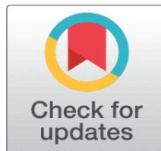


RECLAIMING A MARGINALIZED TRADITION: THE CLASSICAL STATUS OF MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTANA

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is a significant form of devotional music and dance originating from the state of Manipur in north eastern India. It holds a prominent place in the religious and cultural life of the Manipuri people. It is a combination of music, dance and recitation performed as part of religious and cultural rituals, primarily associated with Vaishnavism. Sankirtan in Manipuri society is an ancient tradition and its form and practice reflect the rich spiritual heritage of the region. In this article, we will highlight the Manipuri Sankirtan and its similarities with other Indian classical music. Although Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is based on the Indian music system and it is still not recognized as classical music.

Keywords: Manipur, Music, Raaga, Sankirtana, Taal

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipuri culture possesses a distinctive and rich heritage shaped by centuries of historical continuity, spiritual evolution and artistic creativity. The history of the people of Manipur stretches back nearly two millennia, as evidenced by early manuscripts and royal chronicles such as the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, which document the socio-political and cultural developments of the region. These records reveal a civilization that nurtured indigenous traditions while simultaneously engaging in processes of cultural assimilation and transformation. Over time, Manipuri society evolved through interaction with neighboring cultures yet retained a strong sense of identity grounded in ritual, performance and community practices. A major turning point in the cultural history of Manipur occurred between the late seventeenth

and early eighteenth centuries, when Vaishnavite Hinduism became the dominant religious and philosophical force in the region. But the presence of Brahmins from the mainland India in the valley of Manipur is recorded in the time of King Kiyamba (Hanjabam et al., 2020). Although Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself never visited Manipur, his follower Narottama Datta known among the Manipuris as Narottam Thakur was closely associated with the spread of Vaishnavism in the region (Sharma et al., 2021). Under the patronage of rulers such as Maharaja Bhagyachandra, the spread of Gaudiya Vaishnavism transformed the religious, social and artistic landscape of Manipuri society (Parrat, 1980). The devotional ideals associated with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu inspired a profound reconfiguration of indigenous rituals, music, and dance. Many traditional practices were reinterpreted through Vaishnavite philosophy, leading to a unique synthesis of local and classical elements. Rather than erasing indigenous culture, this process produced a dynamic cultural continuum in which pre-Vaishnavite and Vaishnavite traditions coexisted and interacted.

Within this historical framework emerged some of the most refined and widely admired aspects of Manipuri culture, particularly its performance traditions. Among these, Manipuri Dance and Nata Sankirtana stand out as significant expressions of devotional aesthetics, spiritual discipline and artistic excellence. Manipuri Dance, especially in the form of *Raas Leela*, integrates music, rhythm, gesture and narrative to convey the emotional and philosophical essence of Vaishnavite devotion. Owing to its codified technique, aesthetic sophistication and continuity of practice, it has been recognized as one of the classical dance forms of India. However, the recognition of Manipuri Dance as a classical tradition raises a crucial cultural and scholarly question. The *Raas Leela* tradition is not an isolated art form but an extension of the broader Sankirtana tradition, which constitutes the foundational framework of Manipuri devotional performance. Nata Sankirtana, with its complex musical structures, rhythmic intricacies, ritual functions and performative grammar forms the core from which other Manipuri performing arts have evolved. It integrates vocal music, percussion, dance, dramaturgy and ritual symbolism into a holistic aesthetic experience. Despite its depth, antiquity and continuity, Nata Sankirtana has not yet received equal recognition within the discourse of Indian classical arts.

2. OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to explore and establish the classical status of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana through a critical and interdisciplinary approach. The specific objectives are:

- 1) To examine the historical evolution of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana and trace its development within the socio-religious and cultural framework of Manipur.
- 2) To analyze the aesthetic and structural features of Nata Sankirtana in relation to classical performing arts, focusing on its music, rhythm, dance and dramaturgical elements.
- 3) To evaluate the marginalization of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana in mainstream Indian classical discourse and identify the factors responsible for its limited academic and cultural recognition.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology, combining historical, textual, ethnographic and performance-oriented approaches. The study examines historical records, royal chronicles, manuscripts and earlier scholarly works to trace the origin and development of Nata Sankirtana. Secondary sources such as research articles, books and cultural reports are also analysed to contextualize its evolution. The research engages with classical Indian aesthetic theories, especially *rasa*, *bhakti*, and *natyadharmi* traditions, drawing parallels with the concepts found in the *Natyashastra*. This helps to evaluate the classical framework within which Nata Sankirtana can be located.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana has been preserved and transmitted not only through an unbroken lineage of performance practice but also through a growing body of written scholarship. Over the last few decades, several writers, researchers and traditional *gurus* have contributed significantly to the documentation, analysis and theoretical understanding of this composite art form. Their works, available in print and academic formats, have played a crucial role in shaping contemporary discourse on the tradition. Among the early systematic efforts to document the form is *Manipuri Nata Sankirtana* (1983) by Kumari Ranjana Devi, which provides a descriptive and historical account of the

evolution, structure and ritual context of the tradition. The work highlights the devotional and cultural foundations of Nata Sankirtana and attempts to situate it within the broader framework of Manipuri Vaishnavite practices. Similarly, A. Chitreshwar Sharma's *Sankirtana Bichar* (1997) offers an analytical perspective on the emergence and aesthetic dimensions of Sankirtana. B. Kulachandra Sharma's *Sankirtana Nirnaya* (2001) contributes to the understanding of performance grammar and pedagogical methods within the tradition and various types of Sankirtana. L. Lakpati Singh's edited volume *Meitei Nat Sankirtan Neinaba* (2003) compiles important essays and traditional knowledge related to the origin, development and performance conventions of the form. This work is particularly valuable as it bridges the gap between oral tradition and scholarly interpretation. Academic research has further expanded the scope of study. M. Thoiba Singha's doctoral thesis (2004) at Manipur University focuses on *Meitei Pung*, the central percussion tradition of Nata Sankirtana, analyzing its rhythmic patterns, stylistic nuances, and performance techniques. The study demonstrates the complexity and codification of the *punglon* system and situates it within classical Indian rhythmic traditions. Dr. Haorongbam Rajmani's *Meitei Punglon Seigonnabi* (2005) provides an in-depth musicological examination of rhythmic structures, Taals and the theoretical framework underlying percussion in Manipuri Sankirtana. The work underscores the technical sophistication of the form and its potential recognition as a classical musical system. Further interdisciplinary and cultural studies perspectives are evident in Manidhan Singha's doctoral research at Assam University, Silchar titled *Cultural Semiosis of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana: A Study on its Historical Development with Special Reference to Barak Valley* (2009). This study approaches the tradition from the standpoint of cultural semiotics, exploring symbolism, identity, and the process of cultural transmission in diasporic contexts. It highlights how Nata Sankirtana functions as a marker of community identity and continuity beyond Manipur.

Taken together, these works demonstrate the gradual shift from descriptive and devotional accounts to analytical, musicological and interdisciplinary approaches. While they provide valuable insights into the historical, ritual and technical dimensions of Nata Sankirtana, there remains a need for a comprehensive critical evaluation of its classical status within the larger framework of Indian performing arts. The present study seeks to address this gap by integrating historical, aesthetic, and theoretical perspectives to reassess the position of Nata Sankirtana in the discourse of classical traditions.

5. ORIGIN OF MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTANA

The origin of Manipuri Sankirtan can be traced back to the 15th century in several manuscripts of Manipur when the Vaishnavite saint Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu spread the practice of chanting the holy name of God (Harinam Sankirtan) across the Indian subcontinent. Although Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself did not visit Manipur, his teaching has greatly influenced the region, especially through the efforts of his followers who travelled to different parts of India. But, the first Sankirtana performance in Manipur is recorded in 1746 CE in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of Manipur, which mentions the observance of a religious ceremony accompanied by devotional singing, marking the early institutionalization of Vaishnavite musical and ritual practices in the region.

Wednesday, the Meitei maidan Thoipi married to the *Lakpa* of Manlak set off from the market Aayompa. On that day the anniversary of Sicha Khuraileima Punyapati was performed with singing. (Parrat, 2005, p.162)

Again, in 1752, during the reign of King Bharat Sai, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the performance of Kirtan in connection with ritual observances, indicating the growing integration of Vaishnavite devotional music into the socio-religious practices of Manipuri society.

Yipungshi Aananda Sai left for Tomphang watering place, to collect the head of his father, Mayang Ngampa (*alias* Mayampa *alias* Garibniwaz). With the singing of Hindu religious songs in a Kirtan, he also performed a sratha ceremony. (Parrat, 2005, p.168)

This type of incomplete Sankirtana performance represents the early formative stage of the tradition, when devotional singing and ritual observances were gradually being assimilated into the socio-religious life of Manipur, eventually evolving into the highly structured and codified form of Nata Sankirtana known today. The modern form of Manipuri Sankirtan is largely credited to King Bhagyachandra of Manipur (Singh & Singh, 2012). He is believed to have played a pivotal role in formalizing and systematizing the art form by incorporating devotional elements into the traditional dance and music of Manipur. King Bhagyachandra is also credited with creating the classical dance form known as Raas Leela, which is a central element in Manipuri Sankirtan performances (Singh & Singh, 2012). Classical Manipuri Dance is nevertheless identified with Raas Leela by such a National Institution like Sangeet Natak Akademi as

well as awards are presented to the Gurus of Nata Sankirtana under the category of traditional performing arts every year which are not recognize as a Classical (Sankirtana Ritual Singing, 2013). The Manipuri Nata Sankirtana Gurus and Scholars have not been able so far, to project this art form in all its beauty and strength as a classical term or at least to convinced other Indian scholars & authorities of its classical heritage. It only proves that their knowledge of Manipuri Dance is still on the fringe and does not penetrate the core of the real Nata Sankirtana as practiced and believed on the cultural soil of Manipur valley. Every Raas Leela performed in Manipur; it is invariably preceded by Nata Sankirtana as the Ras Leela is born out of the imagination of Lord Krishna when he remembers the Vrindaban Leela.

6. SANKIRTAN OF MANIPUR

The present form of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana singing was introduced by Rajashri Bhagyachandra, which found its supreme expression during the reign of King Chandrakirti (1850-1886). Nata Sankirtana is a Sanskrit word. Nata refers to 'to act', 'to dance' or 'an artist'. According to ancient Indian Nritya and Natya treatises, the person who knows the different types of abhinayas can be called an artist. One of the most prominent treatises in the history of Indian Natya treatises is Bharat Muni's *Natyasastra*. In *Natyasastra*, Bharat Muni discusses Abhinaya, types of Abhinaya and many elements involves around Natya.

Abhinaya is called because in the performance it together with Sakha, the Anga and the Upanga explains the meaning of different... the historic representation of play takes place in four ways this historic representation is known to be fourfold: Gestures Angika, Vacika, Aharya and Sattrika (Ghosh, 1950, p.145).

Sankirtana is a combination of 'Sama' and 'Kirtana'. 'Sama' or 'Sang' means a few and Kirtan means Praise the Lords, which means Praise the Lords in together. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is complete example devotion, spirituality, cultural assimilation and it also follows the principles of Indian music as well as traditional Manipuri dance & song.

7. INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC AND MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTANA

At present, Indian Classical Music has two major forms, they are the North Indian classical music i.e. Hindustani and the South Indian expression is called Carnatic, while both the music genres follows the same Indian musical principles. The Indian classical music has very long and continuous traditions which accumulate the heritage of centuries. In India, music is known as Sangeet. In Sangeet, there are three basic elements viz. Swara, Tala and Laya. All these basic elements directly reflect that music is employed for its three fold meanings, namely Geetam (Vocal Music, Melodic form), Vadyam (Instrumental Music) and Nrityam (Dance, Movement).

If these three categories merged together at the same time then, it gets the supreme ecstasy of Rasa. Music and Dance are always intertwined in Hinduism and also related to the devotion of Gods & Goddesses. The definition of music is correctly defined by Sangeetcharya Pt.

Sharangdeva in his book *Sangeet Ratnakar*:

Geetam Vadyam Tatha Nrityam, Trayam Sangeet Muchyate (Sastri, 1943, p.13)

Pt. Sharangdeva states that the simultaneous and integrated performance of *Geet* (vocal music), *Vadya* (instrumental accompaniment), and *Nritya* (dance) constitutes *Sangeet*. This holistic framework of Indian performing arts can be represented through a diagrammatic model.

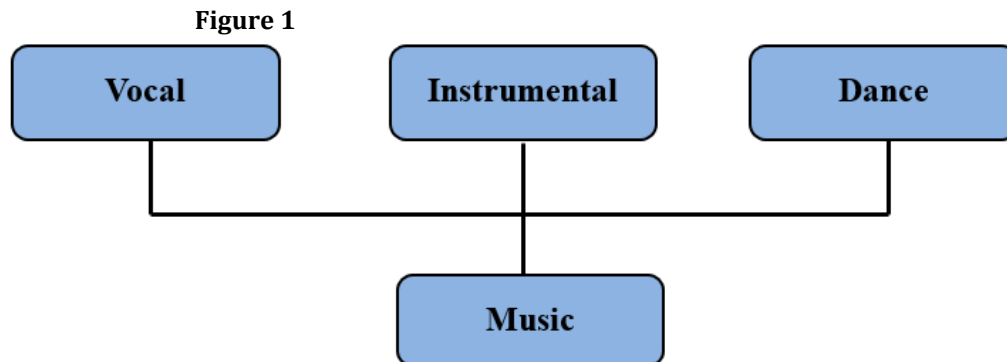


Figure 1 Concept of Sangeet According to Pt. Sharangdeva

But in modern day notion, the Sangeet is only of Geet and Vadya. It is a very important point to note that Nritya (Dance) is also a part of Sangeet. The definition of Sangeetcharya Pt. Sharangdeva's about music is still relevant and widely accepted by most of the Indian scholars. Another definition also highlights elements of music and is narrowly similar to Pt. Sharangdeva's viewpoint:

Geetvaditranritynam Rakti: Sadharno Guna

Ato Raktivihinam Yatna Tat Sangitmuchyate (Paranjape, 2010)

Geetam, Vadyam and Nrityam are the main principles of Indian Music. These three principles have the ultimate supremacy to connect and entertain everyone. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana also follows the Indian music system with some traditional accent and this area is yet to be explored by Indian Scholars. If we closely study the Manipuri Nata Sankirtana, then we can find these three Indian Music principles in the Manipuri Nata Sankirtana. In Manipuri Nata Sankirtana, there are Singers with instrument i.e. Cymbal and Drummers (Modern Manipuri Mridanga). A very interesting part of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana, apart from other Indian Classical Music, is that the singers are performers and performers are also singers. This kind of duality in characters among the Sankirtan artistes is almost absent in other forms of Indian Classical Music. The artistes of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana sings dance and perform with instruments and at the same time, they mesmerize the audiences with their unparalleled skill and talent.

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is a collective prayer, a meditation and a great sacrifice (Mahayajna in Vaishnavism), lasting about 4-5 hours at a stretch with a lot of rituals, movements and rhythmic patterns strictly after the Vaishnavite faith and also colored with indigenous Manipuri traditions. It is a composite vision of Classical Music that Sura, Tala, Laya and Dance are combined together at a time. Being a way of worship, each gesture, dance movement is significant, symbolic and mystical. One is supposed to be in constant touch with the eternal Lord Krishna and Sakhis of Vrindaban. The beauty of Nata Sankirtana lies in the fact that it is a new creation patterned on the Vaishnavite philosophy and aesthetics, integrated with the traditional beliefs of Manipuri. It is closely associated with the Naradiya Ghandharva School of music and follows such texts as Sanggeet-Sara, Sangeet-Damodar. It can't escape, of course, from the pervasive impact of the Nata Shastra of Bharata Muni

the development of Manipuri classical music known as Nat based on six ragas and thirty-six raginis expounded in the Sanskrit text of Indian classical music (Singh, 2012, p.88).

Various classical Taals are adopted and there are hundreds of Samcharas, Taal-Prabandhas associated with the Manipuri Mridanga Gurus. Vigour alternates with softness in the Tandava movements based on sometimes animal gaits and the posture of Manipuri martial arts. The

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is generally performed in a courtyard or Mandap (Hall) of a temple and the Mandali (performing area of Nata Sankirtana) of Sankirtana's design & arrangement of the seats are determined according to religious text. The artistes form a choreography in the centre of the pavilion. Two Mridanga players sit on the left and right of the temple, resting on their knees and toes. Other singers also came in and they showed Dandavat Pranama to the assembly before taking their places. After distribution of incense, flowers and cloths to the artistes, the Sankirtan begins with the following words by Mandap Mapu (President of that particular Sankirtana):

Ballap Premase Kaha Sri Radha Krishna, Balaha Prabhu Nitya Chaityana Advaita Kahata Santa Sadho Madhuras
Vasi Hare Hare (Singh, 1968, p. 31)

The Mridanga players start with Bola (Strike of Syllables) *Ten Ten Ta Tak Taang* representing the Chaityana and Nityai, the founders of the Goudiya Sect. This is also known as Raaga Achouba (Major Raaga of the Mridanga), consecrated to the making of a mental image of Gouranga Mahaprabhu, Nityainanda, Aadvaita, Gadadhara and Srivasa (Singh et al., 2020). The Conch player blows the Conch when the Mridanga player plays his first movement. It is followed by the Vocal music Raag *ta ri ta na* in the cyclic order of the Indian music system Ghora, Pancham and Dheergha with the striking of Cymbals. The Singers sing, viz. Sabha Vandana, Guru Vandana, Gourchandrika, and Padavali songs in succession. The Mridanga players make use of Teen Taal (Tri-kuta-ka), i.e. 7 beats and 3 Stresses, then Tanchap (Chaturashrajati Ek Taal), i.e. 3 beats and 1 stress and Menkup (Tyashrajati Ek Taal), i.e., 3 beats and 1 Stress. This is followed by Taal- Duitaal, called Rajmel Rajamel has, by and large, the most important part of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana. It is a kind of Dance performed by the artists with 7 beats and 2 stresses in the Vilmvita Laya (Singh, 1980). The artistes first move clockwise (representing the pilgrimage to Nabadwip), where the meeting of the instrument (Yantra Milan) symbolising the union of Lord Krishna and his Sakhis takes place. Exquisite movements of the body with considerable grace and dignity come up, and the quickening of the bolas of Mridanga indicate the three stages of vision, viz. Sankshipta, Samkirna and

Sampurna at different stops. At this point, no sitting is allowed for the stobha is to be shouted by the singers and the audience all standing together. But nowadays, the tradition of standing at the closing part of Rajamel Abhinaya has almost disappeared (G. Singha, Personal communication, June 08, 2024). Then comes the movement of Tanchap (a form of Ek Taal), followed by the graceful movements of Dohara, in the Taal Menkup (another form of Ek Taal), representing the union of Sakhis with Radha and Krishna. Thus, the entire happening at Vrindavan conceived by Lord Chaityana is indicated by the songs and dance movements. The artistes recited the name of six Goswamis of Vrindavan, prayer to Nityainanda and Mridanga players would strike bols representing both brothers (Jaya Bhai Chaityana Nityai). The singers remain seat in a distinctive posture towards the end of Sankirtana. The Singers and Mridanga players by way of expressing the climax of their sublime and ecstatic feelings in the process of Sankirtana is unmatched. This is very humble, spontaneous, highly spiritual, and devotional and of course classic feature which is very much in vogue for the last few decades. The Sankirtana, unlike any other form of Kirtan or Bhajan singing has thus very vast, deep and unique in terms of theme and dynamic. It is indeed most fortunate for the Vaishnavite Manipuris that they have been blessed with such a holy cult of Sankirtana music which easily brings them on the path of Prem Bhakti devotion to the Lord.

The central and most distinctive feature of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is all the songs that sing in the entire Sankirtana, including the birth of Gouranga, Mudhura Rasa of Radha and Krishna describes by dance movements with appropriate Taals. The Mridanga players articulate the Mridanga as sounds of thunder, the voice of birds and animals, etc. The rich cultural heritage of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is yet to be explored and recognised as a Classical Music in the same line as Hindustani and Carnatic. Even in Hindstani and Carnatic music, abhinaya is involved nowhere. But, according to ancient Indian Natya and Nritya treatises, abhinaya is an integral part of Classical Music. From these points of view, only Manipuri Nata Sankirtan lies in the within frame of Indian Classical Music. It is quite a strange thing that, although the present Manipuri Nata Sankirtana took its final shape in the last part of the 18th century and follows the exact rules and regulations of the Vedic Sangeet treatise by non-literate Manipuri Sankirtana Gurus. Nata Sankirtana performs in every sphere of life of Manipuris, from Shasthi Puja to Death ceremonies. It still remains the sole property of Manipuris and needs to be generalized to other people and recognised as classical music.

8. MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTAN IN THE UNESCO

As a result of the continuity effort of Sankirtan Gurus, the United Nations has announced on 4th

Dec. 2013 that Manipuri Nata Sankirtana has been selected for the inscription on the Representative List of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The decision was taken on 4th Dec. 2013 at the 8th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee consist of representatives from 24 countries. While announcing the Nata Sankirtana of Manipuri as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the United Nations stated:

Sankirtana encompasses an array of arts performed to mark religious occasions and various stages in the life of Vaishnava people of Manipur plains. Sankiratana practices centre on the temple, were performers narrate the lives and deeds of Krishna through song and dance. In a typical performance, two drummers and about ten singer-dancers perform in a hall or domestic courtyard encircled by seat devotees. The dignity and flow of aesthetic and religious energy is unparallel, moving audience members to tears and frequently to prostrate themselves before the performers (UNESCO, 2013).

It is a first and positive step towards its goal as a classical music of India. In the present scenario of Indian Classical Music, the Raag (melody) and Taal (rhythm) are the main elements. The Raag is a unique melodic structure with infinite possibilities of variation, while the Taal measures the time cycle and parallels the Raag in many aspects (Sorrell & Narayan, 1980). The Manipuri Nata Sankirtana has also Raag and different Taals. In Manipuri Sankirtana, there are six Raagas and each Raaga has another six Raaginis (Singh et al., 2020), while in Taals, there are near about 108 types of Taals. In spite of such rich classical features which accumulate from different generation is yet to achieve the status of Indian Classical Music.

9. CONCLUSION

Manipuri Sankirtana is a beautiful synthesis of music, dance, and spirituality, which has been passed down through generations in Manipur. Its distinctive rhythms, graceful dances, and the spiritual essence of the chanting make it one of the most significant forms of devotional expression in India. This art form continues to play an essential role in the religious and cultural life of the Manipuri people and is an important representation of India's diverse and rich devotional

heritage. Manipuri Sankirtana lies in the blending of ancient Manipur traditions with the devotional practices of the Vaishnavite sect, particularly through the influence of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the contributions of King Bhagyachandra. Its distinct combination of chanting, music, and dance makes it an integral part of the spiritual and cultural fabric of Manipur. So, the Nata Sankirtana of Manipuris lies in the exact horizon of Indian Classical Music as well as opens up this unexplored music to the world's community.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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