



# FOLKLORE TRAITS IN THE MANIPURI VAISHNAVITE RITUAL PRACTICES

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**Abstract:** Folklore is a discipline within the paradigm of Cultural Studies. Oral narratives, oral poetry, folk speech, physical and material culture, social folk custom and performing arts, etc. are the different genres of folklore which each folk member of a folk group has as its constituents since quite early times. The inherent nature of folklore and the inflowing force at work for a social change become intricately synthesised in that new genres start sprouting from the soil of a group. It is for this reason that folklore discipline is treated as a tool for producing new genres of culture. The Manipuris who settled in the North-east corner of India are a folk group having a vast treasure of folklore in their literature. New ritual performance texts of religious practices of the Manipuri Vaishnavite cult were composed in styles tinged with bona-fide Manipuri ethos under the patronage of royal families. In all these performance texts, in expressing Vaishnavite philosophy, folk arts as well as folk elements of Manipuri folklore were incorporated so freely that it resulted in creating a deluge of new performing texts of Manipuri culture in the gamut of the cultural history of the Medieval period.

**Key Words:** Folklore, Vaishnavite cult, Sanskritisation, *Nat Sankirtan*.

Folklore is a discipline within the paradigm of Cultural Studies. Oral narratives, oral poetry, folk speech, physical and material culture, social folk custom and performing arts, etc. are the different genres of folklore which each folk member of a folk group has as its constituents since quite early times. In fact, folklore can be regarded as an index of a folk group. In the social change of a folk group, the folklore of the group is always the locus of susceptibility. The inherent nature of folklore and the inflowing force at work for a social change become intricately synthesised in that new genres start sprouting from the soil of a group. It is for this reason that folklore discipline is treated as a tool for producing new genres of culture. It is worthwhile to mention here that in the growth of the genres of the folklore, human knowledge, thought and art are necessary. From time to time, different scholars are used to employ special traits which are needed in the formation of folk-structure in the ways they like or in the manners they are well-versed in and as such it is generally supposed that these traits are more autonomous than the genres of the folklore. Besides, the ventifact and artefact in the genres of folklore enable one to utilize the traits of folklore as per one's personal liking and then produce the same for general popularization. Oral tradition, however, plays an indispensable role in transporting the very folkloric genres of a society from one generation to another.

The Manipuris who settled in the North-east corner of India are a folk group having a vast treasure of folklore in their literature. In the cultural history of this group, only the pre-Vaishnavite period evinced a purely distinct culture of this group. As in the Medieval period, the impact of Sanskritisation engendered a diglossic situation in the Manipuri cultural scenario. Under the influence of Ramanandi and Goudiya Vaishnavite cult, temples in the name of Lord Rama and Sri Sri Govinda were constructed and in the process of a full-fledged

Hindu religion started flowering in the domain of the then Manipuri society ever since. Eventually, the Manipuris started to immerse themselves in the philosophy of the great Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas like *Sri SriMadh Bhagavat Gita*, etc. New ritual performance texts of religious practices of the Manipuri Vaishnavite cult were composed in styles tinged with bona-fide Manipuri ethos under the patronage of royal families. In all these performance texts, in expressing Vaishnavite philosophy, folk arts as well as folk elements of Manipuri folklore were incorporated so freely that it resulted in creating a deluge of new performing texts of Manipuri culture in the gamut of the cultural history of the Medieval period.

The full import of Manipuri folklore is imminent in the *Lai Haraoba* festivity of the community. The *Lai Haraoba* is a summation of the festival and ritual aspects. The genres of Manipuri folklore – myth, legend, folktale, folksong, ballad, folk epic, proverb, riddle, etc. together with the skills of verbal art such as telling and singing art and various forms of folk musical art coexist as concomitant parts of a performing art in this festival. They are being used as an indispensable trait in the making of ritual performance texts of the Manipuri Vaishnavites.

Innovation may also be regarded as a function of folklore. Here, what Bakhtin said of folklore is very relevant: Folklore maybe “old wine in new bottles” and “new wine in new bottles”. According to this statement of Bakhtin, folklore is, viewed from the angle of social context, a communal possession; it is a collective representation as well as communal creation or recreation; and as such has existed in the society. It is from this very nature and form of folklore that many a new genre of culture emerges.

There can be no denying the fact that *Nat Sankirtan* and Ram Leela constitute the dichotomy of *Lai Haraoba*. Based on the philosophy of *Srimadh Bhagavat*, they exist as a genre of culture of the ritual performance text of the Manipuri society being encapsulated in the traits of the Manipuri performing folk arts. They become an indispensable part of Manipuri rite de passage though in the case of ritual performance, *Sankirtan* is always more closely associated with the Manipuri society than ram Leela. In the birth, death and marriage ceremonies of the Manipuris, *Nat Sankirtan* is supposed to be the only means of salvation in the form of *Maha Yajna*. The folkloric traits of Manipuri folk narrative art, narrative dialogue, narrative song, etc. are transferred onto the *Mridanga* (*pung*=drum), *Kartal* (cymbal) and *Nat* song to generate various *rasas* of *astakal* with the help of the art of telling, retelling and narrative song while staging a performance of musical composition. How intensely the traits of Manipuri folklore are intertwined with the text of Manipuri composite art can be studied for our knowledge and information with the help of *Nat Sankirtan* structural analysis.

The nature and form of Manipuri *Nat Sankirtan* represent a replica of a theatre as they are organised in plots and linear sequences on the theme of Radha and Krishna love relation (*prem rasa*). Sri Krishna is the male protagonist while Srimati Radha is the female protagonist. Its sole objective is to throw light on the union of *Jibatma* (life-soul = Radha) and *Paramatma* (supreme soul = Krishna). It has been integrated in the treasure of Manipuri culture since the time when Vaishnavism gained its full efflorescence in the State as a new dominant religion. By creating a new bifurcation in the style of singing in respect of *Kirtan* and *Sankirtan* and then conflating the traits of Manipuri folklore and the philosophy of attaining Bhagavat Prem through Vaishnavite beliefs of post-Sanskritisation, it was engendered in a purely Manipurised style of Vaishnav theatre as a receptacle of varied and exquisite *rasas* by the maestri. In short, it is but a cultural syncretism. In fact, here the traits are more autonomous than the texts when viewed from the cultural context. In the words of Maxmuller, it can be said that the relation between a word and its meaning is made all the more intensified. But often there is every possibility of straining the relationship between the word and its meanings in that the very word itself may give rise to a new meaning while its meaning is made to attach to another word. In the case of culture too, this possibility cannot be ruled out at all. There is little doubt that this diffusing character of the cultural traits has played a key role in the making of the texts of Vaishnav culture.

The composition of the *Nat Sankirtan* is as follows:

(i)*Raga Sanchar* (ii)*Teen Tal* (iii) *Men* (iv)*Tanchap* (v)*Menkup*.

*Raga achouba* is the biggest of all the ragas of *Nat Sankirtan*. It is also called *Mulraga*. As Sri Krishna is known as *Natabhav*, the raga is also known as *Nataraga* because the Goudiya Vaishnavas believe, through this *raga*, they can express their deep devotion for Him by way of appreciating and worshipping every part of His physical anatomy. Notwithstanding manifold names by which Sri Krishna is addressed, the cardinal implication remains unchanged – creation of the image of the Lord of the Universe, Sri Krishna and an

invocation to Him for His benign appearance and revelation in the mental realm of His ardent devotee to lead him to the path of enlightenment.

The special quality of this *raga* is evinced in the mesmerising symphony of synchronising tune, rhythm, acting, *mridanga* and cymbal. The *raga* begins with *mridanga*. The sequential arrangement of the *mridanga* sound – assonance and dissonance – is kept in tune with the inner philosophy of the *raga*. To cite as an example, the *mridanga* beat: *ten ten ta ta* : repeated thrice is an invocation to Sri Chaitanya Nityananda thrice while: *ghrin na grah dhe dhen ten ten ta ta tang* : is inviting the grace of Sri Chaitanya Nityananda RadhaKrishna Sri Govinda. Continuing in this way, at the stage of *Gurughat*, the *rasaraj* who has been invoked so long is supposed to have incarnated in His image and then instilling soul into the image is gradually done till the full attainment of the living status by the subsequent beats.

Thus, in the trend of building up *raga ahouba*, the first phase of the *Lai Haraoba*, the treasure of Manipuri folklore can be traced. This part of the *Lai Haraoba*, known as *ekouba* is very important as in this part, the image and soul of the deity in whose name the festivity will be celebrated are evoked and then invoked from either the water of a river or from a plot of land and brought with due offerings and honour by the *Maiba* and the *Maibi* (male and female *devadasi* or priest) to the spot where the celebration will take place in the accompaniment of *pena* (stringed musical instrument). This part of evocation as well as invocation of the image and soul of the deity is a trait of Manipuri folklore in the custom of ancestral worship. By incorporating all these features well in the *raga ahouba* of the *Nat Sankirtan*, a text of the Manipuri culture is created.

With the end of the *raga*, after *Sabhabandana* and *Gurubandana*, the participating artistes in the *Sankirtan* make a left turn and perform a synchronisation of the musical instruments. At the time of *men* also, they make a right turn and make a ritual genuflection or prostration to the audience-devotees. Towards the end, after *chhoigosain*, the artistes moving with the right turn, stop and stand in their respective places. These ritualistic movements of the artistes in the *Sankirtan* are associated with *paphal* item of the *Lai Haraoba* which is a form of Manipuri folk theatre. To use the term of *Nat Sankirtan*, it is what is generally known as *Parikrama* or circumvention round the deity.

*Teen Tal* embodies the feelings Sri Gouranga Mahaprabhu experienced at the sight of the unified images of Radha and Krishna. The three-fold thoughts that struck Sri Gouranga Mahaprabhu at that time are – (1) How intense was the love of Radha in its significance? (2) How intense was the aesthetic sense that Krishna experienced when He thought of Radha? (3) How intense was the ecstasy of Radha when She thought of Krishna? Here, Sri Krishna, the beloved son of Braja with a view to recompense the debt of Srimati Radha and liberate the world, cherishes the idea of Radha, took His birth from the womb of Sachi as a son of Jagannath Misra.

Sri Chaitanya Prabhu was also accompanied at Nabadwip by the male and female devotees of Braja. To perform as a theatrical art such a philosophy of the Hindu legendary story, the Manipuri artistes made a lot of modifications according to their cultural ethos. As for example, first, it is supposed that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu has paid His divine visit to the temple in the form of incense as fragrance, sandalwood as hue, flower as sweets, betel leaves as *rasa*. All these are supposed to have emanated from the organs of Chaitanya in the mold of a messenger.

Secondly, *kanthi* (necklace), *mala* (garland), *Harinaam* (chanting the name of Hari), *upasik* (relating to the worshipper) and *upasana* (relating to reverence) – all these five are regarded as representation of age, moon, sun and it is supposed that they have successfully enabled to create a feeling of *alambana* (means) and *uddipana* (determinant). Thirdly, *bhav*, *prem*, *rasa* and *tatva* are explained in terms of eight *Satvik bhavs* to achieve equanimity by transcending limited personal yearnings such as joy, etc. So, the source of all these is Sri Govinda and is very skillfully and vividly expressed in the form of *Naam Prachar* through the medium of *Teen Tal* with a song accompanied by five beats and seven *matras* (notes).

Against the backdrop of what has been stated above, we can bring in the story of the moon that occurs in ‘myths associated with celestial bodies’ which is a type of Manipuri mythic story relating to cosmology. In this story, *Atingkok Sidaba* incarnated Himself and from His will, spilled His body into parts and named them ‘sun’, ‘moon’, ‘star’, etc. as per the duties and responsibilities ascribed to them. The moot point here is the equivalence of this fictional truth with the folkloric trait or sign. Though apparently differences are there in symbolic elements, the physical structure and function of Gouranga Mahaprabhu and Chaitanya which are hypothetical construct can be seen in the deep structure of this myth of Manipuri folk narrative and are well



reflected in the *Teen Tal* of Manipuri *Nat Sankirtan*. Which is why, Manipuri folkloric traits can be traced in these theatres when constructing Manipuri cultural text by *Lai Haraoba* and *Nat Sankirtan*.

The term 'Men' in *Nat Sankirtan* is equivalent to climax in theatrical terminology. The *intro* or the opening piece of the *men* is termed as 'ghat' which serves as a connective between the two thematic aspects of Nabadwip and Brajabhav in *Nat Sankirtan*. *Men* can also be construed as an assimilation of all the thematic constructs of theatre. A unified art form resplendent with uniqueness and aestheticism is manifested by the synchronized conglomeration of *mridanga*, *kartal* and singer-artistes. The singer-artistes singing 'ye ye ye' in a chorus rise up in a crescendo as the *men* finally culminates.

Viewed from the cultural context of Manipuri folklore, a significant similarity is noticeable in the climactic effect of the *Men* and the *laibou* of *Lai Haraoba*. Just as the *Lai Haraoba* seems incomplete without the *laibou*, the *Men* is also an indispensable aspect of *Nat Sankirtan*. Manipuri folkloric aspects in the *Men* lay its basis on the narrative text of myths of the Manipuri cosmology. In the myth of the genesis of the Universe, when the folk deities had created the world and began settling down, the creation of life became an element of wonder and confusion to them. The Supreme Almighty came to their rescue by opening His mouth and displaying the various living beings to the great delight of the deities which resulted in roaring out in loud cheers. This loud cheering of the deities is termed as *Lai Hoilaoba* by the Manipuris. The philosophy embedded in the ancient worship of the Manipuri traditional faith is well-manifested in a similar manner in the art form of *men* in *Nat Sankirtan*. This aspect of folklore forms the core of the theatrical aspect of *Nat Sankirtan*.

The *Men* is followed by *Tanchap* which plays the part of *Shulonaam*. It proceeds to the experience of bliss in the unification of *Menkup*, leading to the evocation of RadhaKrishna and thereby proceeding towards the culmination with the singing of *Chhoigosain*. The final chanting of *Harinaam* ceremonially concludes a *Shraddha* ceremony based on *Nat Sankirtan*. More often than not, in the concluding part too, the features of *Lai Haraoba* are again evident. On the day of *Talairoi*, *Maibas* and *Maibis* invoked the deities for the ascent of the souls to Heaven at the dead of night singing *Nonggaron* (song of the ascension to Heaven). The soul of the dead being synonymous with God is a Manipuri construct. Thus, with a firm conviction, it can be said that, in the concluding part of a *Shraddha* ceremony, the ritual of the liberation of the soul of the dead resembles the *Nonggaron* from the Manipuri folk cult.

The dress code of Manipuri *Nat Sankirtan* exemplifies a unique status of authentic Manipuri philosophy in its import. The pristine white *pheijom* (dhoti), *kokyot* (turban), etc. embodies truth, purity, idealism and sanctity of devotion and worship. The mode of singing also reflects the same of Manipuri folk songs and ballads. Manipuri ballads are rooted deep in *pena*-based (indigenous musical string instrument) song styles like *shikaplon*, *huikaplon*, *jat*, *lamyeen*, *hiripabot*, *hirithangyei*, etc. The various performance acts of *Nat Sankirtan* are a resemblance of Manipuri martial arts and the movements of elephants, horses, snakes, swans, etc. In short, we can safely conclude that, taking the precedence from *Thang-Ta* (sword-spear martial arts), *Mukna* (wrestling), *Kangjei* (Hockey), etc. and transforming it into a form of popular theatre, *Nat Sankirtan* has emerged as a performance text in the soil of Manipuri culture of the Medieval period of Manipuri history.

In fine, it is to be noted that besides *Nat Sankirtan*, from the treasure house of Manipuri culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Vaishnavite theatres constituted performance texts that stemmed out as innovations after deconstructing texts that belong to the genre of Manipuri folklore in its knowledge, mode of thought, kinds of art, etc. Such instances of cultural genre which exhibit a blend of Manipuri folk and Vaishnavite signs have emerged from the diglossic soil of Manipuri culture and can be considered as an integral part of cultural text of and contribute to the formation of holistic Indian culture.

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