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Devadasis and Their Dance in Assam: an Overview

Upala Barua^{1*}, Dipika Pegu¹

¹Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Assam down town University, Panikhaiti, Guwahati, Assam-781026, India

*Corresponding author: Upala Barua, Email: upalabarua9@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article reviews scholarly discourses related to the *Devadasi* system in Assam as a socio-historical reality in some ancient temples and also as an almost forgotten dance style variously called *Nati naach* or *Deoghararnati* (*Devadasi* dance) since early medieval period. It also addresses the attempts at its restoration as an art form since the mid-20th century by using secondary materials only.

Keywords: *Devadasi, Devadasi dance, Assam*

1 Prelude

There has been a plethora of global academic researches on the intersections of culture, religion, gender, art and power in recent years. In actuality, such interests are not new, only the perspective of looking at these issues varies not only from diverse academic approaches, but also at different points of time. In the pan - Indian context, the traditional system of *Devadasi* (God's maid or maiden servant) has attracted scholarly attention from researchers, academicians, social-workers, legal and social activists and art-revivalists. *Devadasi* means "God's maid-servant" in Sanskrit. These unmarried prepubescent or pubescent temple workers were devoted to deities as young girls in temple rites corresponding to Hindu marriage ceremonies. *Devadasis* were expected to live a life of celibacy; however, there have been instances of exceptions. *Devadasis* are crucial to Indian temples because they clean, decorate, light, chant, and dance for deities. In addition to that, they had taught many young girls music and dance, thereby keeping these traditional art forms alive. In this way, the word *Devadasi* connotes two inter-related aspects in the Indian context. First, it refers to an ancient socio-religious complex system involving female dancers attached with various temples in many parts of India, including Assam which continued till early part of the 20th century after which they began to wane due to numerous factors. Second, it also evokes the images of

today's Indian classical dances that were resurrected from different *Devadasi* dance forms that prevailed in the temples by the sheer hard work, tenacity and zeal of many artists, dancers, art historians, archaeologists and dance enthusiasts with active support from the Government of India. Such a transition of the *Devadasi* dance from the sacred to profane demands scholarly investigation. In India, the *Devadasi* system may be considered, from anthropological perspective as a cultural complex that could be seen more concentrated in the Southern, South-Eastern and Eastern states, yet there are historical references that point to its wider northerly extensions in many states of India, up to Kashmir in the past, as gleaned from some epigraphic, Puranic sources(1). Kalhan's Rajatarangini happens to be one of the prime references.

1.1 *Devadasi* System in Ancient Assam

The present article is an attempt at reviewing the academic discourses related to the *Devadasi* system in Assam as a socio-historical reality in some of the ancient temples of Assam and also as a dance form referred to as variously called *Nati-naach* or *Deogharar nati* (*Devadasi*) dance since early medieval period. These two interrelated aspects are the main themes of this study. It is based on secondary sources. Earliest reference to *Devadasi* system in Assam is from a copper plate inscription of Kamrupa King Banamaladeva dated 9th century A.D. (2). In this inscription, the word

doluhangana is used to refer to very beautiful dancing damsels who were dedicated to the temple of Hatakasulin for worshipping the Lord Shiva.(1) believes that the one of the prime duties of these dancers or *Devadasi* was the performance of ritual dancing and singing as part of daily worshipping at the temple. According to Kakati *doluh* is a Austric word meaning temple (doul or Devalaya)(*ibid*). He says that since very early times (i.e. at least since 9th century A.D.) in Assam, there were *Nati* or *Natinis* (dancers) comparable to the *Devadasis* of other parts of India and each temple had a *Nat ghar* or a dancing hall where the *Nati* or the *Natinis* used to perform dance as part of the daily worships or on special ritual or festive occasions. However,(3) recounts that a king named Dharmapala, during the 4th century A.D. brought a few Brahmanas from northern India to perform the rituals in these temples.

The story of Hinduism, in the context of Assam and (North East India) began with a very ancient strong sub-stratum of Saivism or the worship of Lord Shiva(4). According to Assam's *buranji* or historical accounts,(5) and also numerous ethnographic research reveal that many of the indigenous tribal groups worshipped Siva in his different tribal avatars and with seemingly diverse names. For instance, the Boro-Kacharis, the largest Scheduled Tribe community of the state, worships lord Siva as Bathou with a blending of Brahmanic and indigenous rituals that also included singing, dancing with drum beatings, and sacrificial offerings of buffaloes, swine, cocks, he-goats, ducks and pigeons along with wine and cooked rice(5). Assam, a North-Eastern state, is home to many ethnic groups with distinct cultures and religions. This region's religious life reveals a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, including animism, animatism, and nature worship among the various ethnic groups, tribal and non-tribal communities who live in the hills, valleys and foothills. Their rituals are performed in courtyards, open fields, banks of stream, and other specific locations in and around their villages. Once the ritual is completed, the sacred space where the rite is performed is transformed back to its secular character. In many areas of Assam, the beliefs that specific trees or areas around those trees, or secluded places away from human habitation are the abode of the deities often draw people to those places, which have gradually become popularly known as Than or simple shrines which were simpler forms of religious buildings in the region with locally available materials like timber, bamboo and cane. Temple construction is possible only when there is a strong central political power vested on a king or monarch. And it is possible only when there is a strong and stable kingdom. It is not a simple matter to maintain the daily and annual rituals, festivities without the support of strong political patronage. According to (6) the earliest construction of temples or any architectural monument in Assam could be placed, as per Umachala rock inscriptions, to 5th century AD. Temple building in Assam reached its peak during the 9th - 10th centuries during the reigns of Varman; Mlechchha dynasty, Salastambhaand Pala dynasties which were worshipers of Siva. Thus, Siva temples were mostly constructed during this period. It has to be kept in mind that institutionalized form of *Devadasis* was part of the Brahminic form of worships that were introduced at the in-

stance of the ruling Hindu dynasties in the specific temples. So far as other ethnic groups of the region are concerned, they continued their traditional tribal ways of worshipping with a veneer of Hinduism. However, a connection may re-surface when one looks into the Assamese dance forms of *Devadasi*, Satriya, and other folk forms like Ojapali and so on. From the 11th century onwards to the coming of the Ahoms in the 13th century, the region was divided into a large number of small principalities mostly on ethnic lines leaving no scope for the rise of a powerful kingdom that could support the Saiva and other temples. This led not only to the deterioration of all the old temples but also ushered in an impoverished dark period for the Brahmins and other saivites of these temples. The *Devadasis* and their unique dance form suffered a set-back without strong royal patronage. It was only when during the 16th - 17th century, the Tai Shan Ahom dynasty gradually embraced Hinduism and Ahom monarch Rudra Singha (1696 - 1714) A.D. and his son Siva Singha (1714 - 1744) A.D. promoted Hinduism by building new /repairing existing temples and granting lands and other amenities and titles. In that process, as we shall see presently, that the *Devadasi* system had a new lease of life.

1.2 *Devadasis* in Medieval Assam

Since medieval times, there has been a numerically small caste called *Nat* (or dancer) who used to dance and perform drama in lower (western) Assam while in upper (eastern) Assam the barbers also are called *Nat*. The word *Natas* (male musicians and dancers) and *Natis* (female dancers) appear in Vaisnavite and pre-Vaisnavite literature (7). As per epigraphic records, there were many Siva temples in Assam, where *Natas* and *Natis* danced as part of temple worship. The '*Natis*' in Biswanath, Hajo, Negrhiting, and Dubi Devalaya were known before British rule. According to the '*Assam Buranji*' of Gunabhiram(7) some of this community came to Assam from western India during the reign of Koch king Bisva Singha and his son Naranarayana. Later, they took up farming like many other castes. *Natis* were expert dancers employed in temples, especially Siva temples, to dance and sing during daily prayers. Francis Hamilton notes that *Nats*, or temple dancers and musicians, are a pure caste and *Natis* were not common prostitutes and even Brahmanas condescended to give instructions to them. At some points in history, *Natas* became *Nat-Kalitas*. Ahom King Siva Singha, (1714 - 1744) A.D.'s principal consort Queen Phulesvari (1722 - 1731) belonged to the *Nat* community. As per historical accounts, she was originally a dancer in a religious temple dedicated to the Hindu God Siva. When the king saw her, he was enchanted by her beauty and decided to marry her and made her his principal consort. Later on, queen Phuleswari ascended the Ahom throne and both of them became devout Sakta Hindus and were great patrons of many religious institutions including the temples at had constructed three temples dedicated to Shiva, Devi and, Vishnu at Sivasagar.

In Assam, the *Devadasis* were known as *Natis*, or temple dancers. The notable temples with *Natis* were Netheriting, Singari, Rangpur, Dubi's Pari Hareswara temple, and Hajo's Haygriva Madhaba temple. Furthermore, there were centres in some villages where girls were trained in dance

and music for occasional performances in temples and royal palaces. Chinatali, Kalugaon, and Dergaon are examples of such villages. Significantly, in Assam, the *Devadasis* did not have to stay at the temple premises although they were not allowed to marry while serving the temple. They were permitted to live with their families at their own home. In the early morning they used to come to the temples before prayers and offered their services including their dance performances before the deity as part of morning, noon and evening prayers. After their performances they could go back to their homes. Usually, they were accompanied by their male relatives, who were also musicians of the temple. Their young brothers, were also initiated into a dance form called the *Natuwa* dance with more *tandava* (energetic) element while the *Devadasi* form is noted for its *lasya* (graceful and delicate) movements (1). Initially, the *Devadasis* were not looked down upon by society. Some of them were extremely talented and beautiful. Some of them even wrote *Natimachar* git songs. Bar Raja Phuleswari of Kalugaon was a dancer associated with the Siva temple in Negheriting who was skilled in both dance and music. Initially, temple girls lived celibate lives, devoting their bodies and souls to the temple deity. But, over time, corruption crept into the institution, and it was transformed into a kind of temple prostitution. Gradually, the faith of the common masses in this institution began to wane(8; 1) observed that at least three dance-forms in Assam belong to the tradition of Indian classical dance and music. These are-

1. First item The *Nati naach* or *Devadasi* dance as performed in temples
2. The Ojapāli, and
3. The Sattriya dance

He had also observed close affinity amongst all these dance forms. For instance, the ragas set on the songs used in *Devadasi* dance are often observed in songs of the Biyah-Goâ Ojapali, while many similarities could be seen between the *Natuwa* dances (a version of the Sattriya dances) with the *Devadasi* dance. Besides, commonalities could be observed with regards to different dance gestures, dress and costumes(1). Such royal patronage paved the way for the development of the *Devadasi* custom and it became widely distributed all over the state. The traditional *Devadasi* dance of Assam can be categorized into three broad divisions on the basis of the context of performance, subject matter and manner of presentation-

1. *Devadasi* dance performed at Siva-temples like Negheriting, Biswanath Pingaleswara, Ranganath, Baidyanath, Bilveswara, Gopeswara, Pari Hareswara, Umananda, Madan-Kamadeva, Kedar temple and the Singari Gupteswara Siva temples.
2. *Devadasi* dance performed at the Vishnu temple of Hayagraba-Madhava, Hajo, and
3. *Devadasi* dance performed at the Sakti temple of Kamakhya, Nilachala.

Ritual dancing by *Devadasis* was also prevalent in some other temples, in ancient Assam no traces of which are to

be found today. Some such temples were the Da-Parbatiyâ temple and the Tezpur Siva - temple, both of the 5th - 6th centuries A.D., besides the Hâtakâsulinsiva temple and the Tingeswara temple belonging to the 9th century A.D. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Sankaradeva, the great saint-scholar, and social-religious reformer of Assam, created the Sattriya form of dance as part of religious preaching of the religious movement called, *Ekasarana Dharma* or Neo - Vaishnavite movement. Sattriya art and dance evolved as part of the Vaishnava bhakti movement, in Vaishnavite male monasteries known as *Sattra*. Male monks in these monasteries performed it as part of their religious worship. Unlike the Assamese *Devadasi* dance form, the Sattriya dance continued uninterrupted in these Sattras throughout the medieval period, eventually becoming a classical dance form in the year 2000 A.D.

2 Crisis of the *Devadasi* Dance Form

This section tries to locate the actual *Devadasi* dance form of Assam as revealed by the scholarly works, dancers, and art enthusiasts since last century. References will also be made to a few novels written in the early 20th century. During that time, the *Devadasi* dance form had fallen out of grace with the public due to criticisms from Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, and the emerging educated Assamese middle class. Christian missionaries consistently published deleterious accounts of this system in their monthly journal Arunodai, while the newly educated masses were influenced by writings in newspapers and journals such as Jonaki (1919 - 1929), Bahi (1934 - 1936) and 1939 - 1940), Usha (1907 - 1912), Alochani (1910 - 1917), and Abahan (1929 - 1962). They raised public awareness about the injustice, inequality, and moral turpitude that persisted in Assamese society at the time. And *Devadasi* system happened to be the most focal one. In the year 1932, the British Government imposed a ban on the *Devadasi* system in different temples under its jurisdiction in Assam(1). As the *Devadasis* were facing severe economic crisis due to non - existent royal patronage, their dance form also suffered setbacks. *Devadasi* dance as art form suffered tremendous setback due to the negative outlook of the society. The term *Nati* was originally understood as the feminine form of the Sanskrit word *Nata* meaning not only female dancers or the wife of a dancer, in course of time came to be used as a synonym for a prostitute. And the terms such as *Hajornati*, *Dergayanati*, and *Dubirnati* stood as prostitutes of Hajo, Dergaon and Dubi respectively. Even the lands previously donated by Kings to *Devadasis* were referred to as prostitute's field. Neog (1975) however recalls that despite such repressive situation, the *Devadasi* dance performances were regularly arranged in the Pari-hareswara temple at Dubi till around (1945 - 1946). At Hajo *Devadasi* dance performances were continued irregularly till 1938 while in the Bilveswara temple it got discontinued since 1932. However, at Negheriting temple at Dergaon, this traditional dance form continued for a very longer period. As revealed in an interview, by noted Assamese novelist Sayed Abdul Malik, the last dancers belonging to Negheriting temple were two damsels Hiran and Kiran belonging to the Kalita community of Napa Kalita (now called Burhagaon) in Naharani area. Kiran married

a Bengali man from Dhaka and had a son who was living in Jorhat in 1993.

3 Resurrecting the *Devadasi* Dance Form of Assam

The continual decline in the social status of the *Devadasis* reinforced by the legislations that prohibited the performance ritual dancing in temples, Assam's *Devadasi* dance form was soon in danger of being lost forever. On the eve of Indian independence, no temple in Assam had retained its *Devadasi* tradition and no *Devadasis* could keep this dancing tradition alive due to public criticisms. In this way, the *Devadasi* dance form almost went into oblivion. Dance exponent, Dr. Sunil Kothari, had expressed that he had visited Dubi along with Dr. Maheswar Neog when the Nati dances were still existing which they had photographed and recorded. However, due to their other preoccupations he could not devote more time to study this near-extinct tradition. Kothari writes,

“Deeply interested in traditions of Satriya dances, under the guidance of late Dr. Maheswara Neog, I had visited Dubi where in mid-sixties, Nati dances were still existing and with help of my photographer friend, late Subodh chandra, I had got some of those dances photographed and also recorded on 8mm film. But later on, the attention was focused on Satriya dances and I could not devote more time to study of this near extinct tradition. Prevalent from 7th century, Devadasi tradition in Assam was quite flourishing. Devadasis were attached to temples in many parts of India. Similarly in Assam also they were attached to Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu temples. During the colonial era due to political and social pressures the dance and the dancers suffered and lost patronage and the tradition almost came to an end.”

Nevertheless, it was Ratnakanta Talukdar, an outsider to the temple Nat Guild, but an eminent artist came forward with the support of two former *Devadasis* of Dubi, Kausalyapriya and Raiyabala along with the scholars like Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha and Pradip Chaliha, to take up the strenuous task of reviving the original dance form against all odds. An expert khol player Besaram Bayan helped them for musical accompaniment. And the exponents Raiyabala and Kaushalyapriya helped Talukdar to reconstruct a part of noon time puja dance, from pieces of the half-forgotten dance. In this way, their efforts lead to the reborn of the *Devadasi* dance of Assam in 1954 as a refurbished dance form without much of its ceremonial connotation. The government also helped artists restore this lost art form. The Assam government held seminars and dancing demonstrations in the 1970s and 1980s. Multiple training camps were held. The government also provided pensions and financial help for books and videos about the dance-form. The costumes of *Devadasi* have undergone a change. The performers wear a white *ghaghra*, long skirt and long-sleeved yellow blouse wrapped with white cloth. They put on marigold flowers in coiffure and also a garland around the neck. It is not conclusively known whether songs accompanied the dance in the past. According to Pradip Chaliha, renowned musician Kiritnath Bordoloi discovered a tune that was once sung by the *Devadasi* of Dubi. There were also sam-

ples of Hajo *Natis* songs that were sung in Brajbuli. In recent times, Dilip Kakati who studied under Ratnakanta Talukdar, is trying to revive the tradition. He is assisted by Girindra Patgiri for khol, and Satyajit Chaudhury helped for taal with small cymbals. In recent times, Dilip Kakati who was mentored under Ratnakanta Talukdar, is trying to revive the tradition assisted by Girindra Patgiri for khol, and Satyajit Chaudhury helped for taal with small cymbals. At this point, it must be mentioned that late Dr. Paban Bordoloi had not only covered the details of this *Devadasi* art form of Assam but also compared it with other Classical and folk dances in a meticulous and comprehensive manner. In recent years, the *Devadasi* dance form strives to establish itself as an independent style of dance in Assam. Its development is mostly oriented towards stage performances rather than as a part of temple practice. Organisations like Pathsala *Devadasi* Silpi Samaj (earlier known as the Pathsala Art Society) are devoted to propagating the dance form within the state and attracting dance enthusiasts to learn the form. Besides conducting workshops and training camps for dancers and members of the organization have also been to showcased the dance at functions of Asam Sahitya Sabha, tv programs and various Cultural Exchange Programs under the government.

4 Conclusion

Despite the efforts made to promote the *Devadasi* dance form, it still struggles to create a niche for itself among the names of the ancient art forms of Assam. However, it still calls for its due attention, appreciation and nurturing from the society at large.

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