

Title of the Paper: Navigating the Self, Body, and Identity through Sattriya Nritya: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

The body is the landscape upon which the ideals of cultures, rituals, rules, and boundaries are imprinted as a symbol of society across different cultures. This gains particular significance, especially in Indian Classical dance, where the pillars of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ epitomise the dancer’s role in upholding one’s customs. The body is increasingly brought into discourse through a controlled process of observation and supervision, operating through an internalised ‘self-surveillance’, conforming to culturally constructed ideals of femininity and masculinity. This paper challenges notions of an unchanging, natural body through the Indian Classical dance form of *Sattriya Nritya*. It was traditionally performed solely by male monks of the *Sattras* (monasteries) of Assam as a purely devotional act towards the worship of Lord Krishna, but is now being taught to females to showcase the rich history of India’s culture through the bodies of the female dancer. The paper will analyse how practitioners of the art form construct their notion of the ‘self’ through training. It will examine how gendered perceptions within *Sattriya Nritya* contribute to dancers’ agency and their lived experiences. By tracing how ethical and cultural sensitivity inform embodiment and identity, it will attempt to offer a rather nuanced understanding of ‘dance’ as a site of individual and collective transformation.

Keywords: Indian Classical Dance, Gender and Embodiment, Cultural Identity, Self-Agency.

Introduction

Dance is commonly understood as a space where the ‘body’ assumes the form of a free flowing entity. The movement with the rhythm of the beats along with the fluid twists and turns and the rapid footwork signifies the importance of the body in any dance form. An attempt towards understanding the ‘body’ as the sole tool for externalisation of movements in particular especially movements catering towards ‘performativity’ has varied over cultures and historical periods. In an attempt towards construction of women and their bodies, a major feminist attempt has also been towards understanding how construction is specifically seen as an attempt towards understanding the body as a product of cultural, social and historical roots of the current dominated systems of inequality, and also out of challenging them in many cases. It is always noticed how during the performance of any Indian classical dance form, spectators are seen enthusiastic about knowing and learning a lot about the enactments by asking questions like, ‘what does that mean or signify?’. And this spectator’s wide wonderment which follows the performance of the classical Indian dance in large majority is mostly the female classical dancer seen constituting this particular field of performativity who becomes subjected towards this exoticized gaze.

The pillars of the ideologies and sentiments behind ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ epitomises the arena of classical Indian dance. Anurima Banerjee here would then contest how culture is then provided a space occupying its establishment in a timeless frozen, naturalised familiarity (Distante, 2009). Through the works of Lila Abu-Lughod, Banerjee explores and challenges this very idea of the positioning of culture as something permanent and in doing so states how the body acquires itself as a terrain of then representing and expressing an essential truth of a culture and the body itself then becomes the subject of the social and historical systems of a society deeply rooted in stereotypes of gender and oppression (Distante, 2009). However, what is also important to understand is the fact that how culture at a given time and space can also

become the site of construction as well as reconstruction, which is what followed the post-colonial or post-independence plan of redesigning or reconstructing the classical dances of India which were undergoing an already degenerated decline for over three centuries due to lack of patronage and social acceptance, etc.

What fuelled the reconfiguration process was an attempt towards valorising the ‘classicism’ of the classical dance forms of India with an impetus towards expressing the traditions and ‘ethnic-ness’ of Indian culture in the pre and post phases of independence of emerging Nationalist ideals. And this upholding of the classicism then attempted to achieve its legitimization through state governance by institutionalizing the Indian classical dance arena and basing it on direct corresponding lines of reconstructing an imagined social solidarity towards a ‘Modern’ post-colonial state (Cherian, July-September 2009). With the establishment of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (Academy of Music and Theatre) in 1953, along with the Lalit Kala Akademi (Academy of Fine Arts) and the Sahitya Akademi (Academy of Letters) in 1954, for the promotion, recovery, restructuring and patronage of the lost and neglected forms of visual and performing arts, it is therefore established how the institutionalising of Indian Classical Dance was achieved as part of enriching India’s cultural heritage with an anti-west and anti-colonial ideology. Thus what can be gathered from this establishment is how ‘Infrastructure’ from the mid-1980s went into the construction and thus as a result displayed this certain sense of ‘Indian unity’ characterising how materiality of a space is woven into a certain kind of body, that being the body of the woman of the nineteenth century middle class society whose bodies were considered as being emissaries of change.

What the process of reconfiguration also did was to de-contextualise the regional dance forms of the respective states by positioning them out of their contexts into a larger umbrella of nationalist ideals and sentiments, which fuelled these dance forms with the ideas of what is ‘acceptable’, ‘presentable’, what needs to be a ‘refined’ and ‘reconstructed’ form which could

cater to a more cosmopolitan audience (Munsi, 2010). This is where Uttara Asha Coorwala uses M.N. Srinivas's concept of 'Sanskritization' in dance, thus Sanskritising a dance form for Coorwala implied a refinement of the form to meet the upheld urban sensibilities in its re-designation as 'classical' (Munsi, 2010).

De-contextualisation of Assam and the Classical Dance form of Sattriya Nritya

This "re-writing" of culture that was initiated majorly the influenced the process of reform and reconfiguration of social practices as well as dance practices of post-colonial India. Looking at the history and evolution of 'Sattriya Nritya', this can be evident. A significantly updated and modern adopted dance form which dates back its roots to the 15th century. A dance form which was initially not allowed to be taught or to be learnt by the women folk of the community becomes interesting as the women dancer in present day scenario is considered to best represent the dance form's aesthetics along with its heritage and traditions. Along with the subnational sentiments of the region the dance form was portrayed and practised as an emblematic seal of what constituted Assamese identity and its heritage.

Recognised as the eight classical dance form of the north-eastern state Assam only in 2000, what followed before the start of Sattriya, is the great neo-Vaisnava movement of Assam in the sixteenth century which brought about a cultural renaissance in region of Assam by introducing a new way of life and culture. This cultural renaissance brought about a whole new outlook on the society one that went against the strict Brahmanical order of the society.. The renowned personality and leader behind was the great poet, playwright and social-religious reformer, Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568). Through the works of the Sanskrit sacred texts of Bhagavata-purana, it was set to render the parts into Assamese with the definite goal of propagating the cult of what is popularly known as 'bhakti' (Neog, 2016). Sankardeva's

method included holding ‘kirtana’ or mass prayer as it is understood and dramatic performances along with the building of a temple as the source of bhakti devotion called the ‘namghar’ initially at his official headquarters at Bardowa which became the nucleus of the Vaisnava organisation eventually spreading to the three other Assamese state of then Asama, Kamarupa and Koch Behar (Neog, 2016). These were set up in the form of regional establishments called ‘Sattrā’ which were the learning and cultural institutes where the dancing of Sattriya originated along with the building of village temples known as namghar (Neog, 2016).

The term ‘Sattrā’ is in fact a Sanskrit word implying two meanings, first, it is used in the understanding of an alms house of some charitable institution and second, it is also used in denoting a sense of a sacrificial session lasting for a considerable period of time (Sarma, 2016). And this expounding of stories to his followers where the Bhagavata was read was in fact discussed as a ‘Sattrā’ as the word meant a ‘sitting’ or a ‘session’ or an instrument ‘liberating’ the good which naturally came to occupy the word ‘Sattrā’ in Assamese (Sarma, 2016). Each Sattras consists of three principal parties consisting mainly of three categories of person followed by different activities allotted to the three. These parties are ‘Sattradhikara’, ‘Bhakats’, and ‘Sisyas’. The first is the head of the Sattrā and resides within the four walls of the campus who initiates and conducts all important religious functions, the second are category consisting of devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office under the Sattras or live a devotional life within the institution observing celibacy for life and, the last category of party are the lay devotees or disciples of the Sattrā (Sarma, 2016).

Sattras played a significant role in the life of the people as a place of religious centre, a school and a library also which maintained Sanskrit ‘tols’ and services of reputed scholars (Sarma, 2016). This is where the dance of ‘Sattriya Nritya’ came to originate and exist. Sattriya Nritya was taught, learned and performed within the four walls of the institution and moreover, it was

performed only by the male members of the Sattras as women were debarred from learning or even entering the premises of the institution. The male monks used to perform both the gender roles of male and female characters and also kept long hair, typical of a respected Indian women in the society (Dutta, 2016). The dance includes a well number of 'hastas', intricate and developed choreographic patterns followed by distinctive costumes and a variety of masks along with the music depending on the usage of a 'khol' or 'mridanga', various forms of cymbal, supporting 'raga' and other songs (Neog, 2016). The dance form is portrayed and performed as a worship, a worship that includes the sole devotion to the Hindu God, Krishna and to his remaining ten incarnations.

It can be understood as to how characterising a fresh new look towards the east post-independence was in fact a strategized idea which sought to represent and valorise the north east with its distinct culture, music, food in order to shine bright the phrase of 'Unity in Diversity'. Thus, Sattriya also became a great tool for representing cultural nationalism as well as subnationalism as was the case for highlighting the Assamese language as an identity marker for the region. The importance of culture was most reflective during the nineteenth century when the avant-gardes of Assamese nationalism undertook the Vaisnavite cultural discourse as the mainstream identity of the Assamese community (Dutta, 2016).

During the last decades of the twentieth century with the political and social developments, the sub-regional consciousness of Assamese identity was at its peak and this is where the Vaisnavite music and the dancing of Sattriya were taken out of their age old 'namghar' and 'sattras' and were placed out into the secular public sphere for the assertion of a stronger regional identity among the inhabitants (Dutta, 2016). And it was also at its juncture where the recognition of Sattriya as the eight classical dance form of India was also accorded. The performance space was also reconstructed as it was shifted from the religious proscenium of the monastery or sattras to the urban space of theatre and dramatics and by doing this the focus

earlier being on the sanctum in the front of which the monks perform, the focus on the theatre space has been towards facing the audience with a miniature lamp-stand as a symbolic sanctum in front of which now the dancers perform (Dutta, 2016). Thus, we see how there is a complete de-contextualisation of the original space and location from where the dance form originated to fit this new narrative of a classicised and idealised dance form of the Indian nation as a whole.

As a trained dancer in the art form of Sattriya, my interest stems from my own embodied experience of learning the art form as part of my larger Assamese heritage. My training, distinct from the traditional training of monks in the Sattras, was shaped by my identity as an Assamese woman, where the focus was on perfecting physicality to entertain and validate the "male gaze." However, this approach left little room for flexibility or creativity, prompting me to question where my agency as a female dancer lay. This is where I would like to introduce my argument of the most significant transformation that took place in the dance of Sattriya and where the national consciousness of imparting nineteenth century ideals of 'womanhood' and the notion of women being the cultural bearers of the nation could be brought out front. In post-recognition times, the dance has shifted from being an all-male dominating dance form towards a greater presence of woman dancers, implicating a preference of female bodies rather than the male bodies as signs of greater praise and nobility in the nineteenth century society ideals (Dutta, 2016). The celebration of the female bodies is much appreciated both off the stage as well as on stage and this therefore depicts how the whole idea of an accepted 'ideal' Indian dancer is laid on the bodies of the woman who are seen as culturally more suitable to present themselves under the repertoire of a well-respected citizen and woman of India.

Parasmoni Dutta moreover argues how with the recent 'classicised' version of Sattriya, the mainstream ideology of the Indian nation-state being the authority of the idea of classical dance is given the role of the onlooker or the gazer, where it exercises free control in order to

appropriate the subject of the gaze according to the way it wants to see it (Dutta, 2016). Therefore, the Indian state can be seen as the dominant stakeholder in defining the prospects and the appropriateness of any Indian classical dance form. Moreover, the ideas of social reform ran a direct correspondence between the nationalist agenda of the post-colonial state and the process of social reformation. And this process, furthermore was a highly charged political affair which was gendered to the core of its foundation. Mrinalini Sinha here discusses in detail about how the whole project of a free independent India and debates and projects around nationalism was to the very core a gendered process which according to her came to focus more on the practices of upper-caste Hindu wives and women, instead of addressing the more important question of “caste” (Sinha, 2014).

Reconfiguration and Reformation towards a Gendered Navigation

We also see how the colonial social reforms included practices of understandings of the private/public divide and how that contributed towards characterising the private sphere of the house as essentially sealed off from the observances of the public, now came to determine a place on anti-colonial nationalism with a stronghold on Hindu traditional practices (Sinha, 2014). . In the process of disciplining the women folk of the community in the late 19th century, the narrative transformed into the idea and image of promoting the “Hindu Mother” (Sinha, 2014). And hence, in the late 20th century the reconfiguration of the private/public split occurred and represented a politically charged private sphere. This new imagined private sphere also led to the imagining of the new nation too. Therefore, we see how the nationalist consciousness of India amongst the newly educated Indian men did in fact revolved around the role of the woman folk in the community without actually providing the space to the women themselves for an active engagement.

Thus, there is the prevalence of a correlation or an extension of the dance for to a larger narrative, one where it is portrayed as part of a dedication to ritualistic aspects and the other where it is seen as a way of epitomising national culture. Both marking a woman's life and her position as socially as well as sexually exceptional. Through the works of Davesh Soneji, this is very explicitly highlighted in the case of the Devadasis, or the temple dancers, as they were known. The new cosmopolitan modernity that devadasi dance was a part of, made the bodies of the dancing women as grounds upon which ideas of national culture or a unified culture of traditions and customs could emerge. This made possible of an emergence of a new kind of patriarchal formulation being contested upon the dancing woman's body whereby her own voice and agency were curbed duly.

The Body of the “dancing” Devadasi Woman

Analysing the colonial accounts of the representation of devadasis through Soneji's work, it is evident on how there was a focus or a dwelling on the “morality” that was engendered through their performance (Soneji, 2012). No matter how erotic and aroused the performances of devadasis entailed there was a certain sense of cloaking that proceeded in every representation of devadasis performance as part of a morally defined notion of ‘dignified’ (Soneji, 2012). For instance, with the advent of photography in colonial India, images of ‘nautch girls’ became a part of quite a few collections and like performance, the photographic representation of devadasis also followed a rather undeniable sexually charged front. However, the sexuality of these photographs were crafted to a rather subtle tone, one that was structured to pose with a focus on highlighting the fascinated “bejewelled body” but through a lens of what could be defined under a respectable and dignified representation of devadasis (Soneji, 2012). Thus, we see how there was an initial focus during colonial India towards a certain scholarship being

enforced on reforming devadasis through a refinement of their character, one that could surface itself towards transforming into a civilised and dignified native.

The descriptions of “nautch” performances in the salons of colonial India focused on the skillful display of the dancing body as opposed to the dance itself (Soneji, 2012). Evidences of accounts are proving of this fact as to how there was a more ‘exoticising’ of the body which followed the performance by devadasis in salons. Literature from the nineteenth century in Tamil, Telegu and English employ in portraying a rather “impure” character to the image of the ‘nautch’ performers. And in doing so, depicts a written visual of the ‘cunning’ nature of the courtesan dancer who entraps “innocent” men and lures them into a greed of sexual pleasure (Soneji, 2012). The underlying notion remaining how their only job is to trap men and loot them and also at the same time emasculate them through the act (Soneji, 2012).

Therefore, we then see how the issue of reform for the devadasi women were brought into account. Initially starting as part of missionary projects of nineteenth century missionaries, where there was an impetus towards refining the ‘character’ of the devadasis who were viewed as unruly and ignorant and therefore the need towards civilising them into an exemplary native, the reforming of devadasis took on a full swing from the twentieth century through the ideologues of nationalism thriving on anti-colonial perspectives. We see how issues related to women and sexuality were seen in terms of degenerating what was so associated with India’s moral and social lack (Soneji, 2012).

The regulation and a control on the sexuality of devadasis were also taken into account due to their engagement in sexual relations outside marriage which was seen to be a major constituent in the spread and cause of venereal disease among men. However, this regulation was also part of a larger middle class discourse on constituting the perfect “Hindu Wife”. As we see how as part of the reform agenda, ‘marriage’ was seen as the only option for devadasis to obtain

respectable citizenship and the ideals of a monogamous, heterosexual, conjugal union, one that upheld the status and the morals of independent India was being propagated (Soneji, 2012).

This similar case is also evident in the case of constituting Kuchipudi among the larger nationalist umbrella of terming it as part of the Indian classical dances. Rumya S. Putcha, analyses the ‘All-India Dance Seminar’ of 1958 held at New Delhi, where the Telegu- dance style called ‘Kuchipudi’ was rather mis-categorised as an ‘unclassical’ form of dance and was thus viewed in terms of it being a version of what is so called a ‘folk’ performance (Putcha, 2013). Interestingly, the rising middle class consciousness is also evident in the case of the Dance Seminar of 1958, as the dancers sent to represent Kuchipudi was considered the perfect pair of reflecting the so called middle class notions of the nation-state. Thus, even Rumya Putcha makes her argument, when she states why Appa Rao was sent with Kanchanamala, a female to the All-India Dance Seminar held at New Delhi was to uphold the emerging middle class ideologies of the society and therefore reconstructing the notions of ‘classicism’ as part of the upholding of creating a modern middle class image of what a ‘woman’ was expected to be (Putcha, 2013). Thus, how a new patriarchy was being created which re-defined women in the most essentialist of the term through a regulation and controlling of their practices and actions.

The question that I would like to introduce here include, ‘Is the only aspect of asserting your own sense of self is through conforming to the ideals of being a respected Indian woman by upholding the aspects of beauty, poise, and grace, is through performing ‘tradition’? At any point is there even a ‘self’ that exercises its expression through a complete assertion of their own agency of the female dancers?’

Conversations with female dancers of the Sattriya Nritya: Data and Methodology

Conventional social science research usually includes a focus on the rather ‘quantitative’ or the ‘technical know-how’ aspects of the research conducted and in the process a neglect is seen being inflicted on the social or the personal aspects of the research conducted as to the personal feelings and emotions of the interviewee and etc. And this is where conventional social science research conducts a breakaway and the introduction of feminist qualitative research takes charge. Social science researcher’s awareness of the aspects of interviewing is embedded in a particular research protocol which Oakley argues to be of masculine ideals projected in society and research (Oakley, 1981). The process of interviewing then gains significance in feminist research as it poses as a counter presence to the much rather dominant domain of masculinity in social science research and grants the much deserved agency and voice to the females.

For this purpose, interviews of semi-structured manner with four female Sattriya dancers, aged 21-22, of Assamese ethnicity, each with 5+ years of intensive training in the form were conducted. The interviews were conducted in Assamese and English, taking approximately 20-25 minutes for each of them. For further clarifications, additional thoughts were exchanged in the form of voice messages. Participants were selected using Snowball sampling method. Before the interview began, participants were briefed about the research and its purpose, and their consent was obtained for audio recording. Due to Covid-19 constraints, interviews were held via phone and voice messages that intended to explore participants’ motivations for learning Sattriya, how they relate to the form, and their own interpretations of the dance form’s shift from a male-dominated monastic practice to a feminised cosmopolitan performance. All audio recordings and voice messages were transcribed and analysed for the purpose of research. The transcripts were read and re-read to understand the data, and coding was done to understand the ideas and concepts that emerged in the data, such as “culture and duty,” “influence of family,” “experiencing ‘Asomiya-ness’ on stage,” and “transition in preference from male monastic practice to feminine performance.” These codes were further developed and refined

to form broader themes by comparing them and validating them with the entire transcript. After which the themes were further interpreted in the context of the broader research and literature on Indian classical dance, gender and embodiment, and nationalism, to understand the participants' ideas and concepts in a nuanced manner. Focusing on the analysis from the respondents employing a reflexive thematic interpretation, reveals how these young women articulate their embodied experience of Sattriya in relation to gender, regional identity ("Asomiya-ness"), and cultural heritage. By privileging depth and nuances of the young dancers lived experience over statistical breadth, this approach aligns with phenomenological methodology by particularly being suited towards understanding the meanings constructed through their training and performance of a recently feminised classical form.

Recorded findings from participants

Table 1.0

	Starting age	Source of inspiration	Does learning Sattriya at an early age signify as important?	Other dance forms	Does it make you feel more Assamese during performance?	Why opening up of Sattriya to females happened?	Experience From the dance form
Participant 1	6 years.	Parents and family members.	Definitely not the participant	Learned Bharatnatyam and pointed	Yes. It makes me bring my culture and	Societal changes led to female	She feels she's connected to

			concludes age is just a number.	out that it is more refined than Sattiya and Sattriya is still being refined and polished.	heritage to the stage.	participation as both male and female could take the art form to a greater level.	Lord Vishnu through this dance form
Participant 2	10 years.	Mother and her Seniors from school.	Learning about the culture is the key factor and age bar should not be a problem	The participant has learnt Sattriya and Bharatnatyam. And concluded the latter one has more grace and poise.	Yes. There is a more sense of being “Axomiya” while performing Sattriya.	Females outnumbered men in 19 th century and cultural emblem was led by the females of Assam	Experience is still good and the learning curve never ends.
Participant 3	9 years.	Maternal family specially her mother.	No age constraint. Just the will to learn about the culture.	Haven't learnt other dance form but performed Bihu which is other traditional	The participant feels it depends on the type of responds you	It became a forefront for women to elegantly put Assam on the national stage	The journey has been nothing but amazing through all the accolades

				dance form of Assam.	get from the audience.	through Sattriya	and honours she's received.
Participant 4	5 years.	Parents	The participant emphasised that it's important to know about the culture through this dance form.	The participant has been learning only Sattriya and no other dance forms	It connects her to her Assamese roots and experience the richness of the dance form by wearing Assam Silk.	It was more gracefully by women.	It's been a wonderful journey and the joy of teaching it to younger kids has been an added wonderment.

Results and Discussions

Theme 1- Culture as Embodied Duty and Family-Mediated Inheritance

Across all four interviews, culture emerges as the primary and universal motivation for learning Sattriya, and this can be seen framed not as individual choice but rather as familial obligation and regional inheritance. It becomes quite interesting to note how all the four participants describe mothers, or in one case both the parents, as instrumental in directing them towards Sattriya. Participant 1 notes how her mother insisted she “take up Sattriya as it represented being a larger part of the Assamese community” after Participant 1 had already been trained in

Bharatnatyam. Participant 2 describes the same how her mother was “instrumental in pushing her towards learning Sattriya as it was the classical dance form of Assam and therefore it was seen as intrinsic for an Assamese to learn their own culture”. This impetus from the parents, especially the mother is very interesting to observe how the significance and the importance of “culture” and “heritage” is taken up by the women folk of the family and how this is passed down to daughters of the family as well. Participant 3 states that how her maternal relatives, “renowned cultural art performers of the Assamese culture and heritage”, motivated her to “learn more about her culture”. Here, cultural inheritance can be seen to be flowing through the maternal and feminine lineage, positioning these young women as inheritors and transmitters of Assamese artistic identity. Along with it, the language, with the usage of the word ‘intrinsic’, ‘duty’, ‘essential’, reveals that learning Sattriya is not positioned as a choice among aesthetic options, but rather as an ethical and social imperative for young Assamese women. The repetition of phrases like “learning one’s own culture” and “one’s own heritage” across participants suggests a shared cultural discourse in which female bodies become the custodians of regional tradition.

As Mrinalini Sinha have argued, how nineteenth century middle class Indian nationalism remade the “Hindu Wife” and, by extension, the cultural custodian, as a vessel for tradition and regional pride (Sinha, 2014). In case of Sattriya, the drive to feminise the form, after the recognition from Sangeet Natak Academi’s 2000 recognition of it as a classical form, parallels this pattern, that women’s bodies are recruited as the proper, (according to the participants as being more graceful and appropriate) vehicles for representing Assamese culture on national stages. Yet the participants themselves experience this recruitment not as constraint but as meaningful connection reflecting how they believe it is their duty to perform Assam’s heritage through their bodies as the ground of their cultural identity and familial belonging.

Theme 2- The Stage as a Site of Identity Assertion and Regional Claiming

All four participants describe a marked shift in how they experience and feel while performing Sattriya on stage versus in training or when compared to other classical forms. This shift is articulated consistently in terms of authenticity, pride, and a deeper sense of self-recognition. Participant 1 states “while performing both Bharatnatyam and Sattriya on stage, when she was performing Sattriya, she was able to assert her identity more strongly and proudly.” The usage of the words “stronger”, “more of an Assamese”, “assert her identity”, clearly suggests that stage performance functions as a site where regional identity crystallizes and becomes viscerally felt in and through the body.

Participant 2 uses the term “Asomiya-ness” to describe feeling proud and strong as she represents her heritage and tradition and making her feel more like an Assamese. This neologism of feeling “Asomiya-ness” marks a particular regional consciousness and embodied feeling. It is not the sole act of performing the ‘Assamese culture’ in abstract, rather it is the felt experience of “becoming” more of an Assamese woman through the specific idiom of Sattriya’s movements, rhythms, and aesthetic is what is more being represented.

Participant 3 introduces the presence of the audience as a central factor to this affective experience when it comes to performing Sattriya on stage and feeling the acceptance and respect that makes you feel more of an Assamese. Here, regional identity is not an internal possession but is constituted through the public recognition of the dancing body. The audience’s acceptance and respect, in a phenomenological sense, is performatively achieved through the iterative acts of dancing and being witnessed.

Participant 4 extends this to the material dimensions of what constitutes a performance, focusing on the costume of the art form which is made fully from Assam silk, makes her feel more proud of her Assamese heritage. By claiming that stage performance makes them feel “more Assamese”, these young women are participating in a broader project of rendering

Assam and its regional culture legible within national and transnational frameworks. Their bodies, adorned in Assam Silk, executing Sattriya's movements before audiences, become visual and affective symbols of Assamese identity.

Theme 3- Feminisation as Strategic Reallocation of Cultural Labour

When asked about the shift from the male-dominated monastic practice to the feminisation of Sattriya, participants articulated explanations that align with broader historical patterns of how classical dance forms have been gendered and nationalized.

Participant 2 provides the most historically grounded response, "Late Rakeshwar Saikia Barbayan started tutoring the females which made the art form being opened up to the females now and this happened after he left the 'satras', the monasteries. Leading up to females outnumbering the male dancers as during the nineteenth century, the emphasis on gender relations was one where the males were expected to be the breadwinner of the families and the cultural emblem fell on the dancers of the female gender to learn cultural arts in order to live up to society's expectations". This response is pivotal in tracing the logic of patriarchal modernization: as men's roles were redefined around economic breadwinning, while women's roles were correspondingly redefined around cultural custodianship.

Participant 4 offers a more affirmative framing of the same process by considering how the shift, she believes happened as the graceful form was seen to be better suited on the bodies of the women and for purposes of promotion and propagation of this dance form it opened up to the women folk. Here, feminisation is presented as a strategic choice motivated by both aesthetic appropriateness ("graceful form" on women's bodies) and pragmatic promotion. The form's "propagation", its spread and national/international recognition is enabled by positioning women as its primary performers.

These accounts reveal a critical insight on how women's bodies became the primary vehicles for representing and "promoting" regional tradition within nationalist and transnational frameworks. This parallels with what Rumya Putcha has analysed in her work on South Indian classical dance: the female dancer, in the postcolonial period, becomes a "sticky symbol" by mobilizing affect around questions of cultural authenticity, national identity, and regional pride (Putcha, 2013).

Conclusion

These four young women's narratives illuminate how feminisation of Sattriya operates not as a simple historical fact but as an ongoing, affectively charged process of embodied identity-making. They are inheriting a form that was, until recently, exclusively male and monastic, they are learning it through family obligation framed as cultural duty, and they are performing it on stages where regional identity crystallizes and becomes publicly visible. Their accounts reveal the complexity of what it means to be a young woman in a feminised dance form in contemporary India. They experience genuine agency and pride in their practice. Yet, this agency is exercised within the constraints of a nationalist and sub-nationalist project that has, over the past two centuries, increasingly positioned women's bodies, and particularly the bodies of classical dancers, as the primary vessels for representing cultural authenticity and regional/national identity.

Thus, Sattriya should be understood in the contemporary scenario, not as the "liberation" of women into a previously closed form, but rather as a reconfiguration of how gendered bodies are deployed within postcolonial projects of regional and national identity-making. Women have become, in effect, the new guardians of Sattriya's "authenticity", positioned as the graceful, culturally-conscious custodians of Assamese heritage. It is interesting to see how the

participants find meaning, identity, and pride in this role. But it is a role that has been shaped by historical forces much larger than individual choice, and it warrants critical feminist attention alongside celebration of women's expanded participation in the form.

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