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Guru Kirtan of Kamalabari Sattra: Ritual, Music and Performance in the Neo-Vaishnavite Tradition of Assam

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Abstract
Guru Kirtan is a significant ritualistic musical practice within the Neo-Vaishnavite Sattriya tradition of Assam. Performed as an offering to the Guru, *Guru Kirtan* occupies a central position in the religious and performative life of Kamalabari Sattra, one of the most influential Sattras of Majuli. Rooted in the devotional philosophy propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva, this tradition embodies a synthesis of spirituality, music, and disciplined performance. This article examines the historical background, philosophical basis, musical structure, performance practice, and modes of transmission of *Guru Kirtan* at Kamalabari Sattra. The study situates *Guru Kirtan* within the broader framework of Assamese intangible cultural heritage and highlights its contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Guru Kirtan, Kamalabari Sattra, Neo-Vaishnavism, Sattriya tradition, Assamese performing arts, Sankardeva.

1. Introduction

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam, founded by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), gave rise to the Sattras, monastic institutions that serve as centers of religious, cultural and artistic life. Music and performance are central to Sattriya culture, expressed through Borgeet, Ankia Naat, Sattriya dance, and various forms of Kirtan (Baruah, 1999). Among these, *Guru Kirtan* holds a special position as a devotional offering to the Guru, symbolizing spiritual authority and the transmission of knowledge. At Kamalabari Sattra, *Guru Kirtan* continues to be performed as a disciplined ritual practice. At Kamalabari Sattra, Guru Kirtan represents a living tradition where ritual, music, and performance converge. It functions both as a devotional act and as a cultural art form, reflecting the spiritual, musical, and social values of Assam's Neo-Vaishnavite tradition. This study seeks to examine *Guru Kirtan* as a performing art form, focusing on the integration of musical structure, ritual discipline, and devotional philosophy.

2. Aims and Objective of the study

The study aims to examine *Guru Kirtan* as practiced in Kamalabari Sattra, with special focus on its ritual, musical, and performative aspects within the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition of Assam. It seeks to understand the historical and religious roots of *Guru Kirtan*, analyse its ritual practices and musical structure, and

explore its performance dynamics. Additionally, the study highlights the role of *Guru Kirtan* in preserving Sattra traditions and in transmitting Neo-Vaishnavite values across generations.

3. Significance of the study

This study is significant as it contributes to the documentation and academic understanding of Assam's intangible cultural heritage, particularly the Sattra tradition. *Guru Kirtan* is not merely a musical or ritual practice but a living expression of devotion, discipline, and community identity within Neo-Vaishnavism. The research highlights the cultural importance of Kamalabari Sattra as a major center of religious learning, music and performance. By analysing *Guru Kirtan* through ritualistic, musical and performative lenses, the study helps preserve traditional knowledge that is often transmitted orally and is at risk of decline due to modernization. Additionally, the study will be valuable for scholars of musicology, performance studies, religious studies and Assamese culture, and can serve as a reference for future research on Sattra traditions and devotional performance practices in India.

4. Methodology and Source of data collection

The study follows a qualitative and descriptive methodology. It is based on fieldwork and ethnographic observation of *Guru Kirtan* performances at Kamalabari Sattra. Data are collected through direct observation, interviews with Sattradhikars, bhakats, and Kirtaniyas and analysis of musical and performative elements such as raga, tala, vocal style, movement and ritual structure.

5. Kamalabari Sattra: Historical Background

Kamalabari Sattra was established in the 17th century on Majuli, the cultural heartland of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism. The Sattra is renowned for its adherence to classical Sattriya practices and its emphasis on monastic discipline (Neog, 1980). Historically, Kamalabari Sattra has contributed significantly to the preservation of Sattriya music and performance traditions, including *Guru Kirtan*. The Sattra follows the celibate monastic system, where bhakats engage in daily worship, music, and ritual performances. *Guru Kirtan* forms an integral part of these daily practices, reinforcing devotion and collective identity.

6. About Guru-Kitan

Guru Kirtan is the devotional festival of Kamalabari Sattra, observed to commemorate the death anniversaries of Srimanta Sankardeva, his disciple Madhavadeva, and Badala Padma Ata (Badula Ata). Celebrated annually for four days in the auspicious month of Bhadra, the festival consists of Caul Bhojani, Thaponi, Kirtan, and Bhagoni, each marking a specific ritual and ceremonial significance. During these days, Vaishnava bhakats perform a variety of Sattriya dance forms and cultural programs, including Gayan Bayan, Jumura, Bhojan Behar, and Nadubhangi. *Guru Kirtan* serves as a major platform for preserving and practicing the Sattriya performing arts, integrating ritual, music, and devotional expression, and has been maintained as a living tradition for several centuries.

7. Philosophical Significance of Guru Kirtan

In Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy, the Guru is regarded as the essential mediator between the devotee and the divine. Sankardeva emphasized *guru-bhakti* as a foundational principle of spiritual life (Sarma, 1966). *Guru Kirtan* serves as a musical expression of this devotion, articulating reverence, surrender and gratitude. Unlike congregational kirtans meant for public participation, *Guru Kirtan* is primarily a

monastic ritual, performed within sacred spaces of the Sattra. Its restrained aesthetic reflects the philosophical emphasis on humility and discipline.

8. Musical and Performative Structure

Guru Kirtan is performed according to a structured musical framework rooted in classical Assamese traditions. The performance typically includes melodic structures influenced by Borgeet, rhythmic cycles maintained through the khol and taal, and devotional singing of Naam led by bhakats. The tempo is generally slow and contemplative, allowing for clear articulation of the text and emotional expression. Physical movement is minimal, emphasizing the ritualistic character of the performance, with the focus on collective harmony rather than individual virtuosity (Borpujari, 2004). At Kamalabari Sattra, *Guru Kirtan* integrates music and dance as essential components of the devotional performance. Singing in Assamese or *Brajabhasha* follows specific ragas and talas, accompanied by traditional instruments such as the khol (drum) and taal (cymbals). Performances often feature Naam, with lead singers guiding group participation through call-and-response patterns and Bhaona is performed as part of the ritual. In addition, Sattriya dance forms such as Gayan Bayan, Jumura, Bhojan Behar, Chali and Nadubhangi are performed in coordination with the music, where gestures and movements symbolize devotion and ritual discipline. Together, the music and dance of *Guru Kirtan* constitute a living expression of Neo-Vaishnavite culture, preserving centuries-old traditions, transmitting spiritual values and integrating ritual, artistic practice and communal devotion.

9. Training and Transmission

The transmission of *Guru Kirtan* at Kamalabari Sattra follows an oral pedagogical tradition. Young novices learn through observation, repetition and strict discipline under the guidance of senior monks. This method ensures continuity while maintaining stylistic authenticity (Goswami, 2012). Daily practice not only trains musical skills but also inculcates spiritual values, reinforcing the inseparability of art and devotion within the Sattriya tradition.

10 Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

In the contemporary context, traditions like *Guru Kirtan* face challenges due to modernization, changing social structures, and declining monastic populations. However, Kamalabari Sattra continues to sustain the practice through festivals, scholarly engagement, and cultural outreach programs. As an element of intangible cultural heritage, *Guru Kirtan* represents a living tradition that embodies the philosophical and artistic ethos of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism (UNESCO, 2010).

11 Conclusion

The *Guru Kirtan* of Kamalabari Sattra represents a profound and holistic expression of Assam's Neo-Vaishnavite tradition, in which ritual practice, musical articulation, and performative expression are intricately interwoven into a unified devotional form. Grounded in the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, *Guru Kirtan* serves not only as a sacred act of worship but also as a disciplined artistic tradition that embodies spiritual values, collective participation, and a distinct cultural identity. Its structured rituals, melodic organization, rhythmic patterns, and coordinated performance practices collectively reflect the philosophical depth and aesthetic principles of the Sattra tradition. The sustained practice of *Guru Kirtan* at Kamalabari Sattra underscores the enduring vitality of Sattriya culture and affirms its significance in

both religious observance and artistic expression. In this context, systematic scholarly documentation and performance-based research are crucial for preserving this living tradition and fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural, spiritual, and artistic dimensions for future generations.

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