experienced too many changes and modifications. For example, earlier and even today in Sattras, the 'Pataka' hand gesture is depicted in conformity with the original context (religious) of creation of the dance form. But, today stage-performers prefer the instructions of the scripture 'Srihastamuktavali' and depict the 'Pataka' in a sophisticated manner affecting decontextualisation to a certain extent. This adds aesthetic beauty to the dance form as an art distancing it from its context of being a vehicle for propagating Vaishnava religion. The Sattriya dance today stands at the crossroads of past and future, tradition and modernity, devotion and display, spirituality and secularism. The traditional exponents trained under the tutelage of Sattras maestros and imbibing a devotionally inspired rigour of the religion, try to retain the traditional nuances; while the young artists being trained outside the monasteries are more interested in taking up the discipline purely from the perspective of 'performing arts' bereft of the philosophy of religion or its sacred associations. Hence, this paper will be an endeavor to establish the hypothesis that the Sattriya, whose origin was for propagating Vaishnava faith, has now entered the world of performing arts with highly aesthetical components. And as a transformed art form, Sattriya may be expected to carve a niche in world dance arena. This will be done with the help of historical evidences, observations from the recorded past and expert rendezvous.

**Keywords :** dance, performing art, religion, Sattriya

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