

FROM MONARCHY TO DEVOTIONAL CLASSICISM: CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF MANIPUR AND THE EMERGENCE OF RĀS LĪLĀ DURING THE BHAGYACHANDRA PERIOD

Dr. A. Radhamanbi Devi

*Asst. Prof., Dept. of Dance and Music
Manipur University*

&

Priyalakshmi Langpoklakpam

*Research Scholar, Dept. of Dance and Music,
Manipur University*

Abstract

The cultural history of Manipur reflects a long process of political consolidation, religious transformation, and artistic evolution under the patronage of the Ningthouja dynasty. From the legendary rulers of early Manipur to the devotional renaissance of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, the Manipuri monarchy played a central role in shaping the kingdom's cultural and spiritual identity. This paper examines the evolution of Manipuri culture with special emphasis on the Bhagyachandra period and the emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā as a sacred classical tradition. The study explores how indigenous Meitei traditions, ritual performances, music, and dance gradually evolved through interactions with Vaiṣṇava philosophy introduced during the medieval period. While earlier kings contributed to the development of governance, ritual systems, music, and social organisation, the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra marked the culmination of this cultural transformation through the institutionalisation of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and the creation of Rās Līlā. It argues that Rās Līlā emerged not merely as a dance form but as a devotional theatrical expression embodying spirituality, aesthetics, and collective cultural identity. Through historical and analytical methods, this study highlights the significance of Bhagyachandra's cultural vision in transforming Manipuri society into a refined devotional civilisation, whose artistic traditions continue to define Manipur's cultural identity today.

Keywords: *Manipuri Culture, Bhagyachandra, Rās Līlā, Cultural Evolution, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Manipuri Dance*

Introduction

Manipur possesses one of the oldest and richest cultural traditions in Northeast India. The historical evolution of Manipuri society was deeply influenced by the monarchy, particularly the rulers of the Ningthouja dynasty, who shaped the kingdom's political, religious, and artistic life for centuries. The Manipuri kings were not merely political rulers; they functioned as cultural patrons, spiritual leaders, and protectors of indigenous traditions. Through their reigns, the kingdom witnessed the gradual transformation of tribal and ritualistic traditions into a highly refined devotional culture.

The cultural evolution of Manipur was neither sudden nor isolated. It emerged through a continuous process of integration between indigenous Meitei traditions and external religious influences. Ancient ritual festivals, oral traditions, dance forms, and musical practices provided the cultural foundation for later devotional traditions. Over time, these indigenous elements merged with Vaiṣṇava philosophy introduced during the medieval period, leading to the emergence of a unique spiritual culture.

The reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, also known as Meidingu Chingthangkhomba, marks the pinnacle of this cultural transformation. Under his patronage, Manipuri culture entered a devotional renaissance marked by the emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā, the institutionalisation of Sankirtana traditions, and the spiritualization of dance and music. Rās Līlā became the most refined expression of Manipuri devotional aesthetics and later gained recognition as one of India's classical dance traditions.

This paper traces the cultural evolution of Manipur from the early monarchy to the Bhagyachandra period, with particular focus on the emergence and development of Manipuri Rās Līlā as a sacred devotional tradition.

Literature Review

- M. Kirti Singh in *Religious Developments in Manipur in the 18th & 19th Centuries* discusses the spread of Vaiṣṇavism in Manipur and explains the religious and cultural transformations that took place during the reigns of Charairongba, Garibniwaz, and Bhagyachandra. The work is important for understanding the devotional background behind the emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā.
- Gangmumei Kabui in *History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period* provides a detailed account of the political, social, and cultural history of Manipur before colonial rule. The book highlights the role of the Manipuri kings in shaping the kingdom's cultural identity and traces the evolution of indigenous traditions and Vaiṣṇava influence.

- R.K. Jhaljit Singh in *A Short History of Manipur (From 33 A.D. to the Present Time)* presents a chronological history of Manipur from the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the modern period. The book provides valuable insights into the development of the Manipuri monarchy, religion, and culture.
- Saroj Nalini Parratt in *The Religion of Manipur* examines the indigenous religious traditions of Manipur and the later influence of Hinduism and Vaiṣṇavism. The study is useful in understanding the synthesis of Meitei traditions with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosophy.
- Jyotirmoy Roy in *History of Manipur* discusses the historical evolution of the Manipuri kingdom and its cultural developments. The work highlights the contribution of kings and religious movements in shaping Manipuri society.
- Wahengbam Ibohal Singh in *The History of Manipur (An Early Period)* focuses on the early historical development of Manipur, including the growth of the Ningthouja dynasty and the formation of Meitei society and culture.
- Cheitharol Kumbaba is the royal chronicle of Manipur that records the reigns of Manipuri kings and important historical events. It serves as a primary source for the study of Manipur's political and cultural history.
- Sapam Bheigya in *A Brief History of Manipur (Pre-History to 1972 A.D.)* provides a concise overview of Manipuri history from legendary times to the modern era. The work explains the different historical periods of Manipur and their cultural significance.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the cultural evolution of Manipur from the early monarchy to the Bhagyachandra period.
2. To examine the role of Maharaja Bhagyachandra in the growth of Vaiṣṇavism and Manipuri cultural traditions.
3. To analyse the emergence and significance of Manipuri Rās Līlā as a devotional classical tradition.

Methodology

This study uses a historical-analytical research method. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted to collect relevant information on the cultural evolution of Manipur and the emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā. Primary sources such as Cheitharol Kumbaba have been used alongside secondary sources, including books, research articles, and historical studies by eminent scholars on Manipuri history, religion, and culture. The collected data have been critically analysed to understand the development of indigenous Meitei traditions, the influence of Vaiṣṇavism, and

the cultural contributions of Maharaja Bhagyachandra in the evolution of Manipuri devotional performing arts.

Early Cultural Foundations of Manipur

The cultural foundations of Manipur were laid during the reigns of the early kings of the Ningthouja dynasty. These rulers unified various clans, such as Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, and Chenglei, under a centralised political system, thereby contributing to the emergence of a collective Meitei identity. This process of unification also encouraged the blending of different ritual traditions, customs, and artistic expressions.

The indigenous religious life of Manipur revolved around the worship of local deities and ancestral spirits, as well as nature-based rituals. Festivals such as Lai Haraoba preserved ancient cosmological narratives through dance, music, ritual enactment, and symbolic performance. These traditions formed the earliest performative structures of Manipuri culture and later influenced the aesthetics of classical Manipuri dance.

Several early rulers made important contributions to cultural development. Khuyoi Tompok is traditionally credited with introducing the Pung, the sacred drum that later became central to Manipuri Sankirtana and Rās performances. He also promoted silk rearing and textile traditions, which contributed to the evolution of Manipuri costume culture.

Similarly, Loiyumba's reign marked an important phase in cultural organisation. He introduced the Pana administrative system and promoted Ougri singing traditions, which became part of Manipuri musical heritage. These developments reveal that the foundations of Manipuri artistic culture existed long before the arrival of Vaiṣṇavism.

Medieval Transformation and the Advent of Vaiṣṇavism

The medieval period of Manipuri history witnessed increasing interaction with neighbouring kingdoms and broader Indian religious traditions. During the reign of Meidingu Kyamba, Vaiṣṇava influence became more visible in Manipur. Kyamba introduced Vishnu worship while still preserving indigenous Sanamahi traditions, thereby initiating a process of cultural synthesis.

This transformation became more pronounced during the reigns of Charairongba and Garibniwaz. Charairongba embraced Vaiṣṇavism in 1704, invited Brahmins to Manipur, and promoted temple worship and devotional practices. Garibniwaz further accelerated religious transformation by institutionalising Hindu practices and encouraging Sanskrit learning. His reign witnessed the translation of Sanskrit texts, the expansion of devotional rituals, and the increasing popularity of the term “Manipur.”

Despite these developments, indigenous Meitei traditions remained deeply rooted within society. Rather than erasing local traditions, Vaiṣṇavism gradually merged with indigenous ritual culture. This coexistence created the conditions for the emergence of a distinct Manipuri devotional aesthetic.

Bhagyachandra and the Cultural Renaissance of Manipur

The reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra represents the golden age of Manipuri cultural history. He transformed Manipuri society into a devotional civilisation where art, spirituality, and aesthetics became inseparable. Bhagyachandra was not merely a patron of culture; he was a visionary who understood dance, music, and ritual as paths toward spiritual realisation.

Political instability and Burmese invasions forced Bhagyachandra into exile, during which he came into deeper contact with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava traditions. According to traditional accounts, he received a divine vision of Lord Krishna, who instructed him to establish Govindajee worship and to create devotional performances dedicated to Krishna bhakti. This spiritual vision profoundly shaped the future direction of Manipuri culture.

Bhagyachandra institutionalised Sankirtana traditions and reorganised temple worship around devotional music, dance, and ritual performance. The sacred use of Pung, Kartal, rhythmic movement, and congregational singing evolved into a refined spiritual performance system. Under his patronage, dance and music were elevated from ritual expressions into sophisticated forms of devotional art.

He also introduced elaborate costume traditions, particularly the Kumil worn in Rās Līlā performances, which symbolised spiritual purity, transcendence, and aesthetic grace.

Emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā

The emergence of Manipuri Rās Līlā was the culmination of centuries of cultural evolution and the greatest achievement of Bhagyachandra's reign. Drawing on Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology and indigenous Meitei aesthetics, Bhagyachandra created a sacred dance-drama centred on the divine love of Radha and Krishna.

The first Rās performance is traditionally believed to have taken place at Langthabal under the king's supervision, with Princess Bimbavati Manjari playing Radha. This event marked the birth of Manipuri Rās Līlā as a classical devotional tradition.

Unlike many other Indian classical dances, Manipuri Rās emphasises spiritual inwardness, softness, and restraint. Its movements are circular, flowing, and graceful, avoiding harsh lines and

excessive facial expressions. The emotional depth of the performance is conveyed through subtle body movements, rhythmic coordination, and devotional bhāva.

Rās Līlā integrates dance, music, costume, poetry, and ritual into a unified sacred experience. Different forms of Rās, such as Mahārās, Basantarās, Kunjarās, and Nityarās, evolved in response to seasonal and theological contexts. These performances embodied the spiritual philosophy of divine love at the heart of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.

Cultural Impact of the Bhagyachandra Period

The cultural reforms introduced by Bhagyachandra had profound and lasting effects on Manipuri society. Rās Līlā became a symbol of collective identity and spiritual devotion. Artistic expression became deeply connected with religious life, and dance and music acquired sacred significance.

His patronage encouraged the growth of devotional literature, manuscript culture, temple architecture, costume design, and musicology. Manipuri society gradually developed a refined aesthetic consciousness rooted in devotion and discipline.

The influence of Manipuri Rās Līlā eventually spread beyond Manipur and gained recognition throughout India. Today, Manipuri dance is celebrated internationally for its spiritual depth, graceful movements, and devotional aesthetics. The cultural system established during Bhagyachandra's reign continues to define Manipur's artistic and spiritual identity.

Findings of the Study

The study reveals that the cultural evolution of Manipur was a gradual and continuous process shaped by the patronage of the Manipuri monarchy, particularly the rulers of the Ningthouja dynasty. Indigenous Meitei traditions such as Lai Haraoba, ritual music, dance, and oral traditions formed the foundational cultural framework of Manipuri society long before the advent of Vaiṣṇavism.

The findings further show that the introduction of Vaiṣṇavism during the medieval period did not erase indigenous traditions; instead, it created a cultural synthesis between Meitei ritual practices and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosophy. This synthesis reached its highest expression during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, whose patronage transformed Manipuri society into a refined devotional civilisation.

The study also finds that Manipuri Rās Līlā emerged as the culmination of this long cultural transformation. It evolved not merely as a dance form but as a sacred devotional theatrical tradition integrating dance, music, costume, poetry, and spirituality. The aesthetic principles of softness, grace, rhythmic fluidity, and devotional inwardness in Rās Līlā reflect both indigenous Meitei cultural elements and Vaiṣṇava spiritual philosophy.

Finally, the study establishes that the Bhagyachandra period may rightly be regarded as the golden age of Manipuri cultural history because it institutionalised Sankirtana traditions, enriched devotional performing arts, and established Manipuri Rās Līlā as one of the most significant symbols of Manipuri cultural and spiritual identity.

Conclusion

The cultural evolution of Manipur was the result of a long historical process shaped by indigenous traditions, political transformation, and devotional synthesis under the patronage of the Manipuri monarchy. From the early ritual traditions of Lai Haraoba to the devotional renaissance of Bhagyachandra, Manipuri culture gradually evolved into a highly refined spiritual civilisation.

Maharaja Bhagyachandra played the most decisive role in this transformation by institutionalising Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and creating Manipuri Rās Līlā. Through his spiritual vision and artistic reforms, dance, music, ritual, and devotion became integrated into a unified cultural system.

Manipuri Rās Līlā emerged not merely as a performance tradition but as the highest embodiment of Manipuri devotional aesthetics and spiritual philosophy. It preserved indigenous cultural identity while simultaneously connecting Manipuri culture with broader Indian devotional traditions. Thus, the Bhagyachandra period may rightly be regarded as the golden age of Manipuri cultural history, whose legacy continues to inspire and shape Manipuri artistic consciousness to this day.

Greater efforts should be made to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Manipuri Rās Līlā and other devotional performing traditions established during the Bhagyachandra period. Proper documentation, digital archiving, workshops, and research activities should be encouraged to safeguard these traditions for future generations. Educational institutions and cultural organisations should also emphasise the philosophical, spiritual, and historical significance of Manipuri dance and Sankirtana so that younger generations may develop a deeper awareness and appreciation of their rich cultural heritage.

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