

Rasheshwori Pala: A Religio-cultural Heritage of Women's Art Performance

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ABSTRACT: In the domain of intangible cultural heritage of a society, there are performing art forms expressing the unique creativity of song, music, dance, theatre, etc. Among the Meiteis, the dominant people in the central valley of Manipur in India, there are traditional art performances mainly associated with ritual ceremonies and social functions. The present study attempts to describe the cultural tradition of a musical art form which has been performing exclusively by womenfolk. Rasheshwori pala is the collection of musical performers belonging to the female descendants of a king's lineage known as *Karta bangsa* (lineage of Karta Maharaj). In Manipur, princess Rasheshwori's group sang verses of Hindu god in ordered bodily movements as the first women's musical performance in *sankritan*. This paper will look into the particular religio-cultural heritage through the line of a specific royal kin group comprising womenfolk only as an integral part in their social matrix. Methodologically, the standard techniques of observation and in-depth interview were used to collect data. Indeed, it may be described as the key feature in the journey of Vaishnavite Hindu women of Manipur for the participation in *sankritan* after its initiation by the exclusive women members of the Royal family. Gradually, it turns open an avenue for common women in the patriachial Meitei society to perform in *sankritan* under the title of various *nupi pala*. Promotion of syncretised Hinduism in respect of art forms among the Meiteis would not be satisfactory without the role of Rasheshwori Pala.

INTRODUCTION

Our culture values may change and experiment novelty but creativity may also be based on tradition (Kottak, 2000) and non-western art may usually link to religion (Schildkrout and Keim, 1990). There are performing art forms expressing the unique creativity of song, music, dance, theatre, etc., conveying several kinds of message and leading to catharsis, intense emotion to audience. Indeed, music is really in the hearing while the real magic of dance is in the dancing itself to become a living thing (Menon, 1983).

The Meiteis are the major indigenes residing mainly in the central valley of Manipur in India. Even after the conversion to Hinduism in the 18th century, they developed a syncretic way of cultural behaviour such as praying Lord Sanamahi, the household deity and a unique art form which was partly traditionalism and partly Hinduism. There are still traditional art performances mainly associated with aesthetic values expressed in ritual ceremonies and social functions. The present study will highlight a unique way of *sankritan* performance based on Hindu faith with traditional mnemonic creation by women repertoire known as Rasheshwori pala.

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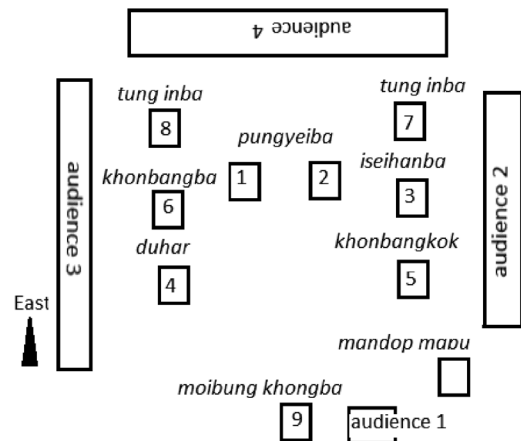
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- The objectives of the present study are given below.
- To describe the living cultural tradition of a musical art form performed exclusively by womenfolk.
- To know the emergence of Hindu women's group of music and dance.
- To explore the uniqueness of Rasheshwori Pala, the first women's zone among the Meitei art performers.

Methodologically, the standard techniques of observation and in-depth interview from key informants like *arangpham* (arranger), Brahmin serving at Lord Govindajee temple, and members of Rasheshwori pala were used to collect data.

Sankritan in Manipur context

etc. Later, Maharaj Chingthangkomba popularly known as Rajashree Bhagyachandra (1759-1797 A.D.), constructed the temple of Shree Shree Govindajee and introduced Raas Kritan of Lord Krishna preceded by Nat Sankritan. Nat Sankritan is composed of five elements - *pung* (drum), songs, dance, story, and ritual (Singh, 2022). The nature and form of Manipuri Nat Sankritan represent a replica of a theatre as it revolves on the romantic theme of Radha and Krishna (*prem rasa*). It metaphors the union of *Jibatma* (life-soul = Radha) and *Paramatma* (supreme soul = Krishna) (Singh and Singh 2022). During kingship of Rajashree Bhagyachandra, Hinduism in Manipur reached its peak.



Though *sankritan* has been originated due to the conversion to Hinduism, the Meitei context has its uniqueness in tonic expression, dance form including *pung cholom* (drummer's dance), and costume. In Manipur, *sankritan* is a ritual dance and music form. The performing space is a square which faces the east and the performance itself is executed in a circle. The performers are ranked as the lead *pungyeiba* (drummer), *pungyeiba* follower, *iseihanba* (main singer), *duhar*, *khonbangkok*, *khonbangba*, and followers of *iseihanba* as well as the followers of *duhar*. *moibung khongba* is the conch blower while *mandop mapur* is the president of the function. The audiences are seated to all the four sides (Fig 1). Because of its uniqueness, the cultural heritage of

Manipur was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of the UNESCO in 2013.

Women in sankritan

In India, for hundreds of years, music has been a male-dominated profession (Koskoff, 1989 97p) though there were self-empowered woman in Patanjali, Katyayana, and certain Rig Vedic verses (Rohit and Ashfaq, 2021). Likewise, in the beginning women were not allowed to take part in *sankritan* in Manipuri Hindu society. It was only in 1779 A.D. when king Bhagyachandra gave permission to women for the group preformation in *sankritan*. Rasheshwori pala is the first group performers in *sankritan*. Nevertheless, they were the musical performers in group belonging to the female descendants of a king's lineage known as *Karta bangsa* (lineage of Karta Maharaj). King Bhagyachandra was also known as Karta Maharaj and his lineal descendants are called *Karta bangsa*. In Manipur, princess Rasheshwori's group sang

verses of Hindu god in ordered bodily movements as the first women's musical performance in *sankritan*.

Later, Narasingh Maharaj established the second Nupi Pala Sankritan exclusively from his lineage line to sing on the last funeral rite (*shradha*) of his royal brother Gambhir Singh in 1833A.D. In 1845, it was named "Jalakeli Pala" for being performed in the event of Jalakeli on Budha Purnima. In Manipur, *Karta bangsa* and Narasingh *bangsa* are the two important royal descent groups. Both women *palas* were dedicated to the service of Govindajee. In the Pala Sankritan the performers were usually seen both standing and sitting around the Bhadra Chakra while performing. However, in the case of Jhalakeli Pala they were performing only in the sitting position which is known as *phamsak*.

At present, there are groups of women *sankritan* singers but these are not permanent associations. Above all, the first ever Nupi Sankritan Pala (Women's Pala) is Rasheshwori Pala. In this Nat Sankritan Pala, the performers are ritualistically rooted and no facial or eye movements are expressed.

Rasheshwori Pala: Origin



Figure 2: Rasheshwori Pala Performing Sankritan

Source: Raseshwari pala | RITUAL DANCE 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZIH64IMOmA>

In 1776, the idol of Lord Govindajee made of jackfruit tree which was brought from Kaina hill was started to worship (Singh and Singh 1911). Afterwards, in 1779 AD, the Maharaas Dance was performed from 11-15 day of *Hiyangei* (October-November) on the consecration day of Shree Govinda at the Raas Mandal of Langthabal Palace. In that Raas Leela, Biswabati (8years old) daughter of Rajshree Bhagyachandra played the role of Radhika.

From that occasion onwards, the princess began to whole-heartedly devoted to Lord Govindajee and remained unmarried throughout her life being immersed in Radha Bhav. No women *pala* existed at that time. The ardent devotee of Lord Govindajee requested her father to organize a women chorister for the service of Lord Govindajee to which the saintly king approved after consulting with the royal pandits and the Brahma Sava.

In this way, the all-women performers' chorus led by her began to perform *sankritan* for devotion to God. Nonetheless, only women of Karta Bhagyachandra's royal lineage were allowed to join this chorus. It also marked the first ever women only *Sankritan Pala* or *Nupi Pala* (*Nupi* = Women, *pala* = performers).

This *Sankritan* (Rasheshwori) *Pala* is treated like a *Raas* Dance that centres around the romantic scene of Radha and Krishna inside the *mandal*, that is, *Bhadra Chakra*. Actually the main *sankritan pala* or Rasheshwori *Pala* comprises two *mirdanga* (*Meitei pung*) players, one *iseihanba*, one *duhar* and *khonbangkok*, and *khonbangba*. Whenever a *Raas Leela* was performed *Nat Sankritan* is always started first and so also, in Rasheshwori *pala* performance. In the *Raas Leela* one of the most important parts is the combination of *chali saba* and *Bhangi pareng* which is a fusion art of local version and mainland Indian style. In the *Raas* dance, even *Bhangi Pareng* may be skipped but *Chali* dance cannot be left out. This is also included in the performance Rasheshwori *pala*.

Aesthetic Body Decoration

Women *palas* wear *Phanek Mayek Naibi*, a valued striped bottom cloth pulling it up to the level of armpit. They cover their bodies with a thin cloth called '*inaphee*' (*moirangphee/ wangkheiphee*) but they wear no shirt. The style of wearing is aesthetically valued for the married women in public performances as garment is not only to protect the wearer but also convey message of the concerned culture (Barnes and Eicher, 1992, Kaiser, 1990). If a lady wears the *phanek* (loin cloth) at waist and *phurit* (top) at such occasions, she is an unmarried one. They ornamented certain golden necklaces locally known as *marei pareng*, *heinajom pareng*, etc. *Marei pareng* is a necklace having certain patterns locally called *yena*, *chenggum*, *khoi phura* and *khoi kararng phakpi* and it is commonly adorned along with another necklace called *tharoi maning pareng* having 120 pieces of snail-end pattern (Bahadur 1988). *Heinajom pareng* is a necklace having the design of star fruit. Flowers and posy are adorned as the traditional decorations of hair and ear. They neatly combed to make hairdo knot on nape. This

costume is slightly different from the costume of *Raas Leela*. Besides, the Hindu Manipuris depict their self-identity by applying *tilak/chandan* on their forehead and nasal bridge.

In the *Raas* Dance, *pungyeiba*, *iseihanba*, *duhar*, and *khonbangbas* wear *khamen chatpa* which is a cloth of reward given by king for extra ordinary qualities and not allowed to wear by layman (Bahadur, 1997). Besides, *sana pala* performers also wear it. Rasheshwori *Palas'* *pungyeibas* are also allowed to wear the *khamenchatpa* clothe. It is also important to note that in Rasheshwori *pala*, *pungyeiba* are men who wear *khamenchatpa* dhoti and white *kokyot* (turban).

Performers' Account

In Rasheshwori *Pala*, *iseihanbi*, the main singer is a woman born to Karta lineage only. The 2nd and 3rd of the hierarchy - *duhar* and *khonbangbi* singers should also either be a daughter of Karta lineage or women born by a Karta women married to other lineage. To become a member of the group, she may be a consanguineous kin known as *sanaibemma*, or, affinal kin addressed as *sija* by marrying to this lineage, or, daughter of *sanaibemma* locally referred as *leima* (Fig. 3).

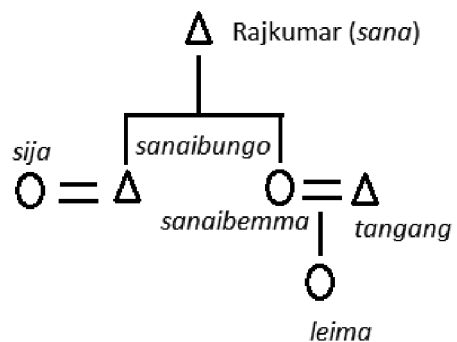


Figure 3: Kinship Terms of Royal Lineages

Though the performers of this women chorus belong to the royal kins of Karta *bangsa*, there is also an exception. The descendants of Nigthoukhong Kala Rajas lineages reckon their apical ancestor to Karta (Bhagyachandra); however, they were kept abeyance from taking part in the Rasheshwori Sankritan *Pala* if it is to be held at Shree Shree Govindajee Temple.

For other places, they were allowed to join in this Sankritan Pala.

Ethics of Arrangement and Service

Every year, on the 12th day of *Poinu* (November-December), Rasheshwori Pala sings at the Govindajee Temple as a tradition. For this, there is an *arangpham* or arranger wearing a white loin cloth specifically arranging essential items in the north side of the *mandap*. Things like *pana tanga* (set of betel nut and betel leaf with banana leaf) and other items like cloth, fruit, sweets, flowers, lamps, etc., are prepared with aesthetic beauty and systematically stored there. He keeps cloth in fold that can be carried and spread-out easily because at the start of the chorus ritual, the cloth is gifted to each participant (*Phee Thaba*) as is done in all *Sankritan* performances. One the main duty of *arangpham* is to serve *panch tattaw* made of *lei-chandan* along with *kwa tanga* (betel leaves and nuts presented on well-cut banana leaf) to one and all. *Lei-chandan* includes *lei* (flower symbolizing goddess Radhika), *chandan* (sandal paste symbolizing lord Krishna), *jal* (water interpreting love), *dhup* (incense representing Nandi, a servant of lord Shiva), and *deep* (light representing Bhringi, another servant of lord Shiva) (Sharma, 2025). When the times of distributing these things came the arranger entrusted these things to the *sevaris*. *Kritan sevari* of Rasheshwori Pala would be women. Service of *lei-chandan seva* to the members of the Sankritan Pala, *phi boriba* (presentation of cloth to

pala), *sana khutyel* of *pana tanga* (particularistic style of *pana tanga* distribution in royal occasions) are all done by three women *sevari*. While serving they wore auburn lower cloth and wear white *inaphi* covering up to their head.

Pana is made up of 5 (five) similar longitudinally cut pieces of betel nut, betel leaf, and 3(three) pieces of dried tobacco leave along with *sunu chap* (limestone envelope) and pieces of ginger. For this, banana leaves are incorporated to make containers with ethno-designs. Rasheshwori Pala is a unique *Sankritan pala* of Manipur for having a novelty of distributing *pana tanga* in *sana khutyel* style.

Now, the living tradition of women only art performers of Rasheshwori pala endeavours to showcase the performances to other Meitei settlement areas outside Manipur. In fact, it tries to embrace solidarity of the community by visiting Meitei diaspora in different countries, for instance, their performance on 16th October 2016 in Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that the cultural expression of Hinduism in the manifestation of creativity in art forms among the Meiteis would not be satisfactory without the role of Rasheshwori Pala. The artistic attitude to bolster a religious heritage through the line of a specific royal kin group comprising womenfolk only is an integral part in their social matrix. Indeed, it may be described as the key feature in the journey of Vaishnavite Hindu women of Manipur for the participation in *sankritan* after its initiation by the exclusive women members of the Royal family. Gradually, it turns open an avenue for common women in the patriarchal Meitei society to perform in *sankritan* under the title of various *nupi pala*.

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Figure 4: Women *Sevari* Serving in Rasheshwori Pala

Source: Raseshwari Pala | RITUAL DANCE 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZIH64IMOmA>

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