

The Devadasi Dance Tradition of Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya, Assam: History, Performance, And Preservation

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Abstract

Assam, a culturally pluralistic state in Northeast India, has sustained social harmony through diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious traditions. The region's religious life is shaped primarily by Shaivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism, expressed through ancient Shaktipeeths and Shiva temples that function as centers of worship, art, and community. While the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of the 14th–15th centuries led by Srimanta Sankaradeva reoriented devotional practice, Shaivism and Devi worship retained prominence. A distinctive feature of Assam's temple culture is the integration of performing arts into ritual worship. Among these, the Devadasi dance tradition, locally called 'Nati-nach', represents a foundational form of India's Margiya classical dance and was historically performed in major Shiva temples including Parihareshwar Devalaya in Dubi. This tradition declined due to loss of royal patronage, colonial intervention, and social reform. Today it survives only in fragments, preserved through the memory of the last devadasis Kaishyala Bala and Raiebala and documented by cultural figures like Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Ratnakanta Talukdar. This paper investigates the historical origins of Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya, documents the performance structure, costumes, ornaments, and musical instruments of the Dubi Devadasi tradition, and examines contemporary preservation efforts. It argues that institutional support, academic documentation, and community engagement are essential for safeguarding this endangered intangible heritage.

Keywords: Devadasi Dance, Nati-nach, Assam, Dubi, Intangible heritage

Introduction

Assam represents a unique confluence of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity in Northeast India. Inhabited by numerous ethnic groups, tribes, and sub-castes, the state has maintained social harmony through a shared cultural ethos grounded in mutual respect, trust, and linguistic cohesion. This secular fabric has allowed multiple religious traditions to flourish simultaneously, contributing to a rich and syncretic cultural heritage. Religion in Assam extends beyond doctrinal practice; it is deeply embedded in art, music, dance, and

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community rituals that sustain collective identity.

Three principal religious streams have historically shaped Assam's spiritual landscape: Shaivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism. These traditions have been practiced since ancient times, as evidenced by the proliferation of Shaktipeeths and Shiva temples across the region. While early religious life included Vishnu worship, Shaivism gained prominence and became institutionalized through temple construction and royal patronage. The Ahom dynasty played a pivotal role in reinforcing both Shaiva and Shakta traditions. Many of the state's most significant temples — including Negheriting Shiva Temple, Shukreswar, Bileswar, Baneshwar, and the Parihareshwar Devalaya in Dubi — were either built or restored under Ahom rule.

A transformative phase occurred during the 14th and 15th centuries with the advent of Neo-Vaishnavism, propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. This movement introduced Eksharan Naam Dharma, a monotheistic tradition emphasizing devotion through congregational prayer and cultural expression (Neog, 1965). Despite this shift, Devi worship and Shaivism remained deeply entrenched.

Integral to Assam's temple culture is the interweaving of ritual and performance. Among the most significant of these traditions is the Devadasi dance, known locally as 'Nati-nach'. The term 'Devadasi' translates to 'servant of the gods', denoting women dedicated to temple service through dance and music. Scholars argue that this tradition forms the foundation of India's Margiya classical dance system (Barua & Pegu, 2023). In Assam, Devadasi dance was performed in major Shiva temples such as Parihareshwar Devalaya in Dubi, Negheriting, Pingaleshwar, Bileswar, and Hayagriva Madhav Temple in Hajo. Girls were offered to Saiva, Sakta and Vaishnava temples to dance as part of a daily ritual since the 7th century, and ancient texts like the *Kalika Puran* and *Jogitantra* carry references to this practice.

However, the tradition declined around the 17th century when royal patronage receded. By the early 20th century, the British had abolished the system in India. The system further deteriorated with the decline of royal patronage and growing criticism from Christian missionaries and the emerging educated Assamese middle class (Sarma & Thakur, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the historical importance of the Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya, the Devadasi dance tradition associated with it remains largely undocumented in academic literature. While revival efforts by Ratnakanta Talukdar and institutions like NEZCC have preserved fragments, there is no comprehensive study on its performance structure, transmission, and current status. With only a ten-minute segment of the original repertoire surviving, the lack of systematic documentation threatens the complete loss of this intangible heritage.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three reasons. First, academically, it contributes to the documentation of endangered dance forms of Northeast India and fills a gap in Devadasi studies specific to Assam. Second, culturally, it helps preserve the Shaiva temple tradition and community identity linked to

Parihareshwar Devalaya. Third, in terms of policy, the findings can guide the Government of Assam, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and cultural institutions in formulating safeguarding measures for intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO 2003 Convention.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the historical origins of the Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya and delineate the geographical and cultural context of the Dubi region.
2. To document and analyze the performance style, costumes, ornaments, and musical instruments integral to the Devadasi dance tradition preserved at Dubi.
3. To assess the current state of preservation, modes of transmission, and future prospects for safeguarding and promoting the Devadasi dance tradition practiced at Dubi.

Research Questions

1. What are the historical origins and cultural significance of the Devadasi dance tradition associated with the Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya?
2. What distinctive elements characterize the performance practice of the Dubi Devadasi dance tradition?
3. Through what means has the tradition been preserved and transmitted in contemporary Assam?
4. What challenges threaten its continuity and what strategies can be proposed for its safeguarding?

Structure of the Paper

This paper is organized into six sections. Section 2 presents the literature review and methodology. Section 3 discusses the geographical and historical context of Dubi. Section 4 analyzes the performance elements. Section 5 examines revival efforts. Section 6 concludes with findings, discussion, and recommendations.

Literature Review and Methodology

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Assam's Devadasi tradition is primarily in Assamese and provides critical insights into its historical, ritual, and aesthetic dimensions. Baisya (2017) documents the heritage of Devadasi dance in Assam, tracing its ritual roots from ancient temple practices to its decline in the colonial period. Bordoloi (1997) discusses Shiva literature and temple traditions that provided the theological and cultural context for Devadasi performance. Bordoloi (2008) provides the most detailed account of movement vocabulary, costumes, ornaments, and musical accompaniment of Assam's Devadasi Nritya Kala.

Choudhury (2000) edited a key volume on Devadasi traditions, including oral histories from Pathsala and interviews with the last practitioners. Kalita (2008) gives the most comprehensive historical account of Sri Parihareshwar Devalaya, its geography, rituals, and association with the Devadasi system in Bajali region. Kalita, T.N. (2008) also documents the patronage system under Ahom kings. Neog and Chakraborty (1973) connect the rhythmic

structures of Devadasi dance to the broader Sattriya tala system.

In English scholarship, Barua and Pegu (2023) provide an overview of Devadasis in Assam. Sarma and Thakur (2025) analyze historical transformations. Dutta (2015) discusses ritual and performance in Northeast Indian temple contexts. Business Standard (n. d.), The Hindu (n. d.) and The Sentinel (2023) cover revival efforts.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating descriptive, analytical, and historical methods. Data are drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include field observations at Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya, semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners from Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj, and archival materials from NEZCC. Secondary sources include Assamese books, peer-reviewed research articles, temple records, and institutional reports.

Geographical And Historical Context Of Dubi

Introduction to the Dubi Region

The Dubi region was a mountainous region in ancient times. The name of the place is probably due to the fact that a small hill called Durbala in the Dubi area sank down over time. The place is known as Dubi based on folk beliefs and folk traditions. Dubi means a deep place between rivers and lakes. The Pushpabhadra River passed near the village of Dubi. It is believed that Shiva rested on Durbalagiri in Dubi. This is known to be the origin of the name Dubi (Kalita, 2008; Kalita, T.N., 2008).

Geographical Location

Dubi village is located about three kilometers south of Pathshala town in Bajali district of Assam. Dubi village is located on NH-31, three kilometers from the North East Railway. The distance from Guwahati to this village is about 103 km. It is only 53 km from Namlang in Bhutan. The soil in this area is silty and flat.

Historical Patronage

Under the patronage of King Shiva Singh, priests from Kanauj, Malakars from Hajo, singers and Devdashis from the Shiva temple in Negheriting were brought and the worship of Shiva Gosai and Devadasi dance were introduced at the Parihareshwar Temple in Dubi (Kalita, T.N., 2008). The Devdashis of Dubi performed dances before the idol of Lord Shiva two or more times as required. The Devdashis performed dances at three watches, morning, noon and evening.

Performance Structure and Elements

Ritual Context

The Devadasi dance at Dubi was a ritual offering performed as an act of devotion to please the presiding deity. It was not conceived as entertainment but as seva, or service to the divine. This aligns with broader descriptions of temple dance as ritual performance in Northeast

India (Dutta, 2015). The performance was integrated into the daily worship schedule.

The Devdashes burn incense, pick flowers, bathe in the pond, purify themselves, put on cosmetics and dance before the gods to appease them. This dance is performed by bowing with palms of hands and playing the khol in honor of the deity. This dance is performed using footwork and connected-unconnected hand movements. The movements are slow, graceful, and devotional rather than theatrical.

Each of the twelve ghats used in the Devadasi dance has different meanings. Initially, the Devdashes use both hands to clean the water for bathing in the pond and perform bathing, cleaning the body parts through various hand movements, dressing and spreading clothes through dance. They also look at their reflection in the water, tie their hair, put on ornaments, pick up flowers and offer them to the Lord, light lamps, sit in peaceful meditation before Shiva. Then the dance ends. The first of these twelve ghats is the Delayed Ghat or Chara Ghat. Different mudras are displayed in Chara Ghat. The 12 ghats correspond to daily activities and devotional moods and serve as a form of embodied prayer.



The two Devadashi dancers of Dubi, Aminjula Baruah and Madhabi Baruah.

Costumes And Ornaments

In ancient times, Devadasis wore Ghuri or Mekhela. They draped a long cloth across the chest, brought it over the shoulder, and wrapped it again around the chest. They wore long-sleeved blouses. A thin, shimmering cloth was worn over the head as a veil. Their hair was tied in a bun and decorated with flowers, which could be seen beneath the transparent veil (Bordoloi, 2008). The costume was simple yet elegant, designed for temple rituals.

As part of their adornment, Devadasis applied oil to their hair, a mark of vermilion on the forehead, sandalwood paste and agaru powder on the face, Barhamthuri leafs on the lips, kajal on the eyes, and Jetuka (henna) on their hands. In modern times, Devadasis use various cosmetics such as lipstick, nail polish, kajal, and other beauty products for stage performances.

Devadasis also adorned themselves with a variety of gold and silver ornaments. These included Galpata, Gal Madhuli, Muthikharu, Jonbiri, rings, and other traditional ornaments. The ornaments were both aesthetic and symbolic, marking their status as married to the deity

and dedicated to temple service.

Musical Instruments

The musical instruments used in Devadasi dance are broadly classified into four categories (Bordoloi, 2008, p. 119):

- a. **Ghana Vadya (Idiophones):** Taal, Pati Taal, Khuti Taal, Ghanta (bell), and Borkah. These provide rhythmic punctuation.
- b. **Avanaddha Vadya (Membranophones):** Khol or Mridanga, Nagara, and Doba. The Khol is the primary percussion instrument.
- c. **Sushira Vadya (Wind Instruments):** Bongshi (traditional bamboo flute), and Shankha (conch shell) as an indispensable ceremonial instrument.
- d. **Tata Vadya (String Instruments):** Veena, Tokari, Dotara, and Cherenja. By the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, the harmonium had also begun to be used in association with Devadasi dance at the Negheriting Shiva Temple (Bordoloi, 2008, p. 98). The rhythmic framework draws from both local folk talas and classical Sattriya talas (Neog & Chakraborty, 1973). The music is devotional and supports the dance movements.

Revival and Contemporary Preservation

After the discontinuation of the Devadasi tradition, the Devadasi dance of the Dubi Parihareswar Devalaya was revived during the 1960s. The revival and preservation of this dance tradition were made possible through the efforts of Ratnakanta Talukdar, leader of the Pathsala Art Society, with the cooperation of the last Devadasis of the Dubi Parihareswar Devalaya, Kaushalya and Raiyabala.

In the early 1950s, Ratnakanta Talukdar of Pathsala decided to revive the forgotten Nati dance tradition. Under the guidance of the legendary Kalaguru Vishnu Rabha, he found the last two surviving Natis, Kaushalya Devi and Royabala Devi. This was a critical moment as the tradition was on the verge of extinction. The local people of Dubi initially opposed the revival and public performance of this dance tradition due to social stigma. After several rounds of discussions, Kaushalya and Raiyabala were invited to perform the dance at the Pathsala Natya Mandir. Bishnu Prasad Rabha attended the performance, appreciated the dance, and succeeded in documenting and preserving parts of this tradition. During the programme, Becharam Bayan accompanied the performance on the Khol, while Kinaram Bayan provided rhythmic accompaniment on the Taal.

In 1955, under the direction of Ratnakanta Talukdar, a segment of the Devadasi dance tradition of the Dubi Parihareswar Devalaya was presented publicly for the first time by the Pathsala Art Society at the Guwahati Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. In 1964, the society was reorganized under the new name "Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj" to institutionalize the efforts.

In 1985, Devadasi dance was telecast on Doordarshan for the first time, bringing national attention. Portions of the Devadasi dance tradition of Dubi were featured in the documentary *_Voice of Silence_*, directed by Manik Borah. From 15 March to 30 March 2000, a 15-day

training workshop on Devadasi dance was organized by the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam, and the North East Zone Cultural Centre, Kolkata, in collaboration with the Sahitya, Sanskriti aru Samaj Kalyan Kendra, Pathsala. This workshop trained a new generation of dancers. In February 2020, the first Devadasi Dance Festival in Assam was held at Negheriting Shivadol. Currently, artistes and researchers like Jatin Goswami, Ramkrishna Talukdar are working to revive and promote this dance. However, only about 10 minutes of the original repertoire has been reconstructed due to loss of oral transmission.

Findings

Based on fieldwork, interviews with practitioners from Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj, archival records, and analysis of secondary literature, the following key findings emerged regarding the Devadasi dance tradition of Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya:

- 1. Curriculum Inclusion:** Devadasi dance of Assam has now been partially incorporated into the syllabi of several colleges and universities in Assam as part of Performing Arts courses. Institutions under Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Visvavidyalaya and Gauhati University have introduced modules on Nati-nach to create awareness among students.
- 2. Reconstruction of Repertoire:** Through the dedicated efforts of Ratnakanta Talukdar and the Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj, approximately 22 dance postures and 12 rhythmic cycles have been reconstructed. These are primarily based on the oral memory of the last Devadasis Kaushalya Bala and Raiyabala Devi. The original repertoire is believed to have contained over 50 ghats, but only a 10-minute performance segment survives today.
- 3. Adaptation for Stage:** To make the dance presentable for modern audiences, innovations have been introduced in costumes, make-up, and stage presentation. While traditional Ghuri-Mekhela and gold ornaments are retained, lighting, stage backdrops, and group choreography have been added.
- 4. Institutional Workshops:** Between 1985 and 2024, more than 7 state and national level workshops have been conducted by NEZCC, Directorate of Cultural Affairs Assam, and Sangeet Natak Akademi. The 15-day workshop in 2000 was the most significant, training 24 young dancers.
- 5. Media Documentation:** The tradition has received limited media coverage. Doordarshan telecast in 1985 and the documentary *_Voice of Silence_* by Manik Borah are the only major audiovisual records.
- 6. Social Acceptance:** Initial opposition from local communities in Dubi has reduced. The rebranding from "Devadasi" to "Nati-nach" and emphasis on its artistic and spiritual value has helped gain social acceptance. Younger dancers from non-Devadasi communities are now learning the form.

Discussion

The findings indicate that while the Devadasi dance of Dubi has not become extinct, it exists

in a highly fragile state. The case of Dubi reflects a larger pattern seen across India where temple-based dance traditions declined due to the triple impact of: loss of royal patronage, colonial legal abolition, and social reform movements.

Unlike Sattriya dance, which was revived through Sattria institutions and later received classical status in 2000, Devadasi dance lacked an institutional base. Its survival depended entirely on individual gurus and the memory of the last practitioners. This makes transmission vulnerable.

Three Major Challenges are Evident:

First, Lack of Complete Documentation. With only 10 minutes of dance surviving, we cannot claim to know the full aesthetic scope of the original tradition. Without video notation, further loss is inevitable as senior gurus age.

Second, Economic Viability. Young dancers cannot sustain themselves by performing this dance alone. There are very few paid performance opportunities compared to Sattriya or other classical dances of India.

Third, Identity and Stigma. The term "Devadasi" still carries negative connotations in public discourse. This makes funding agencies and families hesitant to support it. The shift to "Natinach" helps, but also risks erasing the historical context.

The positive aspect is the role of community organizations like Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj. Their work proves that grassroots revival is possible even without state support. The involvement of cultural icons like Bishnu Prasad Rabha gave the movement legitimacy.

Conclusion

The Devadasi dance tradition of Dubi Parihareshwar Devalaya represents a vital but endangered chapter of Assam's Shaiva temple culture. Historically, it was not merely entertainment but a form of daily worship, where movement, music, and devotion merged to serve the deity. The Ahom patronage, the training system, and the 12-ghat structure all point to a sophisticated performance tradition that deserves recognition.

At present, only a fragment survives — approximately 10 minutes of dance, 22 postures, and oral histories from two last practitioners. This fragment, preserved by Ratnakanta Talukdar, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, and now by Pathsala Devadasi Shilpi Samaj, is invaluable. However, a fragment cannot represent the whole.

Therefore, urgent steps are needed:

1. **Complete Documentation:** Video recording of all reconstructed items with commentary by senior gurus.
2. **Research & Notation:** Academic projects to notate movements and music using modern dance notation systems.
3. **Institutional Support:** Grant classical status or "endangered heritage" status from Sangeet Natak Akademi to enable funding.
4. **Curriculum & Guru Parampara:** Establish a permanent department or center at

Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Visvavidyalaya to train gurus.

If scholars, researchers, government agencies, and the community continue to support this tradition with the same commitment shown since 1954, the Devadasi dance of Dubi can move beyond survival to revival. Preserving it is not only about saving a dance form. It is about retaining the memory of how art, faith, and community were once inseparable in Assam's temple life.

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