

A Historical Study of Manipuri Vaishnavite form of Dance: Nat Sankirtan

R.K. Singel Sana

Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of History, Assam University, Silchar

(ABSTRACT)

The history of the development of Manipuri dances and music may be divided into two parts. The first part will cover the period prior to the entry of Hindu cult into Manipur while the second will cover the Hindu period. Each of the two aspects has its own importance and glory. The introduction of Vishnu worship started in Manipur during the reign of king Kyamba (1467 CE-1508 CE). With the advent of Vishnu worship, rites and rituals attendant's ceremonials were introduced. Ritual singing forms called Kirtan were introduced for propitiating the new divinity. The Chaitanya style of devotional Vaishnavism was embraced by King Gareeb Niwaz in 1717 CE that saw prominence of religious performance arts including singing and tradition based on themes surrounding Lord Krishna. During his reign the 'Ariba Pala' (earliest Nata pala group) became the main ritual for propitiating the god Rama. Nata Sankirtana is regarded as the product of these institutions. Then, in 1763 CE-1798 CE, under the rule of Maharaj Bhagyachandra, Drupad Hari Sankirtana became famous in Manipur. It was during his period that the temple of Shri Govindajee was installed and started to be worshipped by offering Rasa Kirtan of Lord Krishna. The introduction of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is the most remarkable gift of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra to Manipuri culture. The Nata Sankirtana, which was created as a compulsory prologue or purvaranga of Raas Leela, was separately introduced in the rites of passages of the devout worshippers of Vaishnav religion in the late 19th century.

This paper intends to study the inflow of Hindu influence gave birth to one of the richest classical art traditions – the Sankirtan with its many offshoots. However, our concern with Kirtan is only to take up the relevant details and trace the origin of Sankirtan and the gradual development of this form in Manipur.

Keywords: Manipuri, Hindu, Ceremonials, Kirtan, Chaitanya, Vaishnavism, *Ariba Pala*, Purvaranga, Rites-of-Passages, Offshoots.

Sankirtan: the origin of Cholom

Sankirtan, by means of its spiritual epitome, is the chanting or singing of the glories of the supreme Lord, establishing the relation between the soul and the Supersoul. It is an exposition of the gratefulness of the human beings to the creator, and is the well-known truth for all the religions practiced by humans irrespective of caste, creed and colour. Sankirtan, as mentioned in Srimad Bhagavatam, the highest authority of Indian culture, is the religion of the Kali Yuga i.e. the present age of quarrel (Joshi, 2002:108). The home of the Cholom in the field of Manipuri performing arts, specifically dance, is Kirtana or Sankirtan. Cholom is an authentic and an independent form of performing art (Singh, 2004: 35). To trace the origin of it, we have to find out among which of the Kirtans it is used most extensively and perfectly. Kirtan forms a prominent

background in any ceremony, from the day of birth up to the last breath, in this land of Manipur (Singh, 1988: 165).

In Manipur, we can first divide Kirtan in three categories for better knowledge, viz. (a) Nat Sankirtan, (b) Kirtan in sitting form or arrangement, and (c) Kirtan on the move or while roaming.

Objectives: The present study aims at studying what is the nature of Manipuri Nat Sankirtan and what are its types and forms. It will also look at the role of Sankirtan in the Manipuri society and their socio-religious practices. Further, the paper will try to connect the Manipuri traditional Lai Haraoba with this Sankirtan form and to explore the instruments and the role played by them in order to understand the representations of the Manipuri Nat Sankirtan.

Methodology

The main source of data is secondary comprised of books, journals, research articles, published Thesis, magazines, websites, etc. The method of historical analysis is employed for the present study. Moreover interview with the knowledgeable person in this area of study has also made a contribution in the finding of the research.

Nat Sankirtan: a part of Mahayajna

Nat Sankirtan by its statutory nature is the biggest and the most classic form of all the Sankirtans. It is by itself the most visible or practical performance oriented form of Mahayajna, with all the rituals. Hence, Nat Sankirtan is a very high profile activity which is part of a universal Yajna. The people of Manipur are divinely blessed as an eminent devotee like Rajarshi Bhagyachandra was born here, who fully established a rare form of Sankirtan Mahayajna called Nat Sankirtan, which is found nowhere else in the whole world (Joshi, 2002: 108-109).

During the reign of Kiyamba, in 1467 CE - 1508 CE, a Vishnu temple was built and people started paying obeisance to Vishnu by offering Sankirtana. After him, his successors, King Charairongba and most of his people in 1697 CE, took Bhagavat Dikshya and began worshipping Shri Krishna (Madan Mohan) through Hari Sankirtana. In 1709 CE, Maharaj Garibniwaz founded Drupad Hari Sankirtana which was known as Ariba Sankirtana (Bangdesh Pala) in the rituals of dead ceremonies like Asti and Shraddha. Then, in 1763 CE - 1798 CE, under the rule of Maharaj Bhagyachandra, Drupad Hari Sankirtana accompanying Gourachandrika and Goura Bhavi became famous in Manipur. Such a tradition rose to great heights during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh. Nata Sankirtana which found its supreme expression during the reign of King Chandrakirti of Manipur (1850 – 1886 CE) when the 64 Rasas were presented for the first time in 64 sessions spreading over 32 days. The Manipuri musician singing Kirtana is called Nata - a classical term in Sanskrit, meaning the person who knows the four abhinayas and different types of Natya, gets himself merged in the rasa which he is trying to depict and who appears physically on the stage: a dancer with songs on the lips (Devi, 2018: 96-97). This Nata Sankirtan is a well codified form of Sankirtan and is performed before every Raas Leela of Manipur as prologue (prastabana) since its inception (Doshi, 1989: 8).

Further, the Nata Sankirtana was developed and made it and rich up to its high apex which is during the reign of king Churachand (1891-1941 CE) (Bandopadhyay, 2010: 62).

Now, we have to consider the kinds of Kirtan. There are the following numbers of Kirtans which have their own proper place and are prevalent in Manipur.

- (1) **Nam Kirtan:** Without Nam Kirtan any auspicious ritual relating to the glories of Krishna, like Bhagavat Kirtan, and of the demigods and goddesses cannot be performed. Being mainly centred on singing and chanting, this form is only for 'shravanam' (hearing), which is the first of the nine practices of Bhakti described in the Srimad Bhagavatam (R.K., 2012: 63).
- (2) **Katha Kirtan or Guna Kirtan:** The season to celebrate this Kirtan is in the month of Mera conforming to October/November or Ashwin/Kartik in the original Indian calendar. Complying with the idea that the season is inauspicious, the common people in relation to their religious faith organize religious events like Bhagavat Katha (Lord Krishna's tales from the Bhagavad) and Bhagavat Kirtan (chanting the glories of Krishna in musical interludes) and celebrate in the localities of the land. This is the design of the Katha Kirtan in Manipur (Singh, 1993: 60).
- (3) **Episode of Damodar Lila:** The most noticeable tale related during the Katha Kirtan is that of the chapter of Damodar lila that leads to the discharge of Nalakuvara and Manigriva, the two sons of the demigods' treasurer Kuvera. Contemplating in sympathy, Narada Muni showed his causeless mercy and cursed the two to remain as trees in Nanda's (Krishna's father) courtyard for a period of the demigods' one hundred years. However, Narada Muni with his special causeless mercy blessed them that they would be freed liberally by Krishna himself.

However, the celebration around the above tale is commonly celebrated in Mathura, Vrindavan and other places. The singing or chanting is in the mood of the Manipuri style, and the songs utter the different glories of Krishna only.

Nobo Kirtan

Generally we have a type of Kirtan which starts from one place and ends at another place. The process depends on the need of the occasion. Whenever a deity is carried for a particular celebration it is the tradition to lead the procession with Nobo Kirtan (R.K., 2012: 64).

Musical Instruments in Kirtan

On the whole Manipuri drummer artistes use both Pung and Khol in these forms of Kirtans. But about Khol, the artistes do not use the Bengali Matikhol but rather their own wooden Khol which is more suitable in the display of Cholo etc. Among other instruments the Kartals are held in the hands. Singga and Benu are the two instruments generally found mentioned and used in such Kirtans. Singga is the long blowing instrument shaped like an elephant trunk, whereas Benu is one of the names of Krishna's flute. At present, such lovely musical instruments of original character have been relieved by the loud brass bands of western origin. The

other percussion instruments used are the dholak, dhol, khanjuri and dafat during *Yaosang* or Holi (Singh, 2004: 83-85).

Cultural Assimilation

During the reign of a great Manipuri King Garibniwaz (1709-1748 CE), who adopted Ramanandi cult, a team of singers came from Bengal, an old school of Kirtana singing under the style of Bangadesh or Ariba Pala who sang kirtana with line like *Ramo Ramo Govinda*, before the worship began. They were called kirtana or kitana. As the singers hailed from Bengal, their team presentation was called Bangdeshpala. The form got highly enriched on its association with the culture of Manipur and thus took an entirely new dimension with all the stamps of Manipuri culture. It was during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra that we find an evolved form of this pala. Thus the old pala i.e. the Bangdesh pala came to be called the Aribapala and the new pala, i.e. the Nata Pala came to be called the Anoubapala (Devi, Singh, Singh, 2015: 102-103).

This is true in the case of Manoharsai also. In Rada Bengal area, at the village of Kandra Narottam Thakura and Srinivas Acharya started a kind of kirtana singing, which later evolved into Manoharsai kirtana (Singh, 1982: 61). This style is now surviving in the state as it has been a part of the cultural life of the Manipuri Vaishnavas. This form has become deep-rooted here in Manipur up to the extent of becoming one of the important parts of the society with regard to social ceremonies etc.

Sanctity of Cholom

Cholom movement plays a vital role in Manipuri dance. A significant feature of Cholom is that it can be recognised by which musical instrument or object is held in the hands. When accompanied with kartal (Cymbals) it becomes Kartal Cholom. Likewise, there are Pung (drum) Cholom, Dhol Cholom, Manjeela Cholom, Tafat Cholom, Khanjuri Cholom etc. (Doshi, 1989: 118). Holding a *Phiran* (flag) in the hands is known as *Phiran* Cholom (Bandopadhyay, 2010: 143). Cholom is a part of only Kirtan or Sankirtan. So the sanctity of Cholom is very high and sacred since Kirtan is regarded as Mahayajna, the worship of the supreme by chanting his glories (Bandopadhyay, 2010: 134).

Kartal Cholom

Kartals are the pair of cymbals played by the singers and Kartal cholom is the dance performed while playing these instruments. This spherical-shaped instruments, made from an alloy of brass and bell metal, weighs about a kilogramme on each side and produces a sharp sound. Playing these instruments is a highly developed art and is used for its sound as well as decorative dance movements (R.K., 2012:67-68).

Pung Cholom

Pung is the main striking instrument used in the Sankirtan. Elaborating on what are the intricate qualities of Manipuri Pung in Sankirtan, the musical languages of Pung are expressed as a full visual display in this form of Cholom (Singh, 2004: 36).

Female Sankirtan

It may be stated that females in Manipur have more participation in the Sankirtan in comparison with the females of other places. They (the females) have the small Kartal or Manjeela to use in their Cholom which is more delicate and suited for the females. The rise in popularity of Sankirtan may be associated with the sheer dramatic impact of the beautifully dressed woman singers and the acrobatics of their accompanying Pung Cholom drummers (Aihara, 2016: 180). Rath Yatra is another big festival where the females have maximum participation. The two kinds of music, namely, Jaya Deva and Khubak Isei are the gifts of Rath Jatra in Manipuri culture.

Khubak Eshei Pala is a group which performs singing only with clapping of the hands. Khubak Eshei is a form of performing art where every aspect of the song is interpreted with the manifestation of clapping only. The musical instrument used in Khubak Eshei is Pung (drum) only. The song is sung from the prologue of Jaideva's Gita Govinda i.e. the Dasavatara. The ten incarnations of Vishnu are hailed in these verses. So often this Khubakisei is referred to as Jaidevachongba. This rare form is the derivative of the expansion and development of Sankirtan in Manipur (Joshi, 2002: 139).

Yaosang or Holi festival

Holi is celebrated by the Hindus all over India as one of the biggest festivals. In Manipur, the glamorous Holi Palas (participating groups) coming from all the corners of the land overflow the Sri Govindaji temple from early morning, waiting in a queue to dedicate their artistic skills in a short period of time in front of Sri Govindaji and Raseshwori (Joshi, 2002: 145). So the whole depiction of the day's celebration is a unification of devotional and colourful display of Choloms in dholok, big drum, tafat, khanjuri and flags, etc. together at a time. Every group of Holi Pala has its own flag of different colours. Like the drummers, Tafat and Khanjuri players, who have their own moment to display their skills with Cholom, the flag holder also has a part to reveal his entertaining movements with the flag, evoking loud laughter and clapping from the audience (Singh, 1982: 49).

Jagai Madhai Cholom in Gaur Lila

Gaur Lila is a performing art form representing the life and activities of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his Bhakti movement, especially in the northern parts of India. With the arrival of Vaishnava Bhakti cult of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the people of Manipur became more conscious about Krishna awareness with Chaitanya as a symbol of universal love. Goura Leela which is clearly towards the realistic depiction emphasizes more on songs, dance and abhinaya (Devi, 2018: 124). Among the performing arts based on sacred themes, Gaur Lila became very popular here.

Tafat and Khanjuri Cholom

Tafat and Khanjuri are musical instruments in the group of percussion. Their inclusion in the Holi Pala is an additional attraction especially in presentations with innovative Choloms. In a way they are more creative here since their beauty is enriched by the Choloms.

Dhol Cholom

Among the different Choloms, the one with the big drum called Dhol is the most exciting one. Dhol Cholom is a new inclusion in the traditional forms of Cholom used in Nat Sankirtan and not regarded acceptable in all the occasions (Bandopadhyay, 2010: 143).

Rajmel Cholom in Nat Sankirtan

In Nat Sankirtan the most important and ritually seen part is Rajmel, where all the participants with Kartal in hand have to move leftward (anti-clockwise) in the circle (mandap). The movement of the participants should be in uniformity, just like the Kirtan singers maintain their vocal code or sing like a choir. This is the position of Rajmel Cholom in Nat Sankirtan of Manipur (R.K., 2012: 97).

The Role of Sankirtana in social functions or ceremonies

After the introduction of Nata Sankirtana performances in the rituals of temple in Manipur, the art forms started spreading to the social rituals associated from one's birth to manhood and to his dead i.e. birth ceremony, annaprasana or giving of first solid food to the baby, piercing of ears, putting on the sacred thread i.e. the *yagyopavit*, marriage or *vivaha*, and even after death, cremation and death anniversaries etc. Each function has specific rules, which are followed. With the arrival of Vaishnavism in Manipur (mainly the Gaudiya Vaishnavism) these ritual songs were replaced by the Nata Sankirtana. The Sankirtana plays an important role in the religious life of the Manipuris (Singh, 1988: 216).

Lai Haraoba and Nat Sankirtan

To trace the origin of Manipuri Nat Sankirtan, we have to go back again to the account of the creation of this land i.e. *Lai Haraoba*, where all the roots of our cultural ethos are found reconciled in some way or the other. Whatever the Meitei community do in Nat Sankirtan and other forms of such Sankirtan are all the continuation of the original forms, with changes in the designs occasionally due to the need of time, situation and other relevant factors (Devi, 2018: 98). The blowing of conches in Nat Sankirtan is also found in the ancient texts or *Puyas* that they were blown since the very early period.

Apart from the Nat Sankirtan which remains fundamental in all the rituals of Manipur, there is an elaborate form of Sankirtan called Dhumen. This form of Sankirtan is designed in the pattern of Pung (drum) exclusively. Where the tuneful vocal sounds dominate in Nat Sankirtan, the workings of *Punglon* (language of the Pung) supercede in Dhumen. Dhumen is not appropriate like the Nat Sankirtan, in all types of functional ceremonies. There are four types of Dhumen duly dedicated to Sri Govindaji. They are: (1) Maha

Dhumen initiated by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, (2) Nityai Dhumen started by Chaurajit Maharaj (3) Devi Dhumen introduced by Chandrakirti Maharaj and (4) Gaur Dhumen initiated by Narsingh Maharaj (Singh, 1982: 64-65).

Maha Dhumen of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra

The participating artistes or devotees in any form of Sankirtan in Manipur are called *Palas*. In Maha Dhumen initiated by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1759-1798 CE), the minimum number of participating singers is 64 and 14 pung players, i.e. $64+14=78$ *Palas*, whereas in Nat Sankirtan an element of five *Palas* is the minimum i.e. three singers and two *pung* players. The duration of it covers is 24 hours. The function goes on without any interval in between, glorifying in singing the activities of Lord Krishna.

Nityai Dhumen of Chaurjit Maharaj

After Rajarshi, his son Chaurajit was in the throne from 1803-1813 CE. He too dedicated a Dhumen called Nityai Dhumen. Here, the Pung (drum) players are fourteen and the vocal artistes are only eight. The time duration is one day only. Regarding the theme of the song, the artiste can create the sequence accordingly so that the ending is in *Gostha* meaning Krishna's pastimes as a cowherd boy.

Lairema or Devi Dhumen of Chandrakirti Maharaj

Chandrakirti Maharaj, the grandson of Rajarshi (1834-1844 CE), was the founder of Devi Dhumen. This Dhumen is mainly dedicated to goddess Durga. The Pung players (drum players) are fourteen, same as in the Maha Dhumen. The minimum artistes (singers) are sixteen. The main attraction of Devi Dhumen is the exploration of *Pung* mysteries and the skill of the Pung experts.

Gaur Dhumen of Narsingh Maharaj

Gaur Dhumen created by the king Narsingh is the replica of Maha Dhumen of Rajarshi. The only difference is that Gaur Dhumen ends in a day whereas Maha Dhumen ends in two days.

Conclusion

In the panorama of the rich Indian culture such rare forms of performing arts like Nat Sankirtan, which is found nowhere else in the world, is very precious and needs to be preserved properly and promoted. The firm foundation of the Sankirtan in course of its consistent development in Manipur has now become the spiritual fountainhead of all our cultural, religious and social activities. Cultural activities such as the Sankirtan have a high degree of value, even more than religious rituals. There is no other way to identify the nation except by the definition of its varied cultural manifestations.

Sankirtana – the ritual singing, drumming, and dancing of Manipur becomes the fourth Indian art form – has been selected for inscription on the Representative List of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

The decision was taken on December 4, 2013 at the eight session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee in Baku, Azerbaijan. Following the recognition, the art form will be able to enjoy greater popularity across the world, attract scholars and performing artistes from far and wide, and thus the recognition will help in conserving it for the posterity (Devi, Singh, Singh, 2015: 115).

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