

WHAT'S ON



Sattriya: Dance of the Assamese Monks

Workshop by Shadhma

KARIM WAHEED

Although to a layman (such as I), for a few fleeting seconds it might seem to resemble Manipuri dance, which is familiar to Bengalis, it shouldn't take long to distinguish the uniqueness and magnificence of Sattriya, dance of the Assamese monks.

For me, what immediately established the dance form's individuality was the basic foot position, or "ora": the feet are turned out and the knees are bent sideways directly over toes.

The introduction to Sattriya, one of the eight principal classical Indian dance forms, happened at Shadhma's dance studio in Banani, Dhaka on April 16. The occasion was a workshop conducted by "bhakat" (Vaishnava monks) of Uttar Komolabari Satra (monastery) of Majuli, Assam, in India. The workshop was facilitated by Artes Nomades.

Dance exponent and researcher Lubna Marium, who is also the general secretary and artistic director of Shadhma, briefed the participants on the history of the dance form prior to the arrival of the monks.

Sattriya has remained a living tradition since its creation by the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam, Srimanta Sankardev, in 15th century.

Sattriya is derived from the word "satra" or monastery, as the dance was exclusively practised and performed by the monks.

Sankardev employed the dance form as a tool of storytelling in "Ankia Naat" -- drama primarily centred on Krishna.

Sattriya dance has some distinctive footwork patterns. The basic stance, ora, involves both feet and hands. There are two types of ora: "purush" (masculine) and "prakriti" (feminine).

The team of bhakat arrived and were greeted by Lubna Marium and dancers of Shadhma.

The demonstration by the monks, led by Bhabananda Barbayan, began. To the beats of *khol* (two-sided drum) and *taal* (big cymbals), the monks clad in white showed young dancers how to execute the ora, and the stretches they do to stay flexible. Shadhma dancers also learned about "alapadma" or "lotus hand gesture" and "dhwaja", the raised open-palm stance.



PHOTO: RIDWAN ADD RUPON

The workshop was conducted by monks of Uttar Komolabari Satra of Majuli, Assam.

Life of a dancer monk

Before lunch break, I had the opportunity to talk to Bhabananda, who provided a glimpse into the lives of the dancer monks.

The bhakat are celibate monks, sent to the satra by their parents. They join the monasteries as children. Bhabananda joined the Uttar Komolabari Satra when he was a little over four. There have been monks in his family for five generations. His uncle was a musician at the satra.

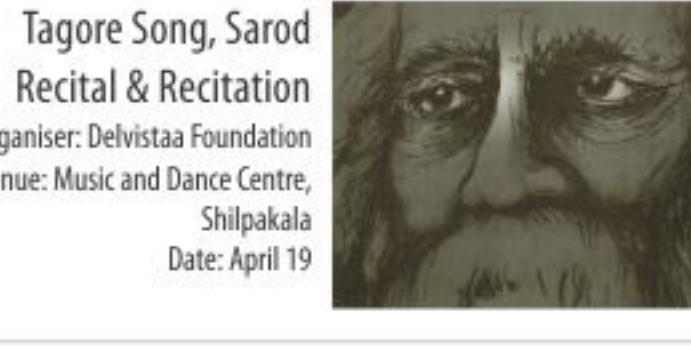
The children go through a disciplined upbringing: waking up very early, studying in the satra, doing chores, practising dance, praying, going to public school, doing homework, going through more lessons etc. The "Burha Bhakat" or head of the "boha" (each

house within the boundaries of a satra) takes care of the children. The head of a satra is called a "Satradhikar".

The satras are self-sustaining; they accept but don't solely depend on donations. Though traditionally the main occupation has been farming, bhakats can choose to be teachers or entrepreneurs. If a bhakat chooses to marry, he leaves the satra.

Bhabananda studied at Gauhati University and taught for a year. He did a PhD in "Rhythmic Pattern of Sattriya Dance" from Rabindra Bharati University (under dance exponent and researcher Dr. Mahua Mukherjee). He is a visiting faculty at Université Paris 8.

Bhabananda is the artistic director of Satranga, a troupe of bhakats. The troupe has 25 regular artistes (dancers, actors and musicians).

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Hashem Khan turns 72

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Arts, University of Dhaka; senior artists and students were present at the programme.

Hashem Khan is a prolific painter, who has made an immense contribution to the enrichment of Bangladeshi art. On his 72nd birthday, Gallery 21 held a celebration on April 16 at the gallery premises in Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Khan's friends, well-wishers, admirers and art enthusiasts greeted him with flowers, gifts and sweets.

Sculptor Ferdousi Priyabhushini; war crimes researcher and author Shahriar Kabir; historian Muntasir Mamur; economist K.A.S. Murshid; artists Kanak Champa Chakma, Khalid Mahmud Mithu, Mohammad Iqbal, Maksuda Iqbal Nipa; architect Rabiu Hossain; Shameen Subarna, founder director of Gallery 21; teachers of Faculty of Fine

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Khan was born in 1941 in Chandpur. He graduated from Govt. Institute of Arts (now Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka) in 1961. He has held seven solo exhibitions and has participated in many group exhibitions at home and abroad. He taught at the Faculty of Fine Arts for 44 years and retired as professor in 2007.

He actively participated in the Liberation War and during the early and mid '70s, made the war the subject of his works. Most of his paintings highlight rural panorama and life in the villages. He has made a major attempt to connect contemporary themes with the Liberation War. He is very cautious in his use of colours and creating texture.

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