

## **DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON THE TRADITION OF MAJULI SATTRAS**

On 21 June 2022, Baburam Saikia defended his doctoral thesis titled “Contradictions in(side) the tradition: Lived religion, ritual and change with reference to Majuli sattras” to obtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (in Folkloristics) at the University of Tartu.

This PhD dissertation is an excellent example of the combination of emic experiences and perspectives combined with a critical etic analysis of a social scientist and a folklore scholar. It is an excellent performance, engaging closely and systematically with contradictions within the tradition of Majuli sattras, which are religious monastic and educational centres on the island of Majuli in the Brahmaputra River in Assam, north-eastern India.

This work proves to be a comprehensive mastery of the subject matter, ably supported by evidence and relevant citation. It shows an excellent ability to organise, analyse, and express arguments fluently and lucidly with a high level of critical analysis displaying a highly-developed capacity for original, creative, and logical thinking.

The great value of this PhD is its method of ethnographic fieldwork combined with a rare emic perspective. Through the lens of a very personal experience and through the methodological fieldwork enquiry, the author shows the reader a religious, educational, and monastic tradition torn within paradoxes and contradictions.

Having been ritually given to a Majuli sattrā by his parents, the author became a ritual child sattriya dancer in his years of childhood and adolescence. The sattriya dance is a ritual dance officially recognised as one of the eight principal classical Indian dance traditions. The sacred and ritual dance is exclusively performed in the monastic context of sattrā culture by its male sattrā devotees. It is one of the main cultural vehicles to spread the neo-Vaishnavite culture of the social and religious reformer and mystic Sankaradeva (1449–1568), who founded the monastic, mystic, and devotional bhakti religious and educational institutions of sattras in Assam as a revolt against casteism and authoritarianism, some of the oldest ones at Majuli.

The author’s international higher educational and academic work as an adult has enabled him to respectfully distance himself from his monastic life and to transform his experience and knowledge to a sociological and cultural reflection and analysis. The deep personal experience of a reflective transformation from an internal insider view to an external outsider perspective makes this work a model for a successful combination of emic and etic perspectives.

The work is analytically very balanced, culturally sensitive and respectful, but it also does not lack highly critical reflections on contemporary politization of the famous anti-caste and anti-authoritarian social and religious reformer and mystic Sankaradeva. Here the author discusses the rising contradictions of Sankaradeva’s neo-Vaishnavism

with once radically egalitarian and anti-establishment ideas transforming today to the revitalisation of Brahmin supremacy and its caste ideology.

Sankaradeva (1449–1568), who spread the worship of Vishnu, has become an iconic figure of neo-Vaishnavism and its regional identity in Assam. As the creator of Assamese literature and sattriya dance tradition, he also became synonymous with the united Assamese ethnic identity, which itself is very heterogenous and diversified.

Monastic sattras offered, besides the cultural centrality of Assamese aesthetics and artistic expressions, a sustained social service to difficult human social conditions and situations. They served as social orphanages or offered children to be adopted by the monastic centres. In return, the adopted boy children obtained spiritual, artistic, and aesthetic learning, mainly expressed through the classical sattriya dance tradition.

The author describes in an interesting manner how the ascetic order needs to create new generations to continue the traditional ascetic heritage. As a means for this, a particular tradition of a boy child donation/gift emerged within the sattria tradition, thus ensuring the continuation of the ascetic practice and tradition through spiritual adoption and the creation of a monastic family.



*Baburam Saikia with his supervisor Professor Ülo Valk (University of Tartu) and opponent Dr Lidia Guzy (University College Cork). Photograph by Piret Voolaid.*

In addition to a robust discussion of the diverse features of the coexisting local religious traditions within the ethnic tapestry of Assam, the author also analyses the everyday life of the celibate sattrā devotees and observes remarkable changes and challenges within the ideal of celibacy in the contemporary situation of the religious and educational centres. Here ritual purity and chastity are hard to maintain for young male sattriya dancers and devotees who find themselves navigating between the glamorous national and international stage lights of sattriya dance performances and the temptations of the sensual virtual world of social media, making the admiring outside world physically so much more easily approachable and available as in pre-digital times.

The thesis is a precious example of an excellent emic description and an etic academic discussion of a vernacular monastic tradition in Assam. With the author's insider experiences and views and with his measured and just academic analysis, the complexity of the religious and spiritual landscape of Assam becomes manifest.

The author places a strong emphasis on the analysis of rituals and the orthopractice of the sattrā centres and the ascetic devotees (monks). "Rituals (*prasanga*) are very important tools for ascetic neo-Vaishnava devotees to maintain the tradition that is controlled by religion. They believe that without the continuation of ritual, tradition will die," writes Baburam Saikia (p. 21). Here the author distinguishes very well between religion and tradition, and he is very conscious with the use of academic categories which are clearly defined and discussed as meta-categories, such as religion and ritual.

The thesis provides a very good introduction into the multi-ethnic and politically dynamic region of Assam in north-eastern India. Assam with its multi-ethnic tribal identity is constantly on the verge of disintegrating (p. 22). Animistic, shamanic, spirit and goddess worship is continuously prevalent in the tribal region of Assam. "When dealing with the world of spirits, religious boundaries do not matter even for orthodox neo-Vaishnava adherents" (p. 23). Goddess worship in this cultural context is combined with many elements of indigenous magic practice, sacrifice, and mystical traditions. Assam, which was earlier divided into several independent kingdoms of tribal communities, accumulated a diversity of religious traits and traditions vivid until today.

The author concurs that the diverse ways of worshiping and communicating with spirits, deities, gods, and goddesses suggest that pluralistic belief systems have always been characteristic of Assam and that the blending of those religious traditions can hardly be overtaken by any fundamentalist, non-secular, majoritarian nationalistic ideology.

The more paradoxical, it appears that the democratic and anti-authoritarian and anti-caste ideology of the bhakti movement promoted by Sankaradeva has today become a vehicle of Hindutva nationalistic rhetoric spread through the sattrā religious centres.

The particular exclusion and control of Assamese traditions of the feminine sacred and the exclusion of women from the ascetic traditions presents a great criticism by the author: "As with other major world religions, the neo-Vaishnava order is also patriarchal when it comes to socio-religious structure and authority. The ascetic sattras

particularly do not allow the presence of women in their lives: there is no order of nuns in neo-Vaishnava tradition” (p. 35).

The author’s critique of Sankaradeva’s neo-Vaishnava patriarchal tradition indicates misogynic practices and concepts within this tradition. He writes: “In the neo-Vaishnava order women are sometimes considered a polluting agent, because of which they are not permitted to enter the prayer halls. This contradicts the liberal notions ingrained in Assam Vaishnavism, although it is typical of general Hindu patterns of ritual purity and women as agents of pollution” (p. 35). Here we see, I would say, a neo-Vaishnavite attempt to control, exclude, demonise and also to appropriate the power of the so powerful goddess worship of Assam through the rival male and ascetic ideology of Sankaradeva’s neo-Vaishnavism.

The relationship between the neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva and the tantric goddess worship and its resilience could be of further interest for an alternative analysis of social and religious change and resilience in relation to asceticism and tantric goddess worship. The author writes: “Ascetic devotees, especially of the Kamalabari school of sattras, keep their hair long in the belief that all humans are female, only lord Krishna is imagined as being male. ... In the secret gopikhela ritual, sex between a human Radha-Krishna couple is an auspicious ritual act. During this ritual devotees offer worship to the genital organs of both the male and the female.” (p. 38) We see here the complexities of an ascetic tradition which absorbs, appropriates, and also modifies the local goddess worship patterns.

The work offers an excellent account on the roles of tradition, culture, and the individual development. The author’s own emic experiences of more than two decades of sattria life prove the functioning of tradition as “lack of individual choices”. It shows that, to become an individual, there is a need for a constant individual contest tradition, a fight against tradition. The individual personality development is the individual choice in the face of or against tradition. The quest for freedom as the core human quest can be seen as a great lack in ascetic traditions where individual freedom is sacrificed for a greater good.

The author’s discussion on the role of tradition and human need for individual freedom is highly thought-provoking and important. In the context of sattras, people are bound by tradition. Freedom is not a part of devotees’ lives until and unless they decide to continue a different life outside. The young celibate devotees who are involved in teaching sattriya dance and music try to enjoy some freedom (for example, eating food outside) as their lives are full of social restrictions inside the sattria campus. Sometimes, this beginning of enjoying freedom leads them to married life (p. 51). It may be concluded that the great challenges for the future of ascetic culture are its worldview and life model which lacks joy, pleasure, and individual freedom as values. Apart from the lack of individual freedom, strong institutionalisation processes of sattria culture constantly lead to the re-introduction of the caste system despite the egalitarian and democratic principles of Sankaradeva’s neo-Vaishnavism.

Another interesting detail is the author's documentation of the centrality of food rituals and their purity and impurity concepts in the context of food intake and food preparation within the sattrā tradition. Here I would question whether the author is right about the concepts of food purity and pollution being exclusively Hindu concepts. I would rather say that they may also indicate indigenous ascetic practices and tribal concepts of food purity and pollution prevalent in all indigenous and local cultures.

The phenomenon of Hindutvaisation or politization of sattrā culture in recent years is of particular importance: some sattras introduce a newly emerging Hindutva sattrā model. A few sattras in Majuli, however, have a different outlook and have maintained political neutrality and never indulged in communal politics. The author generally deplores the compromise of sattrā ideas and values by the introduction of communal politics and political corruption.

In summary, Baburam Saikia's PhD thesis represents an innovative, very valuable and honest research, with rare and rich data, unique insights, scholarly analytics and reflections on the sattras' tradition – a topic which until today has been insufficiently studied.

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