An Exploration Of The Customary Rehearsal System Of Basanta Raas Of Shri Govindaji Temple

Seram Rajeshwaran Singh
Ph.D Research Scholar, Royal School of Languages, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract:

Nestled within Manipur’s embrace lies a realm adorned with a plethora of exquisite dance and melodious cadences. Among these treasures, the Raas Leela of Meitei Vaishnavites, conceived by the visionary Rajarshi Bhagyachandra in the 18th century, stands as a luminous gem of India’s artistic heritage. Reverberating with profound philosophical depths and fervent devotion, this dance tradition transcends the realm of mere entertainment. It unfurled as a heartfelt offering to the divine, a choreographic hymn of devotion. The harmonious collaboration of virtuosos associated with this artistry has dutifully safeguarded the timeless legacy of the three divine Raas forms within the sanctum of the Shri Govindaji Temple. They persist as vibrant, living embodiments of tradition. Antecedent to the presentation of this devotional performance, an indispensable custom gracefully persists elaborate rehearsal meticulously guided by the custodians of the Raas dance legacy at the revered Shri Govindaji Temple. This sacred tradition, meticulously nurtured since its inception, stands unwaveringly as a testament to continuity. The aim of this article is to unveil the intricate nuances and age old tradition encapsulating the rehearsal methodology of Basanta Raas, a mesmerizing performance deeply intertwined with the eagerly awaited and vibrant arrival of spring. Within these pages, the customary rituals and the revered code of conduct governing the rehearsal will be elucidated. This paper will also affirm that the very core of this rehearsal journey is rooted in devout ardor, prioritizing spiritual connection over the mere pursuit of flawlessness to captivate the beholder’s gaze.

Index Terms - Govindaji Temple, Raas Leela, Basanta Raas, Rehearsal, Ritual, Devotion
INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a state in India's North-Eastern region. The state is brimming with diverse and lively dance and music that is uniquely its own. The Meitei community, which comprises the majority of the population, is widely recognised for its rich dance traditions. The Meitei people have a distinct cultural orientation that precedes written history. When it comes to the prehistoric past, the exact beginnings of Lai Haraoba are still unknown because recorded history and human memory are considerably more recent. Devotion is communicated in the thoughts of a Manipuri through dance and singing. Almost every being is revered in Manipur. From the beginning of Meitei creation myths, the supreme created the cosmos and humanity via the act of dance, has always been the way we wanted to commemorate him. All of these are present in the Lai Haraoba tradition. It also acts as a storehouse for all types of dance and music. This indigenous tradition is still followed with utmost respect and fear by the Meitei people because it is believed that pleasing the ancestral deities will bless the people of the community with abundant food production, protection for the family and the community, protection from untimely death, fertility, and so on. For the first time, Hinduism came in the valley of Manipur in the 15th century during the reign of King Kyamba, and from the time of his reign onwards, Brahmins from various regions of the Indian subcontinent came to the valley with their religious texts and practices. They settled in the state's valley and later became Manipuri. Gauriya Vaishnavism, a sect of Vaishnavism was accepted by the people and the royal patronage in the 18th century. After this, Hinduism in the valley achieved its pinnacle. The Meitei Vaishnavites frequently refer to Bhagyachandra's rule in the middle of the 18th century as the "Golden Period" since a variety of Vaishnavite theme dances and musical compositions were created under his supervision. He introduced the Nata Sankirtana tradition which became one of the most important elements in the ceremonial lives of the Meitei Vaishnavites. Also, he installed the idol of Govindaji and initiated in the production of the first Raas form ie Maha Raas. He also introduced Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas during his reign. Two more Raas forms namely Nitya Raas and Diva Raas were developed during the later monarchs in 20th century.

The five Raas forms of Manipur have been designed exclusively with the unique approaches of Vaishnav devotion blended with the various pre Vaishnavite indigenous traditions that has made it very distinctive of its own. “He called around him all the eminent gurus who were exponents in dance, music, thaang-taa and other prominent experts of different subjects in different fields for indepth discussions on how to create and compose the Ras dance and evolve it as an innovation”( Priyogopalsana, 52). “The essence, elements and mode of dancing having taken a clue from Lai Haraoba while the technical part like footwork, footsteps, hand, neck, body movements, etc from the Theng-gou-rol (inner core of sword Play), and Khou-Sa-Rol (inner core of spear) and Paphal –Graphs( charts of graphic movements). The structure, texture, rudiments and its essence are compatible with those of Ras Leela of Shri Mad Bhagavata” (Priyogopalsana, 52-53). “The Raas Leela’s of Manipur are performed on specific days and season according to the Hindu calendar. This is perhaps what Bharata meant in Natyashastr that dance should be performed on a Parva Din. Maha Raas is performed on Kartik Purnima, Kunja Raas on Ashwin Purnima and Basanta Raas on the full moon
night of Vasant. Nitya Raas can be performed anytime except Sharad” (Singh, 46). Diva Raas can be performed during daytime. This dance style has its own distinctive conventions that are bhakti oriented so, they are not meant for public entertainment purpose but a medium to reach the lord.

It is important to highlight that the five Raas forms are still a living tradition because it was preserved by the collective effort of the maestro and associates of this dance style. The three forms of Raas are upheld in their most pristine state at the Shri Govindaji Temple, where they are treated with profound respect and enthusiastic involvement from the Vaishnav followers of Manipur. The focus of this paper is to unfold the intricate rehearsal system of Basanta Raas. “Vasant Ras was constructed with ideas from Brahmaveivarta Puran and also Geet Govinda Kavyaam of Jayadev. Many of the lyrics were taken from Padakalpataru, Sangeet Madhav, Ras Ulasatantra among many others. Nitya Raas was based on Govinda Leelamritam with some deviations” (Singh, 46). “In order to create Basanta Ras, Maharaja Bhagyachandra, so arranged the 71 days of the years from the Magha panchamni (fifth day) upto the Cheitra Poornima as the period of Holi. So, in this Raas there is always a song of Abir Khel (Ibochouba, 56) . Basanta Raas as one of the three Raas forms created by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra has its own distinctive aspects which are motivated mainly by the dramatic elements present in the whole panorama which include the beautiful setting of spring season, nature, joy, love, possessiveness, play of colour, etc. The signature colour of Basanta Raas is considered to be the colour red.

From the time of its creation, Basanta Raas is performed on Shajibu Purnima (March/ April). It is offered by women of all ages by performing the role of Gopis before the idols of Radha-Govinda (also called Radha-Krishna) at Shri Govindaji temple located inside the palace compound in Imphal. It is indeed a divine performance that is motivated by the gracious floating movements of the performer and also by the atmosphere that enthrals with bhakti and devotion. As a devotional performance, it starts with bhakti and concludes with bhakti. Here at this temple, various Vaishnavites from every corner of the valley of Manipur and also from outside the state gather at this centuries-old temple to pay obeisance and also to witness this transcendental performance that was created by the enthusiastic Maharaja.

As a devotional performance aimed at achieving higher devotional quality, a proper and elaborate rehearsal is organised for almost a month before the main performance. This rehearsal is very elaborate as it goes along with certain unavoidable rituals that are to be followed and taken part in by the women who are going to take on the role of Gopis (the damsels of Vrindavan). The rehearsal tradition of the three Raas forms of Shri Govindaji temple is exactly the same. As a paper that focuses on Basanta Raas, I would put forth the rehearsal system specifically for Basanta Raas. To initiate the practice sessions, Paanji Shanglaakpa, a senior Brahmin associated with the temple, will select an auspicious date following the Manipuri lunar calendar. On the initial rehearsal day, females of various age group designated to play the role of Gopi will gather at the Raas Mandali (Pavilion) to participate in a ceremonial observance known as Panchadevata Puja. During a personal interview with Shanglakpam Khogendra Sharma, currently holding the position of Raasdhari (teacher and drummer) at Shri Govindaji Temple, he emphasized the significant and essential
nature of this practice. He explained that this ritual holds immense importance and is meticulously conducted by Brahmin practitioners. The purpose behind this ritual is to seek blessings from five prominent Hindu deities: Lord Vishnu, Lord Mahadeva, Lord Ganesh, Surya, and goddess Durga. These five divine entities, collectively referred to as Panchdevata or Panch Dev, are invoked to ensure a prosperous journey of rehearsals and a successful performance. This particular tradition has deep roots within Hinduism and is integral to its cultural heritage. This ritual is performed by a senior Brahmin, and it is performed in the name of Makokchingbi (the woman who is going to take the role of Lalita). All the costs associated with the performance will be covered by the Makokchingbi. This practice has been consistently upheld whenever a Basanta Raas is presented at the Shri Govindaji Temple.

Following this ceremony, the Gopis will approach the Raasdhari to receive his blessings, ensuring a prosperous path to their performance. As a gesture of appreciation for his devoted guidance, they present traditional gifts to the Raasdhari. Subsequently, the rehearsal begins, with the Raasdhari instructing the women in the fundamental movements of Manipuri dance, known as Chali, at the Raas Mandalai (Pavilion), situated in front of the temple. These practice sessions persist for nearly a month, concluding the day before the main performance. The Raas Mandalai serves as a spacious hall designated for various temple-related ceremonies. It's worth noting that the women participating in this performance might not be professional dancers or singers; they engage in this activity to serve the Lord. Despite being newcomers to this dance style, the Raasdhari introduces uncomplicated and fundamental steps and movements to accommodate their skill levels. Importantly, a few professional dancers and singers are included as an essential component. Their presence aids the novice dancers when they encounter difficulties during the night-long performance. As the rehearsal progresses halfway, a range of musical instruments is integrated, a crucial aspect for the final Raas performance. While one might perceive this as a mere practice, specific codes of conduct must be observed by the female participants and all temple visitors. Even those learning the dance steps adhere to proper traditional attire and a specified color code in harmony with the temple's ambiance. Before commencing and concluding each session, the women pay respect towards the Raasdhari and other instrumentalists, following a traditional protocol.

On the final day of the rehearsal period, a ceremonial practice known as Lai Barton Houba is conducted. This tradition involves extending an invitation to the Radha-Govinda idols at the temple through the offering of Paana Tangga (betel nut and leave). Similarly, the assembled women at the Raas Mandalai, positioned in a semicircle facing the temple, are also invited. This gathering acknowledges them as Gopis who will play a role in the sacred Raas performance the following day. Lai Barton Houba reflects the Meitei Vaishnavite belief system, seeking the divine presence of the Lord in the impending ceremony. This practice of inviting the Lord is also present in the religious and ceremonial customs of the Meitei Vaishnavite community beyond the Raas system. Subsequently, the Raasdhari designates the women participants as the real Gopis of Vrindavan starting from this moment. Following this ritual, the women offer traditional gifts to the two Raasdharis and seek blessings for a successful performance. All those
involved in the rehearsal gather to enjoy Kheer, a sweet dish, at the Prasadam hall. The women are advised to consume only Niramesh (a vegetarian meal) until the main performance concludes.

On the succeeding day, which coincides with the full moon, individuals from both within and outside the state gather in their customary attire to express reverence at the temple during the early hours. The women designated to portray the role of Gopis prepare themselves by bathing and adhering to Niramesh meals at their respective homes. Post noon, these female participants and costume dressers convene at a designated area within the temple environment to initiate the dressing procedure. During this process, each woman performs a customary gesture of respect towards the dresser by offering traditional clothing, a practice rooted in seeking blessings. This custom, termed "boriba" in the local language, is prevalent. The act of dressing is intricate and time-consuming, as each fabric is intricately arranged to properly and aesthetically adorn the women’s body. This procedure involves meticulous attention due to every component of the attire holding specific meanings and significance, thereby necessitating careful handling and placement. “Those who have to dress-up for the Ras are gathered at a very clean and sacred place prepared for the same. After they fully dressed and ready for the performance, a Brahmin will do the “Ghat Sthapana” and sanctify the artistes who are to take the role of God and Goddesses with Veddic rituals. He will also offer the “Pratikar pujah” to clear off the previous sins done by them. Thus, after they are sanctified, the “Abhishekh Sankalpa” is performed for successful performance of the Ras at a selected timing and start for the Ras Mandap. All those, who have been sanctified should not mix with other persons who are not sanctified. This was made and obeyed as a hard rule. (Ibochouba, 29). They are not allowed to talk to anyone since they are advised to live in the mental state of Gopi. They are instructed to avoid conversating with the audience nearby, as engaging in such conversations could disrupt their mental state as Gopis.

In the evening, the idols of Radha-Govinda are taken out of the temple on a palanquin, with Radha leading and accompanying the ritual and grand ceremonial procession accompanied by drum, cymbal, and conch. The idols will be carried to the centre of the Raas Mandali and placed on the Bhadachakra, which is located in the middle of the Raas Mandali. According to Shanglakpam Khogendro Sharma, the idol of Radha comes with a complete set of costumes, but the idol of Krishna wears an incomplete, simple costume that consists of a simple turban, urik-noogoon, nopoor and a golden coloured silk dhoti, which is known as Sanaphige Pheijom in Manipuri. New attire, known as Natabarabesh, will be adorned on the idol of Lord Krishna, placed at the center of the Raas Mandali, with white curtain dropping from all sides. Various essential elements required for the performance will be meticulously arranged and presented as offerings to the idols. These idols will symbolically represent the roles of Radha and Krishna for the occasion. Notably, within the Raas Leela of Govindaji temple, the characters of Krishna and Radha are embodied by the idols present in the Raas Mandali, eliminating the need for distinct portrayals of Krishna and Radha. Conversely, when the Raas Leela is enacted beyond the temple premises, young children often enact the roles of Krishna and Radha. The Raas Mandali is held in high esteem and is likened to the enchanting forests of Vrindavan, a location of great significance to Gauḍiya Vaishnavism as it is believed to be the actual site where the mythical Raas Leela transpired.
Next, the performers of Raga Achouba (also known as Nupa Pala or Sankirtan), which consists of Pung Yeiba (drummer) and Esei Shakpa (singer), will take their respective seats to perform. At the moment, the Araangfam (the arranger or usher) will offer Lei (flower), Chandan (sandalwood paste), Paana-Taangga (betul nut and), and Bori Phee (traditional clothing) to the performers, and at the same time, the Araangpham will pay reverence to every performer. Thus, the Raga Achouba will commence as a prelude to the upcoming Basanta Raas. Raga Achouba is a combination of song, drum, and cymbal performed only by men. According to Natayashastra, a performance should always begin with a Purvarangga (prelude). Thus, Raga Achouba serves as a Purvarangga to every Raas Leela of Manipur.

To start the main performance, i.e., Basanta Raas, the Arangpham (arranger) will offer Lei-Chandan (sandalwood paste and flower) and Paana Taangga (betul nut with leaf) and a traditional clothe to the Raasdhari, Sutradhari (singers), and musicians, and after this they will take their respective seats. To mark the beginning of the awaited Basanta Raas, the two Raasdhari will start playing the Raga Macha, which is also known as the Nuwa Raga, and simultaneously, conchs will be blown by the conch players to indicate the beginning of Basanta Raas. Next, the Sutradhari will start singing the Basanta turi raga, and thus the main performance begins.

CONCLUSION

In modern era, the process of rehearsing has become an essential and inseparable aspect of any performance, aimed at achieving a flawless outcome. When considering the rehearsal methodology within the context of the Raas Leela at Shri Govindaji temple, it is characterized by a high level of precision and extends beyond mere practice. Undoubtedly, it is an inherent and obligatory traditional practice that demands women to undergo thorough guidance and training. This process is essential for them to align seamlessly with the temple’s ambience in a positive manner. This customary rehearsal system at Shri Govindaji Temple is a captivating journey that amalgamates devotion, artistry and tradition. It showcases the dedication of the individuals, the intricacies of choreography and the power of storytelling through dance and fosters a sense of unity and camaraderie among the participants, creating a profound bond that transcends generation. This rehearsal commences with ritual and ends with ritual. From all the above observations, we can conclude that the elaborate rehearsal system of the Raas Leela of Govindaji temple is more inclined towards following a devotional experience than focusing on perfection to please the eyes of the beholder.
REFERENCES


