

## MANIPURI DANCE AND RAAS LEELA PAINTING

SOIBAM MONICA CHANU<sup>1</sup>, KUMAR SARGAM<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Theatre & Music, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Theatre & Music, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

**Abstract:** *This study delves into the dynamic evolution of Manipuri dance and Raas Leela painting, two quintessential art forms originating from Manipur, India. Over the passage of time, these art forms have undergone significant transformations influenced by various socio-cultural factors. The primary objective of this research is to meticulously examine these changes, discern the underlying factors responsible for them, and illuminate their profound implications on the preservation and advancement of Manipuri cultural heritage. The central research question at the heart of this study revolves around understanding how Manipuri dance and Raas Leela painting have adeptly navigated the path of modernity while retaining their intrinsic traditional essence. The Methodology used in the research was historical method, descriptive method and field visit and survey method. Methodology of data analysis was based on qualitative research. The study unearthed several noteworthy findings and ongoing trends in the contemporary period. Notably, it sheds light on the significant theme of "Adaptation to Modernity" in the realms of Manipuri dance, music, and Raas Leela painting. It also explores the profound impacts of "Globalization and Fusion," the intricate "Challenges in Transmission," and the nuanced dilemmas of "Commercialization versus Authenticity." These thematic areas collectively unravel the changing landscape of classical arts and dance in Manipur.*

**Keywords:** Manipuri Dance, Meitei, Painting, Culture, Changes

### INTRODUCTION

Manipur is an Indian state having a rich heritage and culture of its own where Manipuri dance (*Manipuri Jagoi*) showcases the identity of Manipur people to the world. It is a widely popular form of Manipur Dance famous around the globe. *Manipuri Jagoi* here specifically means Raas Leela. It is a form of Indian Classical dance, a blend of uniqueness of gesture and hand movements with song and drama that depicts the love and affection of Lord Krishna with Radha and the Gopis in the form of Raas Leela. With the rise of Vaishnavism in Manipur, Raas Leela became one of the most prominent parts of festivals in this state. The main theme of the classical dance is based on the Raas (love and affection) of Lord Krishna and Gopis in the bank of the Yamuna in Vrindavan. Today Raas Leela has become an integral part of Manipuri culture and widely spread all over the globe and also become a favourite form of classical dance amongst all.

At Masimpur village of Sinhat District in 1919 was mesmerized by its beauty, when great Poet Rabindranath Tagore encountered this form and regain the popularity (Devi, 2013). Afterwards he brought the Raas Leela to Vishwabharti Santiniketan and made the students there learn this dance form. Later on Raas Leela began to be performed on various stages at different places across India.

### 5 KINDS OF OF RAAS LEELA

At present Raas Leela is classified into 5 sub-categories of its kind: 1. Maha Raas, 2. Kunja Raas, 3. Basanta Raas, 4. Nitya Raas, 5. Diba Raas. Initially, only three types of the Raas, Maha Raas namely Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas were in existence during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra. These five sub categories were developed later during the time of Chandrakriti and Churhand Maharaj. The other two types namely- 1. Nitya Raas and 2. Diba Raas came into existence at a later time than the original three types.

- 1. Maha Raas:** Maha Raas created by Maharaja Bhagyachandra is the greatest and the best form amongst the five Raas Leela. This traditional dance form which is the most important amongst the five Raas was created based on the storyline of *Raspandadhya*. In this *Raasleela*, the ecstasy of Lord Shri Krishna with the Gopis depicted usually offered to Shri Shri Govindaji temple on the full moon day of the lunar month of *Mera*.
- 2. Kunja Raas:** This Raas Leela was also created by Maharaja Bhagyachandra. In the Kunja Lord Krishna along with Radhika and the Gopis played together, its resemblance with the ecstasy of Radha and Krishna at Kunja. It was named Kunja Raas is the shortest of the five dance forms. This very Raas form is offered to Shri Shri Govindaji on the *Mera Wakhinba* day of the Meitei.
- 3. Basanta Raas:** Bhagyachandra Maharaj created the Basanta Raas based mainly on *Brahmabeita Puran* and Shri Jayadev Kabi's Geet Govinda. This Raas Leela is played in the month of April (*Shajibu Purnima*) during the beautiful part of the year in the early spring when green buds and leaves start to grow. In this Raas leela, there is also a small part of playing with colours.
- 4. Nitya Raas:** This Raas leela which was created by Maharaj Chandrakirti is a dance form and Leela that can be played every day and hence is also called Niti Leela. It is said that this form was derived from the three Raas Leela of Bhagyachandra – Maha Raas ,Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas. Nitya Raas specifically depicts the moment of Lord Krishna waiting for Shri Radhika by making sakhiya with flowers. This episode is not in other leela except in Nitya Raas.
- 5. Diba Raas:** In order to create this particular Raas, there was intense discussion amongst the scholars and pandits of Manipur of the time in the year 1940 (Devi, 2013). And for the first time Oja Shri AkhamTomba from Sagolband was successful to create it and offered it to the Manipuri audience at *Mandap Achouba* (Placeholder3). This Raas was also created during the reign of Maharaja Churachand. This particular Raas is unique from others in the sense that it can be played during any time of the day and every day. This Raas is not played at Govindaji temple but played in the locality.

## PERFORMANCE OF RAAS-LEELA

The times of performing the Raas Leela are different from one another. The Raas Leela is offered performed considering an equivalent time when Lord Krishna performed the same with the Gopis at Brindavan. The practice has been followed since it was introduced by the Vaishnavs.

## COSTUMES OF RAAS LEELA

The costumes of the Raas Leela have a distinct feature quite different from other dance forms across the country. The costume itself plays a great role in making the Raas a unique dance form. It is said to be the attire which Maharaja Bheigyachandra saw in his dream and it is believed that the same is the original attire used by Lord Krishna. Maharaja Bheigyachandra by consulting various Gurus and Pandits of the then period to bring out what he visualized in his dream, the artistic and creative costume was introduced. The costume of the Raas Leela is so attractive that it easily lures the viewers. The costume cannot be worn casually as it has strict rules to be kept while wearing. Wearing of the costume is time consuming. In order to follow the rules and on the occasion of the

Raas Leela performance, the wearing of costume along with other make up usually starts 2 to 3 hours earlier before the performance. Hired professionals adorn the performers of the Raas Leela and the costume includes decorations and ornaments from head to toe. The performers are not made to adorn themselves.

The performers shall adhere to strict rules not only while wearing the costumes but also on their conduct and discipline.

There are two types of costume in Raas Leela:

1. Potloi of Lord Krishna or Male costume
2. Potloi (dress) of Radha and other Gopis

Both the costumes were introduced by Maharaj Bheigyachandra. There is only one male performer in the Raas Leela who plays the role of Lord Krishna and therefore there is only one male costume. In the costume of male performer, the form of '*Jhapa*' was introduced during the reign of King Shrijut Chandrakirti. The male costumes consist of head attire, neck attire, chest attire, hand and waist attire accordingly with the human anatomy.

Costumes and ornaments attire of male performer (Krishna) are

1. Sana Phige Feijom
2. Dhora
3. Khwangnap
4. Khwangoi

### ORNAMENTS

1. Kajenglei,
2. Chura,
3. Koknam,
4. Samjirei,
5. Nakhum,
6. Chirong,
7. Mukut,
8. Karnful,
9. Khwangnapashangba,
10. Kundonayin
11. Thangjingtangkhai,
12. 13. Kiyanglikphang,
14. Likyanliktat,
15. Heikrupareng,
16. Lei pareng (Mala)
17. Pisindrai,
18. Khaowon Jura,
19. Sana khujipopchaobi,
20. Tan,
21. Tanthak Tankha,
22. Khutnam Topi,
23. khujithakratanjur,
24. Ghongur
25. Nupur,
26. Khongji and
27. khongdop etc

Female (Radha and Gopis) costume and ornaments / attire are:

1. Resham Phurit Angangba (worn by Radha, Anangmanjari and Chandrabali )
2. Resham Phurit Ashangba (worn by Gopis)
3. Ennaphi
4. Thabakyet Angouba
5. Khaowon Nama
6. Potloi Ashangba (worn by Radha)
7. Potloi angangba (worn by Gopis)
8. Potsawan
9. Khwangoi.

The following ornaments are adorned from head to toe:

1. Chubarei,
2. Koknam,
3. Telangka,
4. Samjikhongkhoibak
5. Kundonayin
6. Pisindrai
7. Necklace
8. Mareipareng
9. Ngangoipareng
10. Heikru Pareng
11. Heibi Pareng
12. Khutnamtopi
13. Khujimak Ratanjur
14. Ghongur and
15. Nupur, etc..

### CHANGING SCENARIO

The Raas Leela has gained regards and been placed amongst the Classical dance forms of India. It has also established its place in the college syllabus of Indian Universities unlike the past. The

recognition of the Raas Leela outside of Manipur to a great extent is related to the efforts made by Rabindranath Tagore. He introduced the Raas Leela to the students of Shanti Niketan after witnessing one performance of the said dance in which he was so mesmerized and enchanted by the beauty and philosophy inside it. Various Gurus also contributed to popularize the Raas Leela outside of Manipur by helping in performances of the dance form at several places across the country and abroad. Nowadays the dance form is invited for stage performances. The dance form which was originally long has been shortened to about 30 minutes for the purpose of stage performances. Changes in the costume of the Raas Leela have also been witnessed. Some of the traditional ornaments attires are also replaced by modern ones.

## RAAS LEELA PAINTING

The skilled artists of Manipur by portraying the figures and styles of Raas Leela contributed to the fame and recognition of the dance form. With their creative ideas and colourful sketches and in full dedication, paintings of the Raas Leela have been made. Not all artists' sketch the paintings of the dance form. But only a few who have witnessed the dance form and visualized the mesmerizing moves of Lord Krishna, Radha and Gopis encapsulating with their creativity made such paintings. These paintings create a positive vibe to the viewers and transcend the real joy and peace which the actual dance form shall offer. Out of the five forms of Raas Leela, beautiful paintings are made out of dance movements of Lord Krishna and Radha while performing Maha Ras, Basanta Ras and Kunja Ras. The paintings sometimes added beauty much more than which was witnessed in the actual performance.



Fig: 1.1 Raas Leela Painting by RKCS



Fig: 1.2 Raas Leela Painting by Vishal Deorukhar Deorukhar

Some of the renowned artists who portrayed the Raas Leela were Raj Kumar Chandrajit Singh popularly known as RKCS and Vishal Deorukhar. In their own themes, styles and varying forms of the Raas Leela the said artists made their paintings. The difference in the costumes owing to differences in the forms of the Raas Leela can be witnessed from the attached paintings. Pointed head costumes worn by Radha and the Gopis in the Maha Raas, the Kunja Raas and the Basanta Raas make known to the viewers that the paintings belong to the said three forms of Raas Leela.

In the paintings of RKCS, there are no pointed head costumes, which make it understandable that the dance forms are the Diva Raas and the Nitya Raas. The beauty and the enchantment of the Raas Leela owe a lot to the costumes worn by the performers. This is the reason why the artists put emphasis on the costumes strictly so as to preserve the originality of the Raas Leela. The costumes of the performers of Lord Krishna and Radha-Gopis also differ. Such differences resulted in more work and efforts for the artists. The costumes worn by the performer of Lord Krishna from head to

toe covering the various body parts are many. The time consuming costumes adorned by the Radha and Gopi performers from head to toe with the ornamental attires made the artists to put more efforts and time with varieties of colours.

The only difference between the actual performance and the painting is the spot of the dance. The Govindaji Temple of Manipur and local Mandops are not portrayed in the paintings where actual performances might be made. In the painting of Vishal Deorukhar, the background is an Idol at a temple, portraying the beautiful moonshine in an evening signifies that the form of the Raas Leela is performed in the evening time when moon shines beautifully. While in the painting of RKCS, the spot of the Raas performance is at a grove in Brindavan. In most of the paintings of the Raas Leela, the scene of beautiful grove where Lord Krishna, Radha and Gopis performed the dance of Raas Leela is portrayed.

## METHODOLOGY

The research gives a deep look into the music and folk culture of contemporary Manipur. Many different sources of information are utilized to understand the research thoroughly with various data analysis, interview social studies during the field visit. Primary data sources of the study was questionnaire, interview and filed observation and live performance of the Manipuri Dance Raas-Leela during the period of field visit in Imphal West, adjoining villages of Imphal East and other places of Manipur. Secondary sources of the data were extracted from archive of Akashvani, YouTube, Blogs, Websites, Books, Library and other various sources that enrich the research. The research work also presents the author's comprehension of folk music and music studies. The research is built on a solid knowledge base to analyse and study the subject more effectively and precisely. The Methodology used in the research was historical method, descriptive method and field visit and survey method. Methodology of data analysis was based on qualitative research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Raas Leela of Manipur is filled with rich philosophies. It not only mesmerizes its audience, but it represents a unique artistic narration of devotion. King Bhagyachandra introduced three kinds of Raas dance, viz 1. Maha Raas, 2. Kunja Raas and 3. Basanta Raas. Later, King Chandrakriti introduced a new form of Raas dance known as Nitya Raas. Another form of Raas Leela called Diba Raas was also introduced during the reign of King Churhand. With the contributions of the three kings there are five forms of Raas dance. Out of these five forms 1. Maha Raas, 2. Kunja Raas and 3. Basanta Raas are offered before the sacred temple of Shri Shri Govindaji. Nitya Raas and Diba Raas are usually performed in the locality and they are not presented before the temple of Shri Shri Govindaji.

Humans by nature seek pleasure. The quest for pleasure based on respective human thoughts may be described into two kinds. One is *Astika*, which is the quest for inner happiness or spirituality. Another is *Nastika* which means physical or materialistic pleasure. The Raas Leela of Manipur is based on *Astika* i.e. inner or spiritual pleasure. In the performance of Raas Leela, there is no content of lustrous or lascivious behaviour. To preserve the spirit of *Astika*, the performers of Raas Leela adhere to a strict dress code from head to toe. The body of a performer is not exposed. For example,

the portion of the chest is adorned by a costume called *Thabakyet*, the face is covered by a unique mask and the lower portion of the body is covered by the costume called *Potloi*. The beautiful physique of a woman is all covered by varieties of costumes in back and forth. It is impossible to satisfy one's physical desire and it is a world of illusion. Whereas, the Raas Leela can impart spiritual pleasure with a strong sense of love and dedication.

The paintings of the renowned artists contributed to various extracts of the intrinsic beauty of Raas Leela. Their artistic representations add more meanings to the dance form. These artists strictly adhere to the original dress code, costumes and ornaments used in the dance form. There are instances where the dance is portrayed by those artists in such a manner where the spot or background of the Raas performance slightly differs from the original ones. It is undoubted that the painters have given a grand contribution in bringing about a wider recognition of Raas dance.

## CONCLUSION

Succinctly describing, the Raas Leela of Manipur is very much appreciated outside the State. It imparts a unique taste to the audience. The wholesomeness of the mesmerizing dance movements, the costumes and its intrinsic philosophy led to its uniqueness. Inner peace and mental calmness could be attained by its viewers. It is filled with love, devotion and dedication. The Raas Leela of Manipur suits for all age groups and gender. The dance form is now recognised as a Classical dance form of the country and could place itself as one of the disciplines in the Universities. The roles of the painters who portrayed the dance form in bringing a wider recognition of the Raas Leela worldwide can never be ignored.

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