

# INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTANA

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## ABSTRACT

Nata Sankirtana is inseparable part of Manipuri society. It performs in every sphere of life from Shasti puja (Birth rituals) to death ceremonies. It is still remaining a sole property of Vaishnavite Manipuris. But, it is fact that only after the flourished of Vaishnavism in Manipur, Manipuri Nata Sankirtana began to generalise and more impact on society. It is a kind of great sacrifice (Mahajanya in Hinduism) and way to achieved total devotion. The main principle of Bhakti movement of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was Kirtana. Kirtana is one of way to connect with eternal Lord i.e. Krishna. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is one of its kinds. Manipuri who follows the Hinduism (Goudiya Vaishnavism) performs Sankirtana in every ritual except some traditional ceremonies. Recognising the importance of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana, UNESCO of one of the prime bodies of UNO announced on 4<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2013 listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Representative list.

**Keywords:** Culture, Hinduism, Intangible, Manipur, Manipuri, Nata Sankirtana.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Manipur, one of the tiny states of north eastern India but has a rich cultural heritage, civilisation values among all the north eastern states. Small in geographical area but yet significant in anthropological aspects, has contributed to the mainstream in terms of culture, literature, sports etc. It developed a singing form Nata Sankirtana, which emerged with the absorption of Hindu culture through Vaishnavism, in the ethnic locale yet turning it out into an original expression of the locale people. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana has a great influence of Hindu culture and philosophical thoughts. It only flourished when Hinduism was properly adopted by Manipuris. As a result of proper adoption of Hinduism, two of the greatest Manipuri culture and largely accepted by others, Manipuri Dance and Nata Sankirtana had also emerged. Probably, we can say Nata Sankirtana is the result of proper syncretization of Hinduism and indigenous Manipuri culture. During the period of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, the temple of SriSri Govindaji was installed and the great Manipuri Raas Leela was also introduced with Nata Sankirtana. The introduction of Manipuri Dance (Raas Leela) is the most remarkable gift to Manipuri society as well as for India as a whole. The Nata Sankirtana, which was created as a compulsory prologue known as Purbaranga of Raas Leela, was introduced separately in various rites of passage as worshippers of Goudiya Vaishnav. Seeing its cultural values and importance, the UNESCO recognised Manipuri Nata Sankirtana as an Intangible Cultural Heritage to preserve and continuity for the nation.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this research article is to identify the nature and sequence of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana. It will also look the role of Sankirtana, its relevance and the importance in Manipuri society. Further, it will also discuss the journey and recognition in India and abroad.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main source of data is secondary such as books, articles, and most importantly information available in the websites of UNO. The method of historical and qualitative analysis is employed

for the present study. Moreover, interview with Nata Sankirtana Gurus and knowledgeable persons in this field has also made a contribution in the analysis.

## **DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE**

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana by its nature is the biggest and most classic form of Sankirtana. It is by itself the most visible or practical performance. Hence, Nata Sankirtana is a ritual of Mahajanya (Great Sacrifice) that perform in Manipuri society in every step of life. The present form of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana was introduced by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1764-1789) which found its supreme expression during the reign of King Chandrakirti (1850-1886). But the great Nata Sankirtana, of which the Raas Leela is the extension, is yet too received as a Classical art. Classical Manipuri Dance is nevertheless identified with Raas Leela by such a national institution like Sangeet Natak Academi as well as awards are presented to the Gurus of Nata Sankirtana under the category of traditional performing arts every year which is not recognise as a classical.<sup>2</sup>

Nata Sankirtana is Sanskrit words. 'Nata' or 'Nat' means to act or to dance. Sankirtana is also combination of two words Sama and Kirtana. Sama means a few and Kirtana means praise the Lords which means praise the Lords in together. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is the perfect example of cultural syncretisation and follows the principles of Indian music as well as traditional Manipuri customs. Manipuri Nata Sankirtana is a well codified form of Sankirtana among the Kirtans, Sankirtans and Bhajans which found in various parts of India.

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana generally performed in a courtyard or Mandap (Hall) of a temple and the Mandali (Performing area of Sankirtan) of Sankirtana's design and arrangement are determined according to religious text. The artists form choreography in the centre of the pavilion. Two Mridanga players sit on the left of the temple resting on the knees and toe, other singers also came in and they show Dandavat Pranamma to the assembly before taking their places. After distribution of incense, flowers and cloths to the artists, the Sankirtana begins with permission of Mandap Mapu (President of Sankirtan). The Mridanga players start with the bola (Strike of Syllables) *Ten Ten Ta Tak Tang* representing the Chaitana and Nityai, the founders of Goudiya sect.

## THE SEQUENCES OF NATA SANKIRTANA ARE AS FOLLOWS

1. **Raga Houba:** Raga Houba is one of the most important parts of Nata Sankirtana. It starts with Pung (Manipuri Mridanga). It is the Raga of instrument without any vocal sound. In this part, the artists are chanting the name of Chaitanya Nityai 3 times after which worship to Radha Krishna, followed by creating imagery idol of God staring from toes to waist, waist to neck and neck to head. Here all the artists bow their heads showing courtesy.
2. **Raga Taba:** When a *Taala* begins from a large *misra* and decreases in 5 different *Taala* upto the smallest *Nimesha tanchap* in the *prabandha* repeatedly, it is calling Raga Taba. In this part, the artists will worship Gouranga Mahaprabhu by singing Gurchandrika.
3. **Mel:** When the structure of a *Taala* has *Dhruva* and *Pada* for both right side and left side, this structure is known as *Mel*.
4. **Tanchap:** The different form of *Tanchap Taala* in *ekpadi ektala* structure performed during this period. Songs of *Shrimad Radha Govinda* were sung by artistes.
5. **Menkup:** Here all the *Palas* (artists) will walk *parikrama* in anti clockwise direction within the performance area known as *bedi koiba*. The different form of *Menkup talas* executed in *ekpadi ektala*.
6. **Beitha or Swadhina:** In this stage all the artists will sit down where the first part of *puja* is concluded. Here another *Beitha raga* comprises *Pungi Raga* (*Mridanga Raga*), *vocal raga* along with *bahon* will begin.
7. **Bijoy:** This is the conclusion part of *Nata Sankirtana*. In this part *Nityai Pada*, *Soi Gosai*, *Naam Thingatpa*, *Haribol*, *Govinda Bhai Radhe*, *Joy Bhai*, *Chaityana Nityai* are offered.<sup>3</sup>

*Nata Sankirtana* is a collective prayer, a meditation and a great sacrifice (*Mahajanya* in *Vaishnaviam*), lasting about 4-5 hours at a stretch with a lot of rituals, movements and rhythmic pattern. It is strictly followed *Vaishnavite* faith and also coloured with old *Manipuri* traditions. It is composite vision of classical music that *Sura*, *Tala*, *Laya* and *Dance* combined together at a time. Being a way of worship, each gesture and dance movements are significant, symbolic and mystical. One is supposed to be constant touch with the eternal Lord Krishna and *Sakhis* of *Vrindavan*. The beauty of *Manipuri Nata Sankirtana* is the fact that, it is a new creation

patterned on the Vaishnavite philosophy and aesthetics integrated with the traditional beliefs of Manipuri. It closely associates with the Naradiya Ghandharva School of music and follows such text as Sangeet Sara, Sangeet- Damodara.<sup>4</sup> Singers and Mridanga players by way of expressing the climax of their sublime and ecstatic feelings in the process of Sankirtana is unmatched. The Mridanga players articulate the Mridanga as sounds of thunder, birds and animals. Very distinctive feature of Manipuri Nata Sankirtana apart from others, the performers are singers and singers are also performers. This kind of duality in character among the Sankirtana artists are almost absent in India. 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 fast, 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. To preserve the values and maintain its classical ethos, the UNESCO announced on 4<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2013 that Manipuri Nata Sankirtana will be enlisting as Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Representative list. The decision came in the 8<sup>th</sup> session of UNESCO intergovernmental committee with 24 representative nations held in Baku, Azerbaijan from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Dec. Before enlisting as Intangible Cultural Heritage, India's premier body of culture Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi has already declared and recognised Manipuri Nata Sankirtana as National Inventory on the Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>5</sup> In the introductory note of UNESCO, Manipuri Nata Sankirtana describes as:

Sankirtana encompasses an array of arts performed to mark religious occasions and various stages in the life of the Vaishnavite people of the Manipur plains. Sankirtana practices centre on the temple, where 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 seated devotees. The dignity and flow of aesthetic and religious energy is unparalleled, moving audience members to tears and frequently to prostrate themselves before the performers.<sup>6</sup>

It is an opportunity for Manipuris as well as for the Nation as a whole to preserve, maintain the Sankirtana as a Mahajanya and a way of life in Vaishnavite faith. It is also a kind of cultural

cohesion which unites the society. Not only Manipuri Nata Sankirtana but also a lot of cultural items of India were inscribed as Intangible Cultural Heritage by the UNESCO. List of cultural items of India enlisted by UNESCO are as follows:

SL.No.	Name	Description	Year
1.	Ramlia	Traditional theatre of Ramayana	2008
2.	Vedic Chanting	The tradition of Vedic Chanting	2008
3.	Kutiyattam	A Sanskrit Theatre	2008
4.	Raman	Religious festival and ritual theatre of Garhwal, Himalayas	2009
5.	Midiyettu	A Ritual Theatre and dance Drama of Kerala	2010
6.	Kalbelia	Folk songs and dances of Rajasthan	2010
7.	Chhau Dance	A traditional dance form of Easter India	2010
8.	Bhuddist Chanting	Reciting of Sacred Bhuddist text of Ladakh	2012
9.	Sankiratana	Ritual singing, drumming and dancing of Manipur	2013
10.	Brass and Copper Craft	Traditional utensil making among the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru, Punjab	2014
11.	Yoga	Yoga	2016
12.	Novruz	New year festival celebrate in Azerbaijan, India, Turkey, Iran etc.	2016
13.	Kumbh Mela	The festival of Sacred Pitcher	2017
14.	Durga Puja of Kolkotta	Worship of the Hindu Goddess Durga	2021

\*Data as of Sep. 2023

The main purpose of Intangible Cultural Heritage which UNESCO started in 2001 is to promote, preserve through various means such as financing, project works, symposiums, awareness campaigns etc. The definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage is clearly layout in article 2 of general provisions of UNESCO. It describes as:

The term 'cultural heritage' has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.<sup>7</sup>

Intangible Cultural Heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life. The importance of Intangible Cultural Heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing states as for developed ones. Intangible Cultural Heritage does not only represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part. Whether they are from the neighbouring village, from a city on the opposite side of the world or have been adapted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region, they all can be include under intangible cultural heritage. They have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past through the present and into our future. It contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large.

## **CONCLUSION**

Intangible Cultural Heritage is an important step taken by the UNESCO for the small community to preserve their cultural activities. Now-a-days, growing technological advancements harm the young generations especially in cultural aspects. Lack of participation, insensibility against cultural activities and more importantly maintaining values and ethos

became very challenging. In the panorama of rich Indian culture, such rare forms of performing arts like Nata Sankirtana which is found nowhere in the world, is precious and need to be preserve properly. Cultural activities such as Sankirtana have a high degree of value, even more than religious rituals. By recognizing as Intangible Cultural heritage, Manipuri Nata Sankirtana will definitely help to promote, preserve and attract popularity across the world, among the scholars and artists from various regions.<sup>ii</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Singha, L Iboongohal. *Introduction to Manipur* (Imphal: Ibochaoba Singha, 1987), p. 115

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in/award-honours/ratna-awards>

<sup>3</sup> Narrated by Kuleswar Sharma (Age 81), Occupation Sankirtan Artist, Address Banskandi NH 37, Cahchar, Assam.

<sup>4</sup> Singh, E Nikkanta. *Manipuri Dance*. (New Delhi: Omsoms Publications, 1997), p.6.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in/sections/ICH>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>