



Gender Inclusivity In Manipuri Performing Arts: Tradition, Ritual, And Cultural Continuity

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Abstract

This study explores the idea of cultural equality in the performing arts traditions of Manipur through an examination of *Lai Haraoba*, *Raas Leela*, *Nata Sankirtana*, and contemporary Manipuri classical dance. The paper focuses on the collaborative roles of men and women in sustaining, preserving, and developing these artistic traditions across different historical periods. In Manipuri culture, performance is deeply connected with ritual, spirituality, and community life, where artistic practices are shaped not by hierarchy but by shared participation and mutual respect. The study reveals the contributions of *Nupa Amaibi* and *Nupi Amaibi* in *Lai Haraoba*, the roles of *Raasdhari* and *Sutradhari* in *Raas Leela*, and the emergence of women's participation in *Nata Sankirtana* through institutions such as *Raseshwori Pala* and *Jalakeli Pala*. It also examines the evolution of Manipuri classical dance from ritual performance to stage composition and the growing inclusivity of male and female performers in modern productions. The research adopts a qualitative and descriptive methodology based on historical analysis, textual interpretation, and cultural study. Primary attention is given to literary sources, ritual texts, oral traditions, and scholarly works related to Manipuri performing arts and Vaishnavite culture. Through this approach, the study investigates how gender roles within these traditions evolved while continuing to maintain cultural harmony and spiritual significance. The study concludes that Manipuri performing arts present a unique model of cultural inclusivity where men and women contribute equally to artistic and ritual practices. These traditions continue to preserve collective identity, spiritual values, and cultural continuity while also responding to contemporary ideas of equality and shared creative expression.

Keywords: Manipuri Performing Arts, Cultural Equality, *Lai Haraoba*, *Nata Sankirtana*, *Raas Leela*

Introduction

Manipur, nestled in the northeastern corner of India, is widely admired for its rich cultural heritage and vibrant tradition of performing arts. In this land, dance and music are not confined to the stage alone; they form an inseparable part of everyday life, spiritual practice, and collective memory. Ritual festivals such as *Lai Haraoba* and classical traditions like *Raas Leela* and *Nata Sankirtana* reflect the deep artistic consciousness of the Manipuri people, where performance becomes a sacred medium through which history, devotion, and community are preserved across generations.

One of the most remarkable features of Manipuri performing arts is the harmonious participation of both men and women in sustaining these traditions. Cultural practices in Manipur reveal a balanced relationship in which artistic and spiritual responsibilities are shared with dignity and mutual respect. The *Amaibis*, or priestesses, play a central role in *Lai Haraoba* through ritual dances and sacred storytelling that embody the spiritual memory of the community. Alongside them, the *Amaibas*, or priests, and the *Pena khongbas*, the traditional *Pena* player, contribute equally to the ceremonial and artistic dimensions of the performance. Their roles are not shaped by dominance or separation but by cooperation and interdependence, creating a cultural space founded on unity and collective participation.

This spirit of shared responsibility extends beyond ritual performance into the preservation, teaching, and evolution of artistic traditions. In contemporary times, both male and female artists continue to serve as custodians of Manipuri cultural heritage while also adapting these traditions to changing social realities. Their dedication ensures that the performing arts of Manipur remain living traditions that speak to both the past and the present.

This article seeks to explore how Manipuri performing arts embody a profound sense of cultural equality through the collaborative contributions of men and women. By examining ritual practices, classical performances, and evolving artistic spaces, the study reveals how these traditions continue to promote inclusivity, harmony, and collective cultural identity in an increasingly modern world.

Role of *Nupa Amaibi* and *Nupi Amaibi* in *Lai Haraoba*

In the cultural and ritual life of Manipur, priests and priestesses occupy a position of profound importance in the celebration of *Lai Haraoba*, a sacred festival often understood as “the merrymaking of the gods.” The ritual performances are traditionally guided by the *Amaibis* and *Amaibas*, while the *Pena Khongba* provides the musical accompaniment that shapes the spiritual atmosphere of the ceremony. Although the term *Amaibi* is commonly associated with women in Meitei society, within ritual contexts it transcends gender distinctions and is applied to both men and women. This understanding gave rise to the presence of the *Nupa Amaibi*, male ritual performers who undertake ceremonial responsibilities often associated with female priestesses.

The origins of the *Amaibi* tradition remain deeply embedded in myths, oral narratives, and ancient manuscripts, where differing accounts reveal the shared foundations of ritual authority between genders. Certain traditional sources suggest that *Nupa Amaibis* existed before *Nupi Amaibis*, tracing the earliest ritual performances to Kande Khusum *Maiba* in the *Chakpa Haraoba* tradition, even before 33 AD. Other narratives identify the goddess Nongthang Leima, later worshipped as Panthoibi, as the first *Amaibi*, thereby emphasizing the sacred feminine origin of ritual performance. These varying traditions together reflect the balanced presence of both male and female energies within the spiritual practices of Manipuri culture.

With the gradual spread of Hinduism and the influence of Vaishnavism in Manipur, the position of *Nupi Amaibis* encountered certain social and ritual restrictions as religious structures increasingly adopted patriarchal tendencies. During this period, *Nupa Amaibis* assumed broader responsibilities not only within ritual performance but also in the preservation and development of cultural traditions. They introduced new choreographic elements into *Lai Haraoba* performances to engage wider audiences and contributed significantly to the documentation of ritual knowledge through scholarly writings. Ritual practitioners and scholars such as Rajo Amaibi and Ngangbam Kumar Amaibi played an important role in preserving these traditions through works like *Langol Langdai amadi Lai Haraoba* (1988).

In contemporary Manipuri society, both *Nupa Amaibis* and *Nupi Amaibis* continue to play equally significant roles in the celebration of *Lai Haraoba*. During ritual performances, the similarities between male and female practitioners become visible in their dance techniques, gestures, movements, and even in certain aspects of costume and ceremonial presentation. Their performances reflect not competition or hierarchy but a shared spiritual responsibility grounded in mutual respect and cultural continuity. The festival of *Lai Haraoba* therefore stands as a living expression of equality, demonstrating how both men and women collectively preserve and transmit the sacred cultural heritage of Manipuri society.

Role of Raasdhari and Sutradhari in Manipuri Raas Leela

In Manipuri Vaishnava performance traditions, the term *Raasdhari* refers to the male drummer, while *Sutradhari* denotes the female vocalist who leads the singing in the performance. These roles are significant not only in Manipuri *Raas Leela* but also in other devotional dramas such as *Goura Leela*, *Udukhol Leela*, and *Gostha Leela*. The word *Sutradhari* originates from Sanskrit and is formed from two words: *sutra*, meaning thread or string, and *dhari*, meaning one who holds. Thus, *Sutradhari* literally signifies “the one who holds the thread,” symbolically representing the performer who guides and connects the flow of the dramatic and devotional narrative. As mentioned in *Raj Mantri Paba* published by Shree Shree Govindaji Temple Board, the *Sutradhari* occupies an important place in preserving the continuity and spiritual essence of Manipuri Vaishnava theatre traditions.

The first *Jagoi Raas Leela* dedicated to Shree Shree Govindaji, the *Raasdhari* Guru was Guru Swarupananda, composers were Shree Rasananda Thakur, Kabo Khubongba and Guru..... Mama Shijas (royal wives) being fairly aged, acted as *Sutradharis* of the *Raas Leela*. Prominent ladies of the royal family also acted as *Sutradharis*. The matter of women’s acting as *Sutradhari* was discussed by the Maharaj, *Raasdhari* Guru Brahmacharimayum Swarupand Thakur and Guru Shree Rasananda Thakur and having been approved, the practice of women acting as *Sutradhari* came into vogue since then. Thus, in the Manipuri *Raas Leela*, women became singers in place of male artiste gradually. The replacement of male artiste for *Raas Leela* became more appropriate and suitable when coming to the songs of the Gopies (female dancers) of the play. It gives satisfaction to the devotee audience all the more by enabling to arouse the sense of love for Shree Krishna due to the melodious female voice.

In the early period of Manipuri *Raas Leela*, the role of the *Sutradhari* was traditionally performed by male artistes. However, during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, an important transformation took place when royal women were granted permission to assume the role of *Sutradhari* in place of male performers. This transition marked a significant moment in the evolution of Manipuri Vaishnava performance traditions, reflecting both cultural adaptation and the growing participation of women in sacred artistic practices. The present tradition of female *Sutradharis* in Manipuri *Raas Leela* therefore traces its origins to a role that was initially enacted by male artistes. During a personal communication, Smt. Arambam Tombinou Devi stated that...

When an inquiry was made regarding the first *Sutradhari* (female singer) during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, it was found that Maharani Harimati had to step down from her role as the lead dancer of the *Raas Leela* at the Shree Shree Govindaji Temple due to old age. Deeply concerned about no longer being able to participate in the royal dance, the queen, along with the other royal women, approached the King and expressed their desire to continue serving in the performance. They requested permission to perform as playback singers, that is, as *Sutradharis* of the dance. The King then discussed the matter with the Brahma Sabha, the royal council of *Brahmins*, as well as with scholars and dance gurus.

Some of the gurus expressed the opinion that the singing voices of Rani Harimati, Leim Hanbi, the wife of Prince Ngoubam Sai, and Leimakhunbi, the wife of Prince Anant Sai, were more melodious and more suitable for reciprocal singing with the Gopis than male voices. They further suggested that the use of female Sutradhari instead of male performers would greatly enhance the aesthetic beauty of the *Raas Leela*. After careful consideration, the King approved the proposal. Consequently, these royal women became the first female Sutradhari of the *Raas Leela* at the Shree Shree Govindaji Temple. From that period onward, queens regularly performed the role of *Sutradhari* in the *Raas Leela* presented at the Govindaji Temple.

The songs sung in Manipuri *Raas Leela* are numerous and complex because the *Raas Leela* itself is divided into five different types:

- i. *Maha Raas*
- ii. *Kunja Raas*
- iii. *Basanta Raas*
- iv. *Nitya Raas* and
- v. *Diva Raas*

Each of these five forms of *Raas Leela* differs in terms of costume, style, songs, and dance movements. Therefore, the role of the *Sutradhari* becomes extremely important in the performance of *Raas Leela*. Without the *Sutradhari*, it is difficult to organize and present the performance effectively. Through her songs, dialogues, *slokas*, and *saras*, the *Sutradhari* guides the audience by explaining the story, sequence of events, characters, time, and emotional situations within the play. To become a *Sutradhari* in *Raas Leela*, a singer must possess deep knowledge of the *Raas Leela* narratives along with a melodious and expressive voice. The role demands not only training and dedication but also certain natural qualities and artistic sensitivity. Thus, becoming a *Sutradhari* is considered a highly skilled and respected responsibility.

The *Sutra* and the *Sutradhari* are the very foundation of Manipuri *Raas Leela*. An artiste may be highly skilled in singing, possess a beautiful voice, and be naturally gifted, yet still may not be qualified to perform the role of a *Sutradhari*. Only an artiste who is disciplined, has profound knowledge of *Raas Leela* and other religious traditions, possesses a deep understanding of love and devotion toward God, and is blessed with a melodious voice can truly undertake the responsibilities of a *Sutradhari*. Therefore, the *Sutradhari* of a *Raas Leela* is regarded as a special and distinguished artiste. The formal and ceremonial duties of the *Sutradhari* begin with the auspicious sound of the blowing conch.

Like the *Sutradhari*, the *Rasdhari* must also possess thorough knowledge of all five forms of *Raas Leela*, namely *Maha Raas*, *Basanta Raas*, *Kunja Raas*, *Nitya Raas*, and *Diva Raas*. He must be highly skilled in playing the *Pung*, as the dancers perform according to the rhythm and sound created by his drumming. If the performance of the *Pung* lacks precision and energy, the dancers cannot present their movements gracefully and effectively. Throughout the entire *Raas Leela*, from beginning to end, the *Rasdhari* plays a vital role by performing different *taals* and rhythmic patterns that accompany and support the *Sutradhari* during the performance.

To become a *Rasdhari*, one must possess not only theoretical knowledge of the *Pung* but also strong practical mastery of the instrument. In addition, a *Rasdhari* should have a clear understanding of dance techniques, movements, and performance styles in order to maintain harmony between music and dance.

Thus, in the *Raas Leela* tradition of Manipur, both the *Sutradhari* and the *Raasdhari* play equally significant roles. Their coordination, dedication, and artistic excellence together bring life to the performance and make the *Raas Leela* a spiritually enriching and captivating experience for the audience.

Gender Equality in *Nata Sankirtana*

Sankirtana is a collective form of devotional singing in which people come together to praise and worship the divine through music, rhythm, and spiritual expression. The term *Sankirtana* is derived from the word *Samakirtana*, where *sama* means “together” and *kirtana* refers to the singing of devotional songs. In Manipur, the tradition of *Sankirtana* traces its origins to the reign of King Kyamba, when the worship of Lord Vishnu was introduced after the king received a sacred gift from the ruler of Pong, present day Myanmar. Over the centuries, under the patronage of successive kings, *Sankirtana* gradually evolved in style and structure and became an inseparable part of the religious and cultural life of the Manipuri people.

In Manipur, *Sankirtana* developed into two major forms: *Bangdes Pala*, also known as *Ariba Pala*, and *Nata Sankirtana*, also called *Anouba Pala*. *Bangdes Pala* is believed to have originated during the reign of King Kyamba and gained wider popularity during the rule of King Garibniwaz. Influenced by Vaishnava preachers from Bengal, this tradition came to be known as *Bangdes Pala*. It later developed into two subtypes, namely *Leibak Chaba Pala* and *Sebak Pala*. Apart from religious ceremonies, this form of *Sankirtana* also became associated with social rituals, including funeral ceremonies during the reign of King Garibniwaz.

Nata Sankirtana, on the other hand, was introduced around 1779 by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, who envisioned a more refined and artistic form of devotional performance. The term *Anouba* means “new” in Manipuri, signifying a transformed and enriched style of *Sankirtana* that incorporated graceful movements and dance. The word *Nata* is often associated with dance, multi-talented performers, or even the divine attire of Lord Krishna known as *Natabara Besh*. Unlike the earlier forms, *Nata Sankirtana* harmoniously combines singing (*Eshei*), dancing (*Jagoi*), and drumming (*Pung*), creating a devotional performance that is both spiritual and aesthetic. Within Vaishnavite belief, especially during the age of Kali Yuga, *Sankirtana* is regarded as a sacred path through which devotees can attain spiritual liberation by chanting the name of the Lord.

An important chapter in the history of Manipuri *Sankirtana* is closely connected with Princess Bimbabati, the daughter of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, who was also known by names such as Lakshmipriya, Sija Laidibi, and Sija Lainingbi. A devoted worshipper of Shree Govindaji, the princess received training from an early age in traditional arts such as weaving, embroidery, dance, and music. Around 1779, when Rajarshi Bhagyachandra introduced the first *Maharaas* as an offering to Shree Govinda, the idol of Shrimati Radhika had not yet been completed, making it impossible to perform the *Raas* according to tradition. After consulting royal priests and elders, the role of Shrimati Radhika was entrusted to the young Princess Bimbabati, who was only eight years old at the time. Following this sacred performance, she devoted her life entirely to the service of Shree Govinda and emerged as one of the pioneering figures in the artistic and cultural history of Manipur.

Inspired by her deep devotion, Princess Bimbabati later desired to establish a women’s *Sankirtana* group known as *Nupi Pala*. At that time, women were not permitted to participate in *Sankirtana* performances. She therefore approached her father with her wish, and after discussions with scholars and pandits in the *Brahmasabha*, the king finally granted permission. This women’s *Sankirtana* group came to be known as *Raseshwori Pala*, named after the princess herself. The performances were dedicated to Shree Govinda, with Princess Bimbabati serving as the lead singer (*Eshei Hanba*), while the remaining members were women belonging to the Karta clan.

Raseshwori Pala possessed several distinctive features that set it apart from other Sankirtana traditions. Unlike other groups that used the *Mandila*, the women of *Raseshwori Pala* used *Kartal* during their performances. The musical compositions involved elaborate ragas, while the rhythmic structure of the drum followed the *Nadiya Raga* tradition. This innovation reflected both artistic refinement and devotional depth.

During the reign of Shreejot Narasingh Maharaj, another important women's *Sankirtana* group emerged. In 1833, the king established a second *Nupi Pala* in memory of his brother Gambhir Singh during the *Shradha* ceremony. This group performed in the *Jalakeli* ritual of Shree Govinda and gradually became known as *Jalakeli Pala*. Unlike *Raseshwori Pala*, the women in this group used *Mandila* and sang in a softer melodic style. The *Jalakeli Pala* continued to serve Shree Govinda as the female *Sankirtana* group associated with the Nara Singh lineage.

The establishment of *Raseshwori Pala* marked the beginning of women's active participation in Manipuri *Sankirtana* and inspired the formation of many other *Nupi Palas* connected to festivals and social ceremonies such as *Ratha Yatra*, *Jhulon Yatra*, *Devi Puja*, weddings, *Nahutpa*, *Noogunthangba*, and *Shradha* rituals. Ch. Jamini Devi, in *Cultural History of Manipur: Sija Laioibi and the Maha Raas*, observes that the large-scale participation of women in music and dance today became possible because of the vision, dedication, and leadership of Princess Bimbabati. By standing at the center of *Sankirtana* performances and leading devotional songs and dance, Sija Laioibi empowered Manipuri women and created a legacy that continues to inspire generations.

Today, *Sankirtana* remains an essential part of both the religious and social life of Manipur. It is performed during festivals, rituals, weddings, childbirth ceremonies, and even funerals, bringing communities together in shared devotion and collective memory. Through music, rhythm, and spiritual expression, *Sankirtana* bridges the human and the divine while preserving the cultural identity of the Manipuri people. Both men and women contribute significantly to this living tradition, ensuring that the spiritual and artistic heritage of Manipur continues to flourish across generations.

Shared Contributions of Men and Women in Manipuri Stage Performance

Since 1939, Manipuri classical dance has undergone a remarkable transformation, gradually moving from sacred ritual spaces into the realm of organized stage performance. This shift marked an important moment in the evolution of the art form and opened new possibilities for its presentation before wider audiences. A major turning point came through the pioneering choreographic work of Guru Maisnam Amubi Singh, whose compositions performed by Amala Shankar introduced Manipuri dance to the broader landscape of Indian classical performing arts and brought national recognition to its unique aesthetic tradition.

Deeply rooted in the spiritual and cultural heritage of Manipur, Manipuri classical dance is celebrated for its lyrical grace, devotional spirit, and delicate artistic refinement. The dance form embodies a harmonious balance between *Tandava*, which represents strength, vigour, and dynamic masculine energy, and *Lasya*, which expresses softness, grace, and feminine beauty. Through this union, Manipuri dance creates an artistic language that transcends rigid divisions and reflects the interconnectedness of contrasting energies within human expression.

In contemporary times, Manipuri classical dance has increasingly embraced the ideals of inclusivity and equality. Modern stage productions often present male and female dancers together with equal artistic importance, highlighting cooperation rather than distinction. Mythological roles, especially that of Lord Krishna, are no longer confined to performers of a particular gender. Both male and female dancers now interpret such characters with equal authenticity, devotion, and artistic sensitivity. This evolving approach

not only preserves the spiritual and cultural essence of the tradition but also reflects changing social perspectives that value equality and shared artistic space.

As a result, Manipuri classical dance today stands as both a symbol of cultural continuity and a progressive expression of artistic freedom. By welcoming the creative participation of all performers regardless of gender, it continues to preserve its sacred roots while responding gracefully to the spirit of the modern world.

Conclusion

The performing arts traditions of Manipur reveal a remarkable cultural system in which spirituality, ritual practice, music, and dance are deeply interwoven with ideas of cooperation and shared responsibility. Through traditions such as *Lai Haraoba*, *Raas Leela*, *Nata Sankirtana*, and contemporary Manipuri classical dance, it becomes evident that both men and women have played vital and complementary roles in sustaining the artistic and spiritual heritage of Manipuri society. These traditions demonstrate that cultural continuity is not maintained through separation or hierarchy, but through collective participation grounded in mutual respect and devotion.

The study shows that the roles of *Nupa Amaibi* and *Nupi Amaibi* in *Lai Haraoba* reflect a balanced spiritual partnership where ritual authority is shared across genders. Similarly, in *Raas Leela*, the harmonious relationship between the *Rasdhari* and the *Sutradhari* illustrates the importance of artistic collaboration in preserving sacred performance traditions. The historical emergence of women's participation in *Nata Sankirtana* through institutions such as *Raseshwori Pala* further highlights the gradual expansion of artistic spaces for women within Manipuri society. These developments reveal how Manipuri cultural traditions adapted to social changes while still preserving their spiritual essence and ritual significance.

The transformation of Manipuri classical dance from ritual centred performances to organized stage compositions also reflects the evolving nature of cultural expression. In contemporary performances, male and female artists increasingly share equal creative space, and mythological characters are interpreted beyond rigid gender limitations. Such developments indicate that Manipuri performing arts continue to evolve in ways that embrace inclusivity while remaining rooted in tradition.

Ultimately, the performing arts of Manipur stand as a living example of cultural harmony and equality. They preserve not only artistic excellence but also a collective philosophy that values unity, cooperation, and shared cultural identity. In an increasingly modern and globalized world, these traditions continue to offer meaningful insights into how art can become a powerful medium for social balance, spiritual connection, and cultural continuity across generations.

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